

## **Clearing the Distortion: TV History & Local Archives**

Stephen Groening, *University of Washington*

In October of 2014, just after joining the faculty at the University of Washington, I received an email from the University's motion pictures special collection librarian asking for help in obtaining the news archive of a local television station containing materials dating from 1965 to 1992. The station had already disposed of tapes from before 1965, either deeming them of "low quality" or rejecting them because they were not in color. My job was to write a letter to help convince the Dean of the Libraries that local television was an object worthy of academic study. Negotiations broke down between the University and the television station. It's probable that the new corporate owners of the station still felt they could monetize the archive somehow, that the University felt that the upkeep, maintenance, and care of thousands of local news broadcasts was prohibitively expensive.

My response to this was to try and insert archiving and researching local television history into the University curriculum. Starting this past academic year, I assign students in my Television History course to group research projects on the history of television in Seattle. They publish these projects online using the software platform Omeka, which was developed by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University.

The results, as you can imagine, are mixed. Some groups focused on local celebrities, like Macklemore, Kurt Cobain, and even Ted Bundy. Others took on specific issues, such as civil rights movements, television economics, or the transition to digital broadcasting. Some of the better projects focused original local programming, including a comedy sketch show called *Almost Live!* that aired on Saturday nights right before the national broadcast of *Saturday Night Live*. This show spoofed the contemporary television landscape, for instance, re-imagining the infamous reality show *COPS* as taking place in particular Seattle neighborhoods. In a nod to Orson Welles, the show also created a fake news broadcast depicting the collapse of Seattle's Space Needle on April Fool's Day 1989. The prank managed to fool viewers and tie-up 911. The show's cast included Bill Nye, famous of course, for his science show (also initially produced in Seattle and the subject of another student project), and Joel McHale who went on to host *The Soup* and star in *Community*.

There is, of course, much more to local programming than simply serving as a kind of "minor league" for national programming. For instance, local television broadcasting has influenced Seattle's long history of activism. As an example in 1970, a miniseries on Seattle development, called *The Eighth Day*, asked its audience to organize into "viewing communities" to discuss imagined futures of Seattle. The television program inspired one

group to create a “rails to trails” program which would later become the Burke-Gilman trail, an eighteen-mile pedestrian-bike path that between Seattle and Bothell. In 1982, another program, *Target Seattle* imagined what would happen in the case of a nuclear strike, a year before the national broadcast of *The Day After*. *Target Seattle* featured the first live broadcast satellite link between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. as a metaphorical bridge between the two countries during the height of the Cold War. The program also asked Seattle viewers to engage in a letter writing exchange program with viewers in the U.S.S.R.

It’s also true that Seattle has its share of stereotypical local programming. Seattle had the clown show for kids, the local cooking show and gardening show, the evening “magazine” format that introduced viewers to new restaurants, parks, the music scene and so on. But Seattle television history is also full of “firsts” – the first woman to own a television station in the US (1949), first female local news anchor (1972), first newscast from China (1979), first satellite “spacebridge” between the US and USSR (1982) – suggesting that the “local” can have regional, national, and international implications.

As far as I know, none of these programs I mentioned have been destroyed. But they are difficult to obtain. Only one of the four local stations currently employs a librarian/archivist. So while the tapes of these programs still exist, they are essentially inaccessible. Some, like *Almost Live!*, have migrated to YouTube but in the main, local programs are trapped in limbo, stuck between corporate strategies of monetization that don’t include the historical or ephemeral and higher education’s unwillingness to commit to anything whose instrumental value is not immediately clear.

I hope that by continuing to offer a course in local television history, in which students are confronted with the lack of material, the difficulty of accessing what exists, and the stonewalling of corporate media, some small progress might be made. As an extra credit assignment I asked students to write letters – not emails – to local stations asking them to make their archives more accessible (or even to create archives in the first place). I also hope that the modest work my students have engaged in will be an inspiration to others. Perhaps one day there will be a network of local television history projects working to preserve, archive, and curate local television.