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Why Digitise Historical Television?

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Abstract: Digitisation of historic TV material is driven by the widespread perception that archival material should be made available to diverse users. Yet digitisation alters the material, taking away any lingering sense of presence. Digitisation and online access, however, offer startling new possibilities. The article offers three: use of material in language teaching and learning; use in dementia therapy; and applications as data in medical research. All depend on ordinary TV for their effectivity.

Keywords: Digitisation, television, history, dementia, archive, remediation, media archaeology

Why make archival TV available? The current push to make old programming available online has several causes. Here, I propose some more: potential uses for the material that may not have occurred to those who are currently devoting their time to opening up the archives. These possible new uses are sometimes startling, and they have (of course) implications for the future design of access routes and interfaces.

1 Why Digitise TV? The Current Demands

Every TV viewer is used to storing and retrieving programmes at home. This has been the case since VHS tape recorders became common at the beginning of the 1980s. Many are getting used to accessing recent programmes online as well. This is generating an increasing presumption that 'old stuff is available somewhere'. This in turn provokes a level of (normally unrequited) desire to see or to 'get hold of' that material once it is called back to mind.

Entire TV channels are built on the assumption that archival material can find an audience well after its original broadcast. DVD releases of old shows continue to grow. A rising tide of demand seems to exist, though there is little research about its nature. Evens et.al. provide a careful study of a pilot video-on-demand project which clearly demonstrates the difficulties involved in marketising this demand¹. It exists, but it is as diffuse as the potential material itself, dating back to the beginnings of recorded TV broadcasting. There are several interests ac-

¹ 'Attracting the un-served audience: the sustainability of long tail-based business models for cultural television content.' Tom Evens, Lieven De Marez, Laurence Hauttekeete, Daniël Biltreyst, Erik Mannens and Rik Van de Walle, *New Media & Society*, 2010, Vol. 2, Nr. 6, p. 1005

tively involved in developing the online availability of archived TV material to address this diffuse demand. They are:

Television broadcasters' archives who are faced by two sets of demands. One is from their own organisations, which want to archive almost all their output and to mine previous output as a source for rerun programmes or 'free' library footage. This demand is amplified by other broadcast organisations and production companies which are seeking such footage. So the archives of broadcasters are mostly constructed as businesses to respond to this demand. Another set of demands also exists, from those who seek to service or capitalise on the demand for archival TV: anyone from teachers and family historians to commercial DVD and online distributors. These exist at an entirely different business level to the first group of users, and so are often neglected. Nevertheless, broadcasters' archives attempt to respond to these diverse demands by trying to:

- Display in public the richness of material that they hold. This is a particularly strong motivation for public service broadcasters. The BBC has stated its intention to make all of its archive available to users in the UK by its centenary in 2022. This follows the key declaration by the then Director General Gregg Dyke that the BBC's archival material belongs to the public "because they paid for it".
- Make their holdings visible to researchers in a convenient form. Current access to archival material can be cumbersome, even when the material has been digitised. Central points of public access (eg EUScreen and Europeana) solve the problem faced by many archives: how can organisations primarily devoted to preservation and programme-making service the rising demand for access to materials from many different potential users.
- Bring their material to the attention of programme makers, distributors and other institutional users (e.g. museums). As access is increasing, hidden or unavailable material is squeezed out of consciousness and memory.

All of these impulses have brought broadcasters' archives to an enthusiastic involvement with projects to make material available online to a wide variety of users... so long as copyright issues can be resolved.

TV historians have long been convinced of cultural importance of TV, and have been equally frustrated at the lack of material available to them. TV historians have usually been able to access archives to study a wide range of material, but they are limited in what can be made available for teaching or for the repeated viewing necessary for close study. The result is that historical studies of TV are often skewed towards TV drama and comedy, and teaching towards available box sets, especially of American material. Many TV historians have therefore welcomed the wider access to archives as it promises to provide a balancing access to:

- historical news and documentary
- light entertainment
- magazine programming

Modern historians are increasingly realising that the history of Europe after the Second World War can be written only if television material is included in the research. National and European politics were played out on the TV screens, through news coverage and its management, through debates, appeals to national audiences and the staging of media events. TV material exemplifies the values and preoccupations of the moment. TV material shows what it felt like to be 'in the moment', and so gives a valuable insight into the complex decision-making processes of modern politics. It also shows what 'the moment' felt like for ordinary citizens, giving a valuable insight into modern social history.

Educators more generally need material that is immediately gripping material for their classes, as well as material that students can readily interpret for themselves. Moving image footage can be used for classroom presentations and can be incorporated into other forms of display and new audiovisual works. Reuse is a major aspect of the new interest in archival TV.

Museums and Libraries reacted swiftly to the growing, if diffuse, public perception that old TV should be made available. Many of the great national libraries of Europe have long been interested in collecting and making non-print media available alongside their print media. Europeana's commitment to the audiovisual is the latest manifestation of this trend. Film archives, too, have often preserved broadcast material, especially when the copyright owners were unwilling or unable to develop their own in-house archiving capacities, or where particular local or regional interests were involved in the material.

