

Where have all the Videos Gone?

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I wonder if you realized that in mid-2016 the very last VCR machine came off the assembly line in Japan. This once-revolutionary technical breakthrough is now a dead format. But the event passed almost without comment. We've long since moved on to other consumer formats such as DVD and BluRay, and beyond them, to downloads and streaming.

“So what?” you might say. We who work in archives are used to format change, and the VHS format, as well as its one time rival the Betamax cassette, certainly had its quality limitations. It was not a preservation format—it degraded over time, and compared to the DVD format which allows fast access to any part of the disc, it was rather clunky to use. You had to rewind the tape when you're finished viewing, and as the tape aged you tended to get tracking problems.

But the VHS cassette was revolutionary in an important respect. It allowed convenient off-air video recording for the first time. You could time-shift. And tapes were erasable. You could tape over a previous recording if you no longer wanted to keep it. You could tape a movie off-air that you wanted to see again and maybe a movie that was not available for outright purchase in pre-recorded form. Of course, this technically contravened copyright laws. But for the first time, the technology outstripped the capacity of legal mechanisms to exercise control. And it was much cheaper to record a movie off-air than to buy a prerecorded equivalent, assuming

one was available. So we bought blank tapes by the dozen and built up our personal libraries of favourite movies and shows.

Let's think of the significance of those personal libraries now sitting in thousands, maybe millions, of homes around the region. Could they represent an archival challenge—maybe an urgent one—that doesn't fit naturally into our preservation thinking?

I don't know whether my personal experience is typical, but it will do as a starting point for discussion. Over the years I have accumulated not only a lot of prerecorded VHS cassettes that I bought from retail outlets but also around 150 blank tapes onto which I've recorded all sorts of things off-air: movies, favourite series, news and current affairs, cartoons (I have a particular interest in animation), children's shows (for our kids when they were young), and so on. And the other day I thought I'd sit down and play one of these tapes from end to end.

It began with a favourite movie, the W. C. Fields classic *The Bank Dick* (1940). It was regularly interrupted, of course, by commercials. When it ended, I was suddenly into the middle of an early Laurel and Hardy feature, *Pardon Us* (1931). This was followed by a childrens' show, circa 1990, called *Sing Me a Rainbow*. Then came a newscast, followed by the beginning of a sports program, and then the tape ran out. Clearly, I'd recorded *The Bank Dick* over whatever had previously been on the tape and unclicked the Record button when the movie finished. That left the residual 90 minutes or so already on the tape intact, suggesting that when I first used the tape to record some now-deleted content, I'd allowed it to run on to the end, picking up the station's continuing program stream.

So what were the archival issues that arose?

Are we preserving enough material to reflect the experience of the VHS cassette as an aspect of television culture? In the era when television had to be experienced only while the broadcast was happening, the VHS created the concept of time shift, the ability to record a program off-air so you could watch it at a more convenient time or even to record it off channel B while you were choosing to watch channel A, thus increasing your viewing options. Further, it allowed you to cheaply build up a library of favorite programs and films to be visited and revisited at your own leisure.

Then there are the commercials. How many archives take a considered approach to the preservation of television commercials? There is nothing that so directly reflects the aspirations, values and preferences of a society at any given time as its television commercials. There's a good chance that many of the commercials on the tape that I viewed are unique survivors—that they are not held in any archive or television library, and that they were treated as ephemeral and disposable at the time. They have the added

interest of revealing how their producers were exploring and using—indeed overusing—new electronic effects that are routine today but were exciting at the time.

Finally, any tape which contains a continuity of programming—let's say a three-hour continuous slice of a day's telecast—has captured a slice of life on a particular day in the past. It includes the gimmicks used for station identification and the overall level of presentation, with the gaps and pauses that were once characteristic but which have been eradicated by the split-second continuity of digital telecasting today. In archives we tend to preserve films and programs in their state as individual works, ignoring the programming context in which they were telecast. We have kept the programs intact, but we have lost the contemporary viewing experience.

Is there a collecting and preservation task here then? And is it urgent? VHS cassettes degrade with age and poor storage, and in any case, they are now being discarded either because the players are becoming worn out, or because we'd rather watch DVDs anyway. Unlike vinyl long playing records and analogue audio cassettes—both enjoying a resurgence now—you literally can't give away old VCRs. Charities and opportunity shops will accept your old DVDs, but they don't want your VCRs any longer. Around the world, I expect there will be millions of them going into landfill, creating their own environmental problem.

I see an archaeological challenge for any archive wanting to take up the preservation of the VHS. I'd happily donate my cassettes to the cause. Meanwhile, I'm hanging on to them—or at least the ones I recorded off air. I live in hope.

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