

# Everything old can be new again

## Preserving and archiving your local video legacy is the first step toward the perpetual access that people now expect

By Nan Rubin

**H**ave you noticed that kids—and many adults, too—think every article ever written and every song ever sung is on the Internet?

It won't be long now before young people will grow up assuming that every *TV program* ever made is online, too. That's what they will expect.

It's not true, of course. But in terms of real-life impact, it might as well be. Massive numbers of Americans already look no further than their favorite search engines to find a huge selection of audio, music, articles and video.

They have no idea what is missing—what *isn't* online.

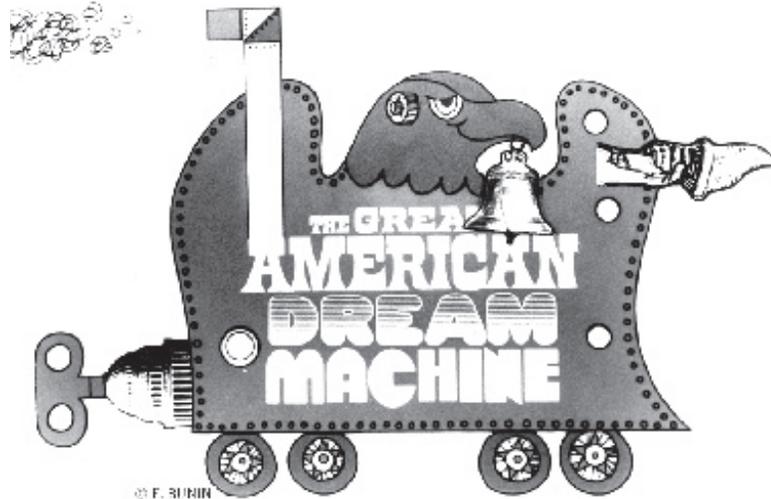
“There's an illusion being created that all the world's knowledge is on the Web,” said Edward L. Ayers, a grad school dean at the University of Virginia, “but we haven't begun to glimpse what is out there in local archives and libraries . . . materials that are not digitized risk being neglected, virtually lost to the great majority of potential users.”

James J. Hastings, director of access programs at the National Archives, goes even further. “If researchers conclude that the only valuable records they need are those online, they will be missing major parts of the story. And in some cases they will miss the story altogether.”

If the common expectation is that everything is online now or will be soon, where is public broadcasting? Sadly, we are virtually absent.

Despite public television's mandate to “inform, inspire and educate,” most of our important and memorable recorded treasures, produced at significant cost, are never seen or heard again after their brief, shining moments on the air.

Some people in our audiences don't forget, however. With great affection, our programs live for years, even decades, in the memories of viewers who wonder why they have completely disappeared.



The first of TV's magazine series is stuck in the minds of viewers who remember it but stuck on the shelf, out of viewers' sight.

### A legacy of “lost” programs

In the dynamic digital environment, we can live up to our mandate by making these programs viewable again. Doing so will transform the image and service of public broadcasting, especially to the millions of potential new supporters who aren't attached to public broadcasting and never saw these programs. They would be delighted to watch them for the first time.

Most of the requests to bring programs back come from an older public and their memories of television.

*Eyes on the Prize*, for example. Originally aired in 1987 and 1990, this inspiring history of America's civil rights movement quickly became one of the most acclaimed documentary programs ever aired on our stations.

After it had been unavailable for nearly two decades in broadcast or video, a new generation of students was demanding to see it. Only because of the sustained public outcry and with special fundraising efforts was the series re-released.

Another example: *Lathe of Heaven*. This dramatization of a well-known science-fiction story was broadcast in 1980 as a product of WNET's Television Lab. Its large following asked repeatedly to see it again. Finally, more than 15 years later, WNET cleared the

rights in 2000 and, with great fanfare, the drama was rebroadcast.

But most programs aren't so lucky. The classic 1970s series *Great American Dream Machine* is stuck in the public's mind and still stuck on the shelf. As one of the very first television magazine programs, *Dream Machine* was grandparent to every irreverent sketch comedy, music video and political satire program broadcast since. Its structure of short segments would make it ideal for online viewing.

