

DIY Media Archives (Or, In Defense of Collecting Crap)

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Mass media often seem to complicate arguments promoting their historical value. While this may be less true of mass media considered *in toto* (e.g., the television medium) than when approached as individual instantiations (e.g., *The Love Boat*), in an archival context it is the latter that metonymically enables understandings of the former. In this circuitous, unpredictable way, mass media are essentially the cats of mediated expression: quixotic, compelling, and a pain in the ass to corral. And like cats, the mass media appear at turns to work toward and against their own preservation, particularly once they leave their point of origin. Unchecked, they propagate into ubiquity, changing in the process from cherished plaything to troublesome pest. There are mobs of magazines, books, audio and video recordings, and digital content in constant circulation, a proliferation that relegates individual artifacts as ordinary and easily replaceable. As a result, the appurtenances of mass media are judged largely worthless; rarity is, after all, one of the key indices of value in collecting.

Additionally, mass media are transient. With few exceptions (e.g., limited and collector's editions), television shows, video games, and movies (among other mass media) are meant to be consumed and excreted, not consumed, preserved, and venerated (at least not for any great length of time). This ephemerality is intensified by the fact that mass media can be immaterial—think of the radio show or live-streamed game tournament. While such programming may be recorded in-house for legal, reference, or subsequent monetization reasons, members of the public typically do not think to save them nor are they legally allowed to. This is a problem from an archival perspective because when content producers go belly-up, they frequently push their stored content into the nearest landfill rather than incurring the organizational and financial expense of shifting it to an archive.

Mass media are also cheap to acquire, and thus not particularly valuable to own except in cases of (sometimes manufactured) aberrancy: the stunningly comprehensive Gramophone Concert Record collection, the limited release signed collector's edition film, or the world record sized game library. Apart from such exceptions, mass media can actually cost far more to keep than to scrap, particularly in archival contexts where exacting storage conditions come with a steep price tag.

And, of course, mass media are often stupid, vapid, or both. They are generally intended as succorers not saviors, works of escape more than works of art. *Garbage Pail Kids* cards, *Alf* pogs, Emoji Poop pillows: on the face of it, then, mass media are literally not worth saving.

Compounding these matters is the imperative for precision and durability in the acquisition, organization, and preservation of artifacts, a set of values often at odds with the overarching chthonic shroud of capitalism. Endlessly bedeviling the librarian and collector with scintillating visions of exchange values and their accrual, the compulsion to sell rather than save is further provoked by the archival mandate's focus on meticulously documenting wide swathes of metadata intended on the contrary to enhance *use* value.

How then to cultivate archives and the value they hold for making media histories? One way is to make archival work—including research, conservation, preservation, and exhibition—part of coursework. What better way to secure the past for the future than by inculcating the value of the archive in present consciousness? Another way is simply to remember to donate (not discard) primary and secondary materials to archives. Consumers amass (often unconsciously) all manner of mediated artifacts, from music playlists and Steam libraries to the metadata used to describe and organize them. Technical challenges aside, such collections could make for fabulous contributions to future meaning making. A third method for archive cultivation is philanthropy; even the most well-heeled archive benefits from financial support. And philanthropy need not be limited to money—those with free time can contribute by volunteering, or by advocating publicly and privately for extant and future archives. From our perspective as archivists, by far the most demonstrative way to help future generations make media histories is to start an archive oneself. Today's software and hardware tools make gaining intellectual and physical control over a collection relatively painless. Best of all, the whole community benefits when new archives are made, opened, and shared. What opportunities exist for teacher-scholars to assist in the making and the maintenance of media archives?