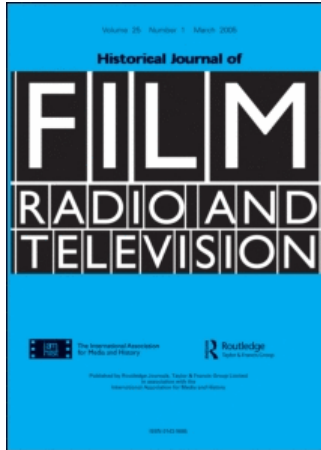


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### **The Case for Preserving our Contemporary Communications Heritage**

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FORUM

## *The Case for Preserving our Contemporary Communications Heritage*

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Because by definition most historians tend to be preoccupied with the past, issues of contemporary and future significance rarely excite their academic concern. Such is the case with the preservation of new kinds of contemporary record material which are likely to prove of enormous benefit to future generations of historians. In the past century, the enormous technological advances in what Asa Briggs termed in the 1960s the 'communications revolution' have transformed our lives and the way we see the world around us. The pace of this transformation has been even more rapid in the past decade. It is sobering to think back to the Falklands War of 1982, which today seems even more like a nineteenth century type of conflict than it did at the time, fought as it was in an age before accessible domestic video cassette recorders, multi-channel satellite television, portable camcorders and satphones, laptop computers, fax machines and modems, let alone before most of us had heard of the like of 'CNN', 'Microsoft', the 'Internet' and 'information superhighways', digital data transmission or the global information infrastructure. Anglo-US deregulation in the area of communications and the media in the 1980s, coupled with the end of the Cold War, have encouraged technological trends which finally perhaps make the concept of a 'global village' realizable. During the abortive Moscow coup of 1991, an interned Michael Gorbachev in the Crimea could learn of events in Moscow by the BBC World Service while Boris Yeltsin at the White House could chart the progress of his supporters in the streets around him by tuning in to Atlanta-based CNN. By contrast to the Falklands, the Persian Gulf War, fought less than a decade later in 1991, could be fought out on real-time live global television, viewed by professors and printers from Vancouver to Vladivostok at the same time as presidents and prime ministers on both sides of the conflict. Converted American EC130 aircraft were capable of transmitting multi-standard and multi-frequency radio and television pictures into the battle zones of occupied Kuwait while messages from one side to the other could be sent instantaneously, via electronic mail (e-mail). This indeed is the New World Information and Communications Order where the media act not simply as observers of events but also as participants and sometimes even as catalysts, as in the case of TV pictures of the Kurds prompting John Major to suggest Operation Provide Comfort to the Americans in 1991 or to Bill Clinton's reversal of American policy in Somalia after watching pictures of a butchered American airman being dragged through General Aideed's camp.

All this has happened at such breathtaking speed that contemporary historians have inevitably struggled to grapple with its consequences. In Britain, at least, historians tend to be by nature a conservative profession—although this is changing because we have

to a large extent had change imposed upon us—and the study of ‘contemporary history’ here has always been hamstrung by the Thirty Year Rule. Yet despite changing academic fashions and despite trends towards more ‘open government’, we remain extremely cautious about encouraging our research students to tackle issues more recently than a generation before because ‘the evidence’ is not yet available at the Public Record Office. Yet our undergraduates cry out for courses which address the confusing and momentous period through which they have lived and are living, becoming less and less interested in far away time periods such as World Wars I and II. They are, of course, the first generation of young people weaned wholly on colour television and for whom the world wars are ‘black and white’ wars; anyone who has used the admittedly rare colour footage of the Nazi period in teaching will know of the shock which it induces, finally bringing home the immediacy of a period they had previously considered remote.