These have been the major interests in opening up archival TV. Their motives have been underpinned by one shared perception: old TV programmes are still TV programmes. The predominant belief motivating all this activity of retrieval and making available is this: these programmes can again do what they were originally made to do. They can still inform, educate and entertain.

2 Digitisation As Reinvention

However, digitisation does not simply re-present these programmes. It remakes them.

This point is forcefully made by the “undiscipline” of media archaeology, as Sobchack puts it². The sense of presence of digitised TV material is very different from its original use. This ‘sense of presence’ is the range of feelings and attitudes that surrounded TV programmes when originally broadcast³. It is a product of three factors:

- the general historical moment shared by programme and audience;
- the specific domestic circumstances in which the programme was being enjoyed;
- the feel of the technology, how it felt to operate it and to use it to watch programmes. This would encompass both wonder at its potential and frustration at its limitations.

All of this was embedded in a regime of broadcasting that has now disappeared from the European scene⁴. The sense of connection that it once had with its audience, its users, has been lost: it takes an intellectual effort to recover it. This would need, in the perspective of some media archaeologists, an intensive study of the apparatus of analogue broadcast TV: the cathode ray tubes, the distinctive buttons and dials of the controls, the limited response of the speakers etc.

Digitised TV is no longer analogue TV. Digitisation remakes analogue TV. It removes it even further from its original sense of presence.

Digitised TV has become data.

This data requires interpretation. This data also enables reinterpretation of the TV material on all kinds of levels that were simply not open to the material in its original analogue state.

However, one important level of interpretation is to read the footage back through the lens of its analogue past. This is no exercise in nostalgia. It is necessary simply to understand what nature of data it might be. The circumstances of the making of the programme material in question determined what was possible, and what was seen and heard. The sheen of sweat on the brow of an interviewee in a programme from the 1950s does not usually indicate guilt or tension caused, perhaps, by having to speak in a foreign language. It is often the result of the heat generated by studio lights, as we see in [the interview in French with the author of *The Saint*, Leslie Charteris](#), from 1958. The conventions of universal accessibility, a major feature of the TV’s first age of scarcity, determined what kinds of language were used and what ideas could be explored. Conventions of universal acceptability determined what could and could not be shown. In other words, digitised TV may be data, but it is always partial data. Its potential uses can be realised only once its scope is made clear.

Once this important orientation has taken place, the data is open to all kinds of reuse. Here are some examples. One is actualised, one is distinctly possible and others are little more than hypothetical.

1. Language Teaching And Learning

One of the discoveries of the EUscreen project has been the potential for old TV material as a resource in language learning. This potential arises from the sheer fact of internet distribution and the searchability of the EUscreen collection. The collection can be searched both by language and topic; so it is easy to find material. The importance for language learning lies in the nature of the original TV material. It consists of extended examples of complex and real utterances by individual native speakers. They are not speaking for any learning-

2 ‘Afterword: Media Archaeology and Re-Presencing the Past’ in ed Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology*, University of California Press, 2011, p. 323-35

3 Sobchack explicitly relates this to Benjamin’s idea of ‘aura’

4 See Ellis 2000

directed purpose, as most language learning materials inevitably are. They speak because what they say matters to them. They are not, for the most part, reading from a script. Their speech has an important element of spontaneity.

- Sometimes they are accosted on the street, like [the Austrians interrogated about bad taste clothing at Christmas](#).
- Sometimes they are engaged in [a studio debate on a social issue like smoking](#).
- Sometimes they are the subjects of an extended documentary or interview, like [Francois Truffaut discussing his then new release Jules et Jim](#).

This is language-in-use at its best. It has a wide variation of real accents and patterns of everyday speech. And what is more, they are speaking on matters of public interest and importance (at least at the time when they were speaking). These topics may well be familiar to the language learner, or they can be easily researched. TV provides complex and extended speech acts, and accompanies them with moving images. The learner can see the speaker as they speak, and can identify the characteristic gestures which accompany the speech of individuals. There are often further visual supports in the form of graphics, written material, film footage and so on. All the elements that went to make an easily intelligible programme in 1970 or 1980 can find themselves recycled, as it were, as learning support materials delivered over the internet.

No-one envisaged this role for these TV programmes when they were first made, but digitisation has made it possible. Suitable material can be conveniently selected by teachers who are assured that it will be present for some time. It can be controlled by the individual learner and so on. Many of the aspects of an expensive language learning package exist on a site like EUscreen as a simple by-product of its structure as a digital delivery device. It has made simple something that was once, in the analogue world, an impossibly large and intricate task for an individual language teacher or learner.

2. Use As Reminiscence Therapy

With the ageing population of Europe, new medical problems are emerging. The European Commission's Health and Consumer Directorate estimated that between 6.8 and 7.3 million people in the greater European area were suffering from dementia in 2006.⁵ This is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "the loss of intellectual abilities of sufficient severity to interfere with social or occupational functioning". It is ultimately a terminal illness, but its stages can last over many years, beginning with short term memory loss, difficulty in making decisions and recognising non-familiar surroundings. It often coincides with other problems such as depression. Reminiscence therapy is increasingly used with dementia sufferers, especially in the earlier stages of the disease. This consists of prompting subjects to remember events and aspects of daily life from their more distant past. Typical prompts would include objects, photos and songs. There is some evidence that this activity might slow the progress of the disease, especially as a regular activity⁶. In any case, it provides an important activity, increases the sense of well-being of sufferers, enables them to connect with each other in conversation, and provides an important means of connection with carers and family members.