But three dozen reels of 2-inch videotape are sitting in a warehouse, labels peeling off and magnetic coating flaking. Its satire is completely unknown to a younger audience that would likely find the series enormously entertaining and revelatory.

Ten years ago, Ron Hull, a former director of CPB's Television Program Fund, reviewed the PBS tape inventory and pulled together a list of more than 1,500 programs worthy of preserving *at that time*, such as the Nixon/Kennedy debates, Chicago Conspiracy Trial, Henry Fonda as Clarence Darrow, the *Dick Cavett Show* and *Cosmos*. Just think about the priceless content that's been added since then!

National programs aren't the only ones worth saving. Nearly every station and production unit across the system has its own video legacy to preserve and revive. A

number of organizations are in various stages of assessing and organizing preservation and access plans for their own program holdings. Among them are WTIU at Indiana University; Rocky Mountain PBS in Denver; WILL at the University of Illinois; Native American Public Telecommunications in Lincoln, Neb.; and KQED in San Francisco.

## A good time to jump in

Advocates for local efforts like these are looking for assistance and ways to learn from each other. Combined with the potential of PBS's planned digital interconnection system to support shared storage, and the repository planning project Preserving Digital Public Television that I manage at WNET, resources for archiving are evolving rapidly.

The American Archive is a new initiative proposing to bring these elements together to assist public broadcasting as a whole. The archive, as proposed by the Association of Public Television Stations, would "harness the power of digital technology and telecommunications to preserve public broadcasting's audio, film and video history and make it available to the American people."

It aims to give people universal, transparent access. A viewer could simply search, point, click and view. On the other side of the interface, of course, media professionals know that creating and maintaining such a repository is not nearly that simple. Archiving digital productions is more complex than putting tapes on a shelf. There are many technical, operational and legal problems to solve. With eventual preservation in mind, producers must introduce new procedures at the very start of production.

But because stations are completing their shift to digital distribution, our procedures are already changing. With some thought, we can plan for preservation *and* access to lost programs at the same time we're going digital.

## Can we afford it?

First, a word about costs.

Many people assume the biggest costs for preservation is in file storage. But this is not so, as storage capacities keep growing and costs drop. In fact, it's cataloging that is really the biggest expense—assigning the metadata to programs so we'll be able to search for and retrieve them.

There is no way around the need for metadata. Digital files are simply useless without it. Even though automated systems are being developed to do some of the work, some manual cataloging is necessary, which is costly because it's labor-intensive. We have to find more cost-effective means to

solve this problem.

Second, a word about monetizing our collections.

Don't get carried away with visions of making lots of money from your archives. Certainly a few programs will be able to earn impressive sums if we can make them available again, and some will be able to earn money online. Others can be repurposed for educational use, which also has the potential for steady sales. Realistically, though, our archival tapes are not going to generate a huge income.

## Taking steps

Though our Preserving Digital Public Television project is well underway and the American Archive is being planned, stations and producers shouldn't wait for directions from national organizations.

Most of the work for access and preservation will have to be done by each institution at home. Indeed, this local experience will help shape and inspire the national effort, which has always been seen as a cooperative and collaborative venture.

Here are some steps you can take now or at least prepare for. To help, our project offers resources at [www.ptvdigitalarchive.org](http://www.ptvdigitalarchive.org).

**Assess your tape library.** Stations, distributors and producers have hordes of tapes sitting on shelves and crammed in closets. It's time to do a first sort. Before you digitize anything, figure out what's worth keeping and get rid of the rest. If you are lucky, you may have an actual database of tapes, but it's more likely that there are only a list or rough notes somewhere. (No, for the first pass you won't have to watch the programs.)

We have resources that can help you decide how to evaluate what you have, so you can decide what to keep, what to dump, and what needs more thought (and maybe research). Two papers on our website—"Report and Recommendations on Archiving Television Assets at WTIU" by Lisa Carter, and "Recommended Appraisal Guidelines" by Mary Ide and Leah Weisse—might be helpful places to start.

Your first cut could leave the job much more manageable than it looks today. When WNET moved to a new building in 1999, we reduced a chaotic collection of 60,000 tapes by half and made close to \$10,000 from recycling.

**Index it with metadata.** If a program can't be searched for, it can't be found. Though you can't paste labels on digital files, you can impose order by entering metadata—program descriptions and other information. In the future, your producers will enter this data much earlier in the production process, making it even more useful during the life of

the program material.