The history of the mass media is barely a century old—as indeed is the profession of the modern historian. Yet despite the progress made in the past ten years especially, in teaching and in research and even in film archive policy, can we as a profession really have been said to have done justice to the history of a century which is unique from all others by virtue of the existence of the mass media? When modern twentieth century history textbooks mention the mass media, they do so almost as if it was a sideshow—with the press still taken the most seriously (because it is printed in the familiar and hallowed written word), but with radio relegated to the ephemeral and cinema to the trivial. And as for television, we have barely begun to regard that as a phenomenon worthy of our serious consideration. Yet in 2095, when history students look back to our century as we now look back to the nineteenth, they will read that the twentieth century was indeed different from all that went before it by virtue of the enormous explosion in media and communications technologies. Mass media. Mass communications. But when they come to examine the primary sources for this period, they will alas find only a ramshackle patchwork of surviving evidence because *we* currently lack the foresight, let alone the imagination, to preserve our contemporary media and communications heritage. By not addressing this issue now, we are relegating our future history to relative obscurity and our future historians to sampling and guesswork.

If this might seem extreme in a century that already provides too much evidence for any one historian to master in a lifetime, let us just recall that only about 50 per cent of the films ever made since 1896 have survived. There is no radio or television archive anywhere in the world which contains a complete archive of the material transmitted since the inception of those media. We have in other words already lost a great deal of our twentieth century heritage. There are perfectly understandable reasons for this, especially when one remembers, for example, that only a fraction of material which our government departments produce on an annual basis reaches the PRO for our perusal 30 years later. The argument is that there is simply too much paper to preserve it all; there simply isn’t the space. Regardless of long-standing concerns over archival policies—who decides to keep what? What is the process of selection and elimination? etc.—historians as users of evidence are bound to clash with archivists as storers or custodians of records. In an ideal world, the former would have everything preserved so that *they* or their successors could decide what was or was not significant. The latter, however, argue that it is not an ideal world and that some things have to go for sheer pragmatic reasons of cost and storage, so they decide which piece of evidence is significant. Both, however, need to recognise that they have a symbiotic relationship and that they need to work together to resolve the problems. Moreover, with media

archives, there are even greater problems. Prior to 1951, for example, film was produced on perishable (and highly inflammable) nitrate stock and before such organisations as the Imperial War Museum or the National Film (and, since 1993, Television) Archive could do what they could, with limited resources, to convert those which had survived into a more durable (and safer) format of acetate, much had already been lost forever. Even the newer post-nitrate acetate stock is subject to a form of deterioration known as the 'vinegar syndrome'. Preservation is an expensive and time-consuming business, while restoration creates even greater problems, as anyone will know who has watched with admiration the kind of restoration work which film historians like Kevin Brownlow have undertaken. The logic should thus be that it is better—and more economical—to preserve and conserve before the need for restoration becomes imperative.

The problems are even further compounded when one realises that a cinematic production is an end-product of a commercial exercise. An individual film will contain but a fraction of the footage taken because it has been edited to meet the commercial imperatives of making a profit. This may seem less significant to those growing hordes of cultural studies scholars who use films as semiotic texts that encode some ideological purpose, but historians can only lament the loss of unused footage to the cutting room floors of history, especially on their more familiar grounds of 'factual' films as evidence (documentaries and newsreels or, today, current affairs programmes or investigative journalism reports).

Herein lies another clue to the difficulties faced. Mass media products, such as films, radio and television programmes, are invariably produced by commercial organisations whose purpose is primarily to entertain people with a product that invariably has a limited life-cycle. There are notable exceptions such as *The World at War*. Yet these organisations do not foster an institutional culture which sees those products as potential historical artifacts that need preserving for future historical analysis. If the product survives at all, it is only because it might serve some future recycling for commercial purposes, whether it be the selling of old *I Love Lucy* programmes to developing countries or to nostalgic cable channels. Many news organisations wipe their tapes after a given period of time so that they can be re-used to save costs. Even public service broadcasting organisations such as the BBC, whose purpose is supposedly to inform, instruct and entertain, have not in the past decided to keep everything. Moreover, the BBC Archives of broadcasting output that do survive (beyond the splendid and underused Written Archives Centre at Caversham) are not organised on an academic archival basis, but rather a commercial one which permits outside researchers to scrutinize their material at commercial rates that are prohibitive to most academic researchers. This means that, for the most part, historians who wish to write about, say, the BBC and the Suez Crisis, are usually only able to do so from conventional written archives rather than to see or hear the actual radio and television broadcasts themselves, with a corresponding loss of appreciation of those special characteristic nuances carried by the audio and audio-visual media.

