

Saving Our Legacy: Archiving Television at the Crossroads

A professional archivist shows how TV can preserve its heritage for the future. | **By Lisa R. Carter**

In his article “Beyond the Fleeting Image” (*Television Quarterly*, Spring/Summer 2004), Rich Newberg made a passionate case for the value of historic television footage, and outlined the current state of television preservation. The picture he presented was of a critical situation; the rich history of local television—the story of our communities in motion—is imperiled due to obsolete media and a lack of searchable descriptive catalogues. The urgency of doing something to save what footage can be found has been instigated by celebrations of anniversaries, viewer interest and the hope of repurposing content for delivery over the Internet. In spite of this urgency, television stations often find themselves frozen at the crossroads, without the resources or expertise to take the action needed to preserve past programming and ensure its longevity for use in the future.

Newberg submitted some examples of efforts towards preservation, presenting the experience of WIVB-TV as a specific case study. He also described a resource that is meant to help direct preservation efforts at local television stations, the Association of Moving Image Archivist’s (AMIA) *Local Television: A Guidebook for Saving Our Heritage*. Newberg’s overview indicates a growing interest in, and promulgation of, resources for preserving local television materials. This follow-up reviews the development of this interest and resources, lists additional television archiving projects, and outlines some initial steps for stations who seek a place to begin.

The best place to start an investigation into the state of and reasons for television preservation is the Library of Congress’s *Television and Video Preservation 1997: A Report on the Current State of American Television*

and Video Preservation. This study is useful to broadcasters because it details why the television heritage is worth preserving, using concrete testimony from those inside and outside the industry, such as studio and network representatives, historians, educators and archivists. The report is a touchstone for an informed discussion of the issues, and a resource for quotes and facts that can support funding proposals to granting agencies, community donors and corporate home offices.

While the Library of Congress was working on their 1997 study, Steven Davidson and Gregory Lukow were putting together a book called

The Administration of Television Newsfilm and Videotape Collections: A Curatorial Manual. Funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), this publication brings together essays, guidelines and examples that a station can use as an instruction manual as they set up an archival program.

Following this raised interest, AMIA prioritized and developed strategies for implementing the numerous recommendations in *Television and Video Preservation 1997*. By initiating several projects, AMIA provided tools that can be used by television stations as they take steps to preserve their heritage.

AMIA's Local Television Task Force (LTV) developed a grant project that was funded by the NHPRC to join with NATAS in discussing issues and making recommendations to promote preservation of local television. Together, NATAS and AMIA created a

database describing the local television holdings of public archives and stations, held summits to determine how the archival community could best help television stations and developed case studies of example archival projects at archives and television stations. These efforts culminated in the publication of *Local Television: A Guidebook for Saving Our Heritage*.

This guidebook outlines the steps a station should take if it wants to ensure the longevity of its assets. Resources for information about archiving, cataloging and storage are listed. Finally, the case studies included at the end of the *Guidebook* document how some stations

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have approached the archives dilemma. Partnerships between KSTP-TV and the Minnesota Historical Society, Maine television stations and Northeast Historic Film and Pennsylvania Cable Network (PCN) and the Cable Center show how collaboration can benefit asset longevity and public access. In addition, the WGBH and Arkansas Educational Television Network (AETN) case studies demonstrate how some stations are managing these efforts on their own.

Among other AMIA initiatives that might prove useful to television stations as they build an archival program are Moving Image Collections (MIC), the Preservation Fact Sheets and the activities of the Digital Initiatives Committee. MIC is building a union catalog of moving image footage available from participating archives and media producers. Through MIC's archival directory, archives in a station's region can be located. Finally MIC

provides information about moving image preservation and metadata generation. Local television stations can either use MIC as an information resource or can participate in MIC to make their footage searchable to the general public. AMIA's Preservation Fact Sheets detail information about storage, handling and reformatting standards for moving image materials. AMIA's Digital Initiatives Committee is currently undertaking a study about the state of Digital Asset Management in the moving image community.

During the development of these tools, the moving image archives community acknowledged a need for a granting agency that would support preservation efforts across the country. By 2003, a few public and private sector individuals and institutions came together to establish the National Television and Video Preservation Foundation (NTVVPF). The NTVVPF "is an independent, non-profit organization created to fulfill a long-standing need by raising private funds and providing grants to support preservation and access projects at institutions with television and video collections throughout the United States". At this time, the NTVVPF acquires donated services from a variety of labs and storage facilities and matches these sponsors to non-profit institutions who need help preserving their television materials.

While the basics (cataloging, storage and reformatting) of television archives work were being documented and promoted, the television community was rediscovering the value of its own history. In addition to celebrating anniversaries, stations faced large

numbers of tapes they were increasingly unable to store. Their viewers were beginning to call, inquiring about their own history captured on tape. Calls from cable channels and the lure of the internet as a delivery mechanism beckoned with new repurposing opportunities. And then the FCC mandated that television stations would need to begin broadcasting digitally by 2006.

