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Vanderbilt Television News Archive

Jo Anna Kessler

Archives of the Jewish Federation of Nashville, Tennessee

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While taping reported network television news for the past eleven years, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive (VTNA) became a catalyst in shaping the history of archives. The passage in 1976 and the enactment in 1978 of the new Copyright Law clearly mark the legal justification of the videotape archive's existence and its implicit recognition as a reference and research collection. The Senate report on the copyright legislation specifically cited VTNA as the type of activity it did not wish the law to preclude. The Copyright Revision Law provides that any library meeting standards specified by the law can videotape and make lending copies of audiovisual news.

The VTNA was the center of a legal controversy which received national publicity. On December 21, 1973, CBS, Inc., charged Vanderbilt University, through VTNA, with copyright violation in taping "The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite." The litigation raised the question of the legality of videotape archives made by off-air taping and focused attention on the absence of legal precedent. The suit was filed with the United States District Court in Nashville, but never came to trial. On December 20, 1976, at CBS's suggestion and with Vanderbilt University's agreement, the suit was dropped without prejudice. The challenge of copyright violation essentially was mooted by the signing into law of the Copyright Revision Law (Public Law 94-553) that became effective January 1, 1978.

A less official but equally important recognition of archival status occurred on June 28, 1978, with the announcement of a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Grant to VTNA. The Research Collections Program of the NEH Division of Research Grants awarded a grant in two parts: $75,000 outright for the first year of the project for basic support; and $150,000 over a two-year period, conditional upon the Archive's raising the same amount from other sources. B. J. Stiles, deputy chairman of NEH, stated that NEH recognizes VTNA for the social value of its archival work which acquires, preserves, and assists in the dissemination of videotape materials used in research for students as well as the public. The purpose of the grant is to help duplicate the collection of approximately 4,500 hours of recorded television news in a contemporary format, that is, provide a copy for security and one for use in a three-quarter-inch cassette format.

For the period from August 5, 1968, to the present, VTNA retains the most extensive holdings of videotaped news in an archival
collection. The Archive now houses approximately 7,000 hours of videotaped materials, of which 5,000 are evening news broadcasts and the remaining 2,000 are special news broadcasts, notably presidential speeches and press conferences. The tapes include the reporting of the 1968, 1972, and 1976 conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties, the Watergate hearings, the impeachment debates, and other broadcasts of a news event nature.

A major problem confronting the Archive in its earliest stages of operation was devising an index for access to the taped materials. Forty-one months after the collection was begun, the Archive produced Television News Index and Abstracts. Initially distributed free of charge upon request, the publication now has a subscription price of $60 a year which includes twelve monthly numbers plus an annual index. A Ford Foundation Grant provided funding for indexing and abstracting the evening news materials collected before the publication began in 1972. For the period August 1968 through December 1971, the Index/Abstracts are available on microfilm for $150, which includes four printed annual indexes. The entire reference work may be purchased in a microfilm format for the years since 1971 at a cost of $50 a year which includes printed annual indexes. Approximately four hundred copies of the December 1979 number circulated chiefly, but not exclusively, to academic libraries.

To locate an item in the index, a user scans the alphabetical listing (yellow pages), such as the one below:

BEAVER, Claudia - 1607
BECK, Eckardt - 1664, 1668
BEE Gees (Musical Group) - 1789
BEECHER, William - 1683
BEGIN, Menachem - 1717
Middle East Conflict - 1599, 1621, 1642, 1833
Peace Moves - 1629, 1639, 1648, 1651, 1654, 1657, 1662, 1664, 1667, 1683, 1688, 1701, 1729, 1732, 1733, 1799, 1816, 1820, 1829, 1830
BEIRUT (Lebanon) - 1596, 1621, 1625, 1644, 1648, 1691, 1695, 1698, 1701, 1746, 1748, 1751

The numbers cited are page numbers of the abstracts (white pages). Locating Menachem Begin as an example and turning to page 1599, the user finds the abstract as well as the network, reporter, date, and time of broadcast to the nearest ten seconds (if recorded in Nashville, Tennessee, Central zone appears):
The abstracts, the user's guide to the collection stresses, identify
news items for subsequent retrieval on the videotapes of the programs
and should neither be attributed to speakers as direct quotations, nor
cited as evidence of what was said. The authoritative source for
study, quotations, and reference is the tape.