There are, of course, problems with such forms as evidence, both in terms of the methodologies for dealing with them and with evaluating their impact. Their ethereal nature need no longer be a deterring factor now that we have the technological capacity to record them for posterity, in the form of audio- and video-cassette, let alone newer digital technologies. These are very small formats—a VHS cassette is the size of a paperback book and we may again face problems of deterioration with formats that are themselves comparatively new materials. If the history of film archives can provide us

with any lessons, it is that planning for likely future conversion onto newer formats must always be incorporated into preservation policy. There may still be some purists who argue that it is better to look at, even *feel*, the original parchment than scrutinise a photocopy or a facsimile reproduction, but there is no room in the preservation of communications archives for such attitudes. This is because the communications media are themselves invariably copies—whether they be newspapers, film prints or television programmes. Of the three boxes which one need to fill in for addressing e-mail, the third in most software packages is ‘cc’.

But questions remain as to how much one needs to preserve: the evening news broadcasts? documentaries? soap operas? Surely not the adverts as well? Ceefax and Oracle? E-mail press releases from the White House, NATO, the UN and the WEU possibly, but surely not the more bizarre examples of cybercasting on the Internet as in the Usenet group ‘alt.sex.fetishes.feet’? Well, frankly, yes. It is for future generations to decide the respective significance of material which many of us still don’t see as important. Ceefax, for example, was the first BBC service to report the resignation of Margaret Thatcher.

But it is not just the speed at which the medium reports the message which needs to be borne in mind—although the breaking of live stories before they have been fully verified is becoming a phenomenon which our decision-makers are increasingly having to take on board. Hence the growth in ‘spin doctors’, public relations activity, even in public diplomacy. Yet television viewing, for example, is rarely something someone does just for one programme. Viewing habits indicate that people do sit down for an evening’s television and even day time viewing is done in blocks of time. Channel hopping is normal and the *cumulative* effect of all this activity, especially when combined with newspaper reading and radio listening habits, does help to shape the way in which we see the world. So we need to record all four British domestic terrestrial television channels 24 hours a day to stand a chance of understanding what that cumulative effect might be. After all, that means three four-hour tapes (slow speed) per station per day, a total of 12 tapes to secure a day in the life of terrestrial television output in the UK. Seven days a week, 365 days per year—which is almost 5,000 tapes per year requiring about 417 feet of shelving. It could be far less if preserved on newer formats such as optical disc or CDI, especially as the technology shifts from analogue to digital. Logging of such material is as simple as preserving the *Radio Times*, an obvious index for such output. However, this permanent recording operation would need to secure copyright waivers from the broadcasting authorities. The costs could not be borne solely by one individual; it would need to be a national archive. The tragic loss last year from these shores to the United States of Barry Hill’s unique archive of radio broadcasts is a salutary reminder that had it not been for the messianic enthusiasm of one individual who took it upon himself to record every radio broadcast he could receive over the past 20 years from his house in Leeds, much of our radio heritage would have been lost. Mr Hill frequently despaired of the lack of vision in this country, especially when professional radio broadcasters asked *him* for material which they no longer possessed. Surely this is a damning indictment on the inability of government, communications industries, archives and academia to get together to preserve our heritage?

In terms of the reception of such material, we already possess public opinion polling and broadcast research data with such organisations as MORI, NOP and others. However, once again, there are commercial organisations whose day-to-day research for contractors rarely sees the public light of day. Historians of public opinion in the 1930s

and 1940s thank God for Mass Observation or the American Institute of Public Opinion, but to my knowledge few approaches have been made to their present day equivalents in order to secure comparative data. How they would respond, therefore, remains to be seen, but the value of such material to scholars not just in history but in sociology and the other social sciences is inestimable. Again the costs of public opinion polling and surveys are too high for an academic institution to carry out on anything but a random basis but given that much invaluable data already exists, the costs of archiving it are already reduced considerably.