You'll need a database to organize your collection, but you can start with simple and off-the-shelf software such as Filemaker. To make your data accessible to other public broadcasters in the future, you can use the CPB-funded PBCore "dictionary" of metadata terms developed specifically for public broadcasting. The website [www.pbcore.org](http://www.pbcore.org) is starting to collect highly useful data entry templates, and we encourage people to learn how to use it so it truly becomes the standard for public TV and radio.

After indexing, you can put the database online even if you can't make the programs themselves fully accessible there. People will still be able to find the shows.

**Remaster it.** Unfortunately, there's no way to keep analog tapes from deteriorating. Tapes in older formats still have to be sent out of house to be remastered. It still costs \$300 to \$700 an hour to have a 2-inch quad or ¾-inch tape properly cleaned and copied.

But these services will soon be creating files in the standard formats we specify, so newly remastered programs can be transferred directly into an asset management system at the same time. *Then* you will be able to watch the programs!

Meanwhile, some funders are keenly interested in projects that could liberate this content for the public, and they may bring new money to the task.

**Digitize it.** Stuffing video files into digital asset management systems is getting easier and easier. Soon, every station will have one DAM thing or another to help manage its program library. It won't take too much additional planning to set up an ingest station that can digitize tapes into uncompressed or lightly compressed video files for longer-term preservation, while low-resolution proxies are used as access copies.

Here, too, standards are important, and a few initiatives are underway to propose technical standards for file formats and storage "wrappers" that the system can use.

**Look into who holds rights.** Yes, rights-holders' agreements can be a costly obstacle to restoring some of our most valuable programs, especially performances. Don't wait for this to get neatly sorted out, because it won't be.

Where possible, we should use educational use rights and other distribution rights that we already possess. It may take some bold moves, but many of our programs, or at least segments, could probably be made available right away.

In the meantime, we should pursue a policy agenda such as the one outlined by APTS, which proposes to free up public access to public TV programs without taking away

reasonable compensation from rightsholders. For example, we need rights agreements that would permit ongoing noncommercial use of our programs in classrooms or for private viewing, regardless of delivery method. We even need explicit rights simply for preservation, protecting access by scholars, educators and others.

**Show it off.** When you're raising money to pay for remastering or other expenses, don't forget that one of the best ways to promote your holdings is to show them off. People love to watch old TV shows, and they will get quite excited at the prospect of helping you restore a library of gems. When you have a few programs remastered, give potential supporters a taste—show them a short clip reel. Once the word gets out that you're bringing back old programs, folks with amazing memories will emerge, bringing a wealth of history, contacts and resources.

### **A time for new partnerships**

It's time to get over our wasteful habit of letting our programs vanish forever. We've got decades of national and local productions sitting in storage, and the public is hungry

for them. Making programs accessible will generate great goodwill, new audiences and new funding.

The technology is here and increasingly affordable. Asset management systems for digitizing, organizing, storing and retrieving media are becoming more powerful, and storage costs are plummeting. On-demand viewing is developing rapidly. In public broadcasting, separate initiatives to develop standards for metadata, file formats and networks for non-real-time program distribution are coming together under the umbrella of the American Archive.

But even with all these pieces falling into place, the job in each community is too big, too costly and too important for stations to go it alone. We need new partnerships for preservation.

Approach local universities, libraries, archives, historical societies and museums to join forces, sharing expertise and resources. They face similar challenges in digitizing their collections, developing standards for access and preservation, designing storage facilities and figuring out how to pay for it. They, too, can't do it alone. There may be additional opportunities to team up with commercial entities that have similar needs

and interests.

The objective: a network of trusted digital repositories that can rescue our programs and keep them safe. At the same time, these archives can restore public access to these programs, introducing them to new generations and bringing a whole new set of viewers to public television. ■

*Nan Rubin manages special projects in technology planning at WNET in New York. She is project director of Preserving Digital Public Television, developed in partnership with Boston's WGBH, PBS and New York University, a leader in designing digital libraries, to design a model preservation repository.*

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*For resources and information about the project, go to [www.ptvdigitalarchive.org](http://www.ptvdigitalarchive.org).*