For those who are not students, faculty, or staff at Vanderbilt
University, the Archive makes nominal charges for services. Charges
for nonacademic use are slightly more than those for use in academic
situations. The hourly rate to view a tape in the Archive is $2.50.
The Archive makes tapes available for loan in one of several formats:
a one inch or one-half inch reel-to-reel tape, a three-quarter inch
video cassette, Beta and VHS half-inch cassette, or audio cassette.
The cost per tape hour for duplicate tapes is $20. If a researcher
requests a compilation tape on a particular topic, the cost is $40 per
tape hour. Until May of 1979, the master recording in black and white
was made on a one inch reel-to-reel tape costing approximately $50 per
hour. Since May, the Archive has recorded two copies, one for secur-
ity and one for use, of each broadcast in color on three-quarter inch
U-MATIC cassettes at approximately the same cost as the single tape
that was formerly made.
Because the earlier copyright failed to provide guidelines for the use of electronic recordings, the Archive from the outset imposed restrictions on the use of the duplicate tapes. To assure responsible handling of materials, these restrictions underlined the Archive's purpose; it is a collection for study, reference, and research, not production. With the passage of the General Revision of Copyright Law, the Archive requires the user's agreement that the material is on loan and is to be returned. The loan form now emphasizes that the material, in most cases, is copyrighted and advises use of materials within the framework of Public Law 94-553. Such attentiveness to the use of the materials must have played an instrumental role in gaining recognition for the Archive as a collection of social and historical value.

With concern for preservation, VTNA maintains the same environment for tape storage as that for books and other documents in the Vanderbilt Library--controlled temperature and humidity. Before using raw tape for archival purposes, a technician takes a random sampling from each shipment and makes preliminary recordings. After use and before returning a recorded tape to the locked storage vault, a technician winds and rewinds each tape to assure a firm and even packing. This measure acts as a safeguard against distortion of the image that would result from uneven packing. In its eleven years of operation, the audiovisual Archive has experienced minimal deterioration of tapes. Any sign of deterioration leads to immediate duplication of the tape and then to random sampling of other tapes with the same series number.

Though the staff at VTNA believes the videodisc is probably the best archival format for electronic recording, the cost at present for a one-on-one copy (single videodisc copy) is prohibitively expensive. Until developments in the industry decrease the cost of videodisc duplication, VTNA will continue using the videotape format. Since the perfecting of videotape in 1957, the improvement in quality, hence longevity, has increased.

Paul C. Simpson, a retired insurance executive, was the originator of the idea and the original funder of the audiovisual Archive. As the administrative consultant to the Archive, he has been intimately involved from the outset in its development. The nonprofit Archive, supported by designated grants and contributions to Vanderbilt University, operates with an Administrative Committee consisting of Mr. Simpson, Jeff Carr, Vice President for University Relations and General Counsel, and Frank P. Grisham, the Director of Vanderbilt University Library. James P. Pilkington serves as the administrator of the collection with a staff of eight.

That television news reporting is becoming a means of documenting the political, social, and economic events of the times is reflected in the use of the Archive. Of the 1,172 services rendered during the 1979 calendar year, 249 involved lending duplicates, which ranged from one tape to over thirty tapes. The heaviest use of the Archive is
academic, but the nature and scope of the research projects vary widely. In the fall of 1978, a researcher traveling with the Israeli delegation to the Camp David Summit came to Nashville to study the reporting of the Mid-East crisis. He returned to Hebrew University with fifty hours of duplicated and compiled tapes for research for his dissertation. Two doctoral candidates, one in sociology and the other in political science, have used the Archive for researching the Viet-Nam War coverage.

From term papers, theses, and dissertations, the range of documentation extends to national and international projects. In May 1978, a tape compiled for New York University was used in a colloquium in Paris which compared the image of France as projected by American television with the image of America projected by French television from 1968 to 1977. That same month a visitor from the University of London borrowed tapes for a study of television coverage of two weeks of current news. The objective of the study is to compare coverage by England, West Germany, and the United States. VTNA provided the United States coverage.

The Archive itself has been the basis of a research project. In August 1978, a group from the Indiana University School of Journalism spent two days videotaping the operations at VTNA. The videotape was presented at the annual convention of the National Association for Education in Journalism for a panel on television collections around the country. The Center for New Communications at the School of Journalism has made rental copies of the tape available to the public.

Nonacademic use of the Archive includes services rendered to federal and state governmental agencies in addition to lawyers in the defense and prosecution of legal cases. Authors have used the tapes for research in writing books and motion picture scripts. One notable example of such documentation was for the movie All the President's Men.

The recognition of VTNA as the earliest and most complete collection of videotaped news of the three major networks has encouraged at least one library to enter into a cooperative working arrangement with the Archive. In the fall of 1978, the George Washington University Library opened a new audiovisual center for the use of videotapes in research and instruction. As the first facility of its kind in a United States library, the Television News Study Center houses a seventy-seat auditorium for group viewing as well as facilities for individual study. Of the 249 requests for tapes in 1979, approximately forty were for the Washington center. In exchange for access to the Vanderbilt collection in serving its patrons, the Washington, D.C., center has taped, since December of 1978, weekend evening news telecasts not shown in Nashville. These tapes have been incorporated into the VTNA collection and included in the Television News Index and Abstracts.
The Copyright Law of 1978 provides that the Library of Congress will start the American Television and Radio Archives which will include entertainment as well as news programs. This operation is currently in the developmental stage. To discover the role of television in reporting news and shaping attitudes about state and federal investigations and legislation, national and international conflict, economic policy in national and international markets, as well as social, political, and humanitarian issues, a researcher finds the most complete source of documentation for the past decade in the collection of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.