The arrival of global media services such as trans-border satellite television raises a further problem that needs to be overcome. Given that many people in, say, Europe can all watch the same programmes, we need to consider the recording and preservation of the proliferating number of international television, radio and other services if we are to begin understanding the international impact of such issues as 'Americanisation' or 'Coca-Colonialism', let alone the role of international communications in the ending of the cold war. The political obstacles are undoubtedly immense, as reflected in the 1993 GATT negotiations that were almost scuppered on Franco-American disagreements over the transfer of media products. Yet the very centrality of that issue in the GATT negotiations begs the need to preserve the products for posterity.

These are not essentially new arguments; Sir Arthur Elton made a similar plea for film back in the mid-1950s and there has been a growing number of individuals since then who are now more sensitive to the issue. But the historical profession as a whole has been slow to respond, almost to the point of irresponsibility. They see the student interest in courses offered by the occasional colleague who does take an interest in such evidence, but they regard it as a still somewhat 'cranky' activity in which the showing of films is a substitute for 'real teaching' by scholars who are not really taken seriously. How many of those historians can really own up to considering film as a potential source for their research when they are considering their somehow more respectable topic? Rarely do major international conferences dealing with a central topic consider putting on a film programme—the 1994 Leeds International First World War Commemoration Week was a rare if encouraging exception which attracted many converts from the distinguished gathering of 'the great and the good'. Even there, however, this participant was struck by the level of indignance combined with ignorance as to how the media world actually operates when several historians, after viewing extracts, argued that the BBC TV series *The Great War* should be shown again. No amount of explanation concerning copyright, the different uses to which film evidence is now used in the post-*World at War* era of TV historical documentaries and so on, could shift the indignation of people who admitted that their interest in World War I had been first sparked by that series.

The massive proliferation of communications and media in recent years does require new thinking and new solutions. Much, of course, has already been done with the oldest of the new media, especially with film where the stable door was left ajar. But the history of cinema was matched with the kind of random preservation policies we are already beginning to witness with the newer media. The problem of accessing scattered film archives—whether they be at the Science Museum, the National Film and Television Archive and BFI, the Imperial War Museum, the East Anglian Film Archive, the Yorkshire Film Archive and other regional collections—may one day be overcome by the new communications technologies currently being vaunted in the form of multi-media information superhighways. Communication technology has always been about the conquest of time and space and there is no reason to believe that in the next

century such technology will not allow researchers to access multi-media archives anywhere they exist—provided they are wired. The gradual convergence of communications and computing offers genuine opportunities of access on a world-wide scale. But the archives themselves must first exist. Temporal and spatial matters concerning storage and preservation are likely to be overcome *but only* if we address the questions which have always lay at the heart of archival policy: costs, copyright and comprehensiveness. Even the National Film and Television Archive was only able to preserve just over 25 per cent of the total broadcast output of ITV and Channel 4 in 1993–94. That means 75 per cent lost for posterity—lower than the annual amount of Whitehall material denied to the PRO, but still only a fragment of our contemporary record. Admittedly, communications media contain only part of that record anyway; with film ‘evidence’ for example, we are only seeing what lay within the camera’s angle of vision, not that which went on behind the cameraman’s back. But no individual form of historical evidence can provide us with a complete picture anyway. Historians piece together different types of evidence rather like a jigsaw; pieces will always be missing but they or their successors don’t have a chance to even begin understanding our audio-visual century, our information and communications age, without access to the very media which have made it thus. There is therefore an urgent need for the Institute of Contemporary British History, as the most dynamic body of recent years dealing with and co-ordinating different approaches to the study of our present century, to bring together the relevant interested parties—from the communications industries, the archivists and the academics—to act now before it is too late.

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