

Clearing the Distortion: TV History & Local Archives

Cable Access and the Television Archive

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While the organizing questions for this roundtable address local and regional programs from early television history, I want to consider a tangentially related issue: cable access programs within the television archive. In general, the amateur, unpopular, and local nature of cable access, as well as its short history dating only to the 1970s, has kept most access programs out of traditional TV histories and archives. However, this is not necessarily negative. I argue that, while its stories may be more difficult to find, the marginality of cable access offers a novel research experience that can help rethink conventional ideas about television.

To illustrate this point, I want to present a few of my experiences in researching *New Wave Theatre*, a music and variety show originally produced for Los Angeles-area cable access in 1979. While the show primarily featured performances and interviews with local punk bands, it also sought to utilize cable television as a force for social transformation. During my research, I came across a document that was instrumental in connecting the show with specific ideas about the revolutionary potential of cable television, helping reconstruct the discursive environment of its production. Found in an envelope that belonged to Peter Ivers, the host and co-creator of *New Wave Theatre*, the document was simply a yellowed article cut out of *The Los Angeles Times* titled “Cable Television—On the Road to a Wired Nation.” This particular copy was marked with the word “SAVE” in red pen and littered with little stars, dots, and underlined passages highlighting ideas about the new forum of cable access and its potential to revolutionize not just TV, but society as a whole. For an archival researcher, it was a great find, tangible evidence of how certain ideas animated the work of a TV producer.

What is notable about this experience is where it happened: the reading room at the Harvard University archives. As stated above, it is certainly not common to come across materials related to a local access program in such a conventional research environment. In this sense, the case of *New Wave Theatre* is a rare exception. Indeed, a confluence of several unlikely circumstances led to Harvard holding this particular document. First, unlike most access shows from the time that were short-lived and limited to one local cable system, *New Wave Theatre* ran for several years and eventually gained a foothold on national cable as part of the USA Network’s late-night compilation show *Night Flight*. Second, Peter Ivers, a Harvard theatre graduate with showbiz connections, was not your typical access producer. But, perhaps the principal reason for its inclusion in the archive is that Ivers was tragically murdered in 1983 at the age of 36. His early death turned his working materials for *New Wave Theatre* into a preserved archive looking to be donated to an institution.

I present this exceptional case not to suggest that premature death is somehow integral to the study of cable access, but to illustrate the contingent nature of how this history enters the archive. Moreover, while these morbid and unlikely circumstances brought the history of a marginal program into a mainstream institution like Harvard, they still did not deliver it to a dedicated television archive. In fact, the disorganized papers and recordings were merely thrown into jumbled boxes and lacked a detailed finding aid. In this sense, while the setting may have been exceptional, the haphazard and

marginal nature of the research was similar to my experience in tracking down the rest of the story of *New Wave Theatre*. Beyond the Harvard archive, I also utilized underground punk fanzine collections, conducted awkward interviews with participants, bought bootleg DVDs from a sketchy internet dealer, read the work of various non-professional “critics” and “historians,” viewed videos held by the Getty’s video art collection, and, of course, scoured YouTube for clips. Significantly, these various conventional and unconventional research sites and voices from outside the mainstream television archive helped shape my understanding of the program. Working across, between, and outside traditional research spaces helped me conceptualize *New Wave Theatre* as a piece of video and performance art, a site of social and political theorizing and activism, and a technology for the creation of subcultural community as well as a TV show. In short, the research process itself revealed that cable access is not just a subcategory of television production, but a much more complicated phenomenon, thoroughly entangled with other media, social practices, disciplines, and forms of knowledge production.

Considering this example, perhaps the question should not be how to incorporate marginal programs like those produced for access in the 1970s and 1980s into the TV studies canon, but how to preserve the marginality of such programs while studying them, displacing the conventional vision of television in the process.