While the major networks (NBC, CNN, etc) have employed proprietary systems for dealing with their archives and digital assets, local television continues to struggle to find appropriate and affordable solutions. Public television stations, given their educational mandates, have started to explore solutions to gaining control of their archives and migrating their assets into digital learning objects. A variety of projects have begun to "do something". A quick and non-comprehensive review of some of these initiatives illustrates a growing interest in tackling the archival challenge.

Research and support are building nationally for archival and digitizing activities.

- WTIU at Indiana University recently received an National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Preservation Assistance grant to bring in a consultant to do a preservation survey that will better inform their archival efforts.
- Kentucky Educational Television (KET) received grant funding to digitize its aired program archives. As a result of this project, KET began to address the role of digitization in video preservation, metadata generation, management of archival assets and strategies for saving the rest of their legacy materials.

- New Jersey Public Television (NJN) has begun a project to digitize selected heavily used segments from their archives.

- Production managers at Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) have been documenting information about their programs and archiving that metadata as productions wrap up. This effort will provide the basis for the digital asset management (DAM) system they will soon be implementing.

- Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB) has also been building a DAM infrastructure to manage and distribute media more effectively, which will include digitizing their archive. They are also hosting this year's SURA/VIDe Conference, a venue for discussing the management and dissemination of digital video.

- Iowa Public Television (IPTV) holds a Digital Television Symposium every year that explores the latest information on digital television, including presentations on metadata, archiving and DAM.

- Wisconsin Public Television (WPT) hosts a website that presents their research on the issues involved in DAM, including information from their Evolving the Links project, a list of readings, presentations, web sites and definitions that explore issues relating to archiving and disseminating television assets.

- Detroit Public Television (DPTV) dug into their archives to work with Michigan State University's (MSU) MATRIX project to digitize and provide access to American Black Journal online. In addition to the NEH grant MATRIX received to undertake this project, DPTV received a grant from the NTVPF to transfer programs from this series that are still on 2 inch Quad tapes.

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Television News Archive, which is the largest, most comprehensive collection of national broadcast news available to the general public, received grants from the National Science Foundation, the NEH, America Research Libraries and local foundations to investigate technologies for digitizing television and to implement the digitizing of their archive.

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WGBH, which has long been a leader in investigating DAM issues, has teamed up with New York University (NYU), WNET Thirteen and PBS to undertake *Preserving Digital Public Television*, a National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (NDIIPP) funded project. This endeavor will advance national standards and provide a model for preserving digital programming. The templates and conclusions resulting from this project will be useful for all television archiving initiatives.

This year, the Corporation of Public Broadcasting (CPB) will release the first metadata standard designed specifically for television materials, called PB Core. This metadata dictionary offers a standard way of describing television materials so that content can be more easily retrieved, shared and repurposed. PB Core is also designed for use as a guide for the development of an archival or asset management process at individual stations.

These model projects and standard-setting initiatives provide the framework for saving our heritage

as it has been captured by television. They also anticipate the preservation and management of future television product.

But where should the individual television station begin?

1. Define the situation. How much legacy material exists, where is it and what kind of catalogs, indexes or other information survives to describe the asset? Who is in charge of the old tapes and how are they used? What kind of budget is available for archiving and what does the station hope to achieve?

2. Put someone in charge of the effort. WGBH, WNET, WPT, UNC-TV, WITU, KET, GPB, and even PBS are among those who have designated this work as someone's primary concern, sometimes establishing a full-time archivist or media asset management position.

3. Gather resources. Stations can utilize the publications and websites listed in this article to determine next steps and identify best practices already being employed by others.

4. Implement a plan. Next steps will be identified by a station's goals, focused through a review of the available resources and carried out by someone who can worry about these issues full time. The steps towards archiving are further detailed in the AMIA LTV Guidebook.

If these steps seem daunting, a station might consider partnering with an entity that can bring some resources to the effort, such as a library or an archive. As the case studies in the AMIA LTV *Guidebook* demonstrate, this sort of solution can effectively address preservation needs and public access. However, a transfer or sharing of rights ownership should be considered in such a partnership, since an archival institution will have to spend public dollars to save a television collection.

Since 1997, advances have been made in research, collaborations and technologies that can further the preservation of and access to the television heritage. What remains is action. Saving our visual heritage will require a change in how television stations prioritize managing their assets as well as a sharing of resources. Collaborations with non-traditional partners such as libraries, archives and museums will open up new funding opportunities. Innovative, exploratory efforts need to be documented and shared with others who seek similar solutions.

Preserving content and archiving for retrieval are critical to the future of media delivery in the digital world. Let's set out from the crossroads and uncover our past with an eye toward our future.

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