

Clearing the Distortion: TV History & Local Archives

“The Golden Era of Live Television For Networks, but for Stations, It Was All About Film”

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The conventional history of early television often describes a golden era of live television, but that history has its roots in what we know about the networks during that period. In delving into the histories of local stations, it is evident that, as this panel’s call points out, focusing solely on the history of networks seriously distorts our understanding of television during that time. This is not to say that the networks did not emphasize live programming during the 1940s and 1950s. Most of the networks preferred live programming because it made the network the primary source of content and thereby strengthened the networks’ ties with their affiliates. Live programming was also cheaper for the networks to produce than purchasing or producing quality filmed content.

However, while the networks might have emphasized live programming, the history of television stations during the late 1940s and 1950s was largely one of film. By investigating television station programming during that period, it is clear that from the earliest days of television, feature films were a crucial part of the larger television landscape. The reality was that there were not enough facilities, money, manpower, etc. available to most television stations to produce their own original live television content for all of their FCC mandated minimum number of on-air hours.

The need for filmed programming was especially strong in the early years of television before the nationwide coaxial cable system linked the major markets. Local stations could either produce all of their own live programming or find films to license or purchase. Live programming could be very expensive to produce, especially in the quantities these stations needed to fulfill their obligations to the FCC and keep their broadcast licenses. In 1955, Milton Fenster, the Film Manager for WOR-TV in New York, (owned by General Teleradio – the company who bought RKO) explained that feature films were the “lifeblood of the programming of an independent station.”

The relationship between the networks and stations, and the difference between independent, affiliate, and owned and operated stations made a significant difference in terms of their attitude toward the use of live versus filmed content on television. Independent stations in particular had a difficult time producing live content for their programming, so for them feature films were all the more important. Since those stations only had small local audiences to offer to potential sponsors, they had less revenue from advertising to use to finance original productions. In many such cases, stations would also use films on a sustaining basis in order to build their audiences to a size that would attract advertisers.

Feature films were even used in different parts of the schedule depending on whether a city was connected via cable to a network or had easy access to kinescope recordings versus cities that did not have those connections. For stations in New York and other cities in the north east, for example, it may have been easier to rely on network programming (either live or kinescope) for their Class A time, and use features in their Class B and C time. Whereas stations in Los Angeles

used films more regularly in primetime as well as other times because they did not have the easy access to a network or kinescope recordings.

While the history of local television stations is crucial to a true understanding of “television,” it can be incredibly difficult to research. The records of many stations have been lost to history, and conducting research on anything other than the programming schedules that exist in local papers requires creativity. In my own research on the struggles over the licensing and sale of feature films to television before 1955, I discovered that a great deal of information on television stations during that period existed in legal files related to lawsuits over the issue of feature films on early television. Although we may bemoan our often overly litigious society, the archives created in the course of legal battles can provide a great boon to scholars interested in telling these histories that have been left out of the story of television for too long.