Recently, the Yorkshire Film Archive has experimented with extending the scope of [reminiscence therapy by using archival film](#). This innovative project assembled footage into themed packages which were delivered on DVD to various care homes and dementia support groups. Each package came with suggestions for use and a range of physical photos and documents that could be passed around. As the source is a regional film archive, the footage had a particular character. Like most such archives, it held no footage from any TV broadcaster. Local in emphasis, it included a substantial amount of amateur material, much of which had added music. So the material was oriented towards memories of places as they once were, and of generic domestic activities such as holidays. Descriptions of the reactions seem to confirm that the films were an effective trigger for reminiscences. Importantly, they provoked conversations between members of the group as much as conversations with carers or family. Dementia erodes short term memory before longer term memory, and this film material clearly enabled the recall and mobilisation of longer term memories. Such an activity is therefore most effective in the earlier stages of the disease.

⁵ The European Dementia Research Agenda, Sally-Marie Bamford, Rebecca Taylor, ILC-UK, 2011 at http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/files/pdf_pdf_165.pdf

⁶ REF

Wang⁷ and Woods⁸ both report that regular reminiscence therapy reinforces older memories and seems to slow the process of memory degeneration. They can therefore help slow the loss of personality which is a distressing effect of dementia as much for family members as it must be for the sufferers themselves. Reminiscence activities also have an important function in providing a manageable activity in care home settings where activities are often rare. And as the Memory Bank project demonstrates, it can promote interaction between sufferers and so produce a greater sense of well-being.

[Memory Bank's material](#) does not seem to have included any TV material as it drew on a collection of over 16,000 titles that "include documentaries, newsreels, advertising films, and home movie collections, all capturing the rich moving image heritage of the [Yorkshire] region over the past one hundred years". The use of historical TV material would seem to offer a number of further advantages due to its familiarity to those who would recall watching it when first broadcast. These advantages would include:

- Familiar faces of presenters and public figures. Anecdotal evidence of historical TV viewing indicates that the people who appeared regularly on screen had an important status as virtual acquaintances. Sharing such TV intimacies, recalling gossip and favourite moments (even if the specific footage was not available) would provide a strong trigger for reminiscence. It could also recall and even recreate past pleasures.
- Familiar music. Reminiscence therapy includes a large element of song, as it seems that memories of music persist after most other memories have been lost. As dementia progresses, sufferers become disoriented in familiar surroundings and can lose their memory of who is related to whom in their family, and even the names of close family members. Sufferers at this stage can still, however, sing familiar songs. One major resource (not yet used to my knowledge) would be the hyper-familiar musical material of television: advertising jingles, programme theme tunes, the musical material of the variety shows of the 1950s, 60s and 70s in particular. Such material is strongly rooted in particular historical moments, the moments lived by the generations who now and in the coming years will be struck down with dementia. This would seem to have more potential than the current default choices for 'geriatric music' which tend to come from an even earlier age: traditional church hymns; songs of the period of the first world war; the music hall and parlour numbers of the Edwardian era. These may be well known to the typical sufferers in their 80s, but they were already nostalgic when they first encountered them.
- Familiar images. TV contains many repeated images and familiar graphics. A whole class of TV material called [interstitials](#) is designed expressly for multiple repetition. Again, it is possible that such material could produce reminiscences and awake dormant memories. This, as academics are fond of saying, requires further research.
- The everyday national community. Many scholars have argued that TV has played an important role in producing a sense of national community, and a commonality between scattered viewers. In the period of scarcity, everybody enjoyed the same TV but apart in their own homes. They often shared that enjoyment in recall the next day with colleagues and friends. This historical sense of commonality can again be an important part in reducing the sense of isolation and disorientation that many dementia sufferers experience. To watch and remember together, to experience again (either in memory or in the moment) a feeling of belonging would have important benefits both for individuals and possibly for the management of groups of sufferers.
- Specific important occasions and events. One function of TV has been to convey (if not participate in the creation of) key moments of public history. Each nation state has its own. Some have been traumatic, others are basic to the self-image of the citizens of a modern nation state. These are specific rather than generic events. They are the royal weddings and the street riots, the assassinations and the space explorations: the moments when everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing. TV footage again would be crucial in exploring personal connections with these public events.

There are, however, some problems in making this happen.

- Disorientation. It is possible that the sense of presence of historical TV material would disorient some sufferers, especially those who are already prone to 'living in the past'. It would be important not to substitute the flow of contemporary TV (often the main visual and aural stimulation in care homes) with a flow of historical material. The material is useful because it can prompt recall of past times and past pleasures.

7 Jing-Jy Wang, 'Group reminiscence therapy for cognitive and affective function of demented elderly in Taiwan', *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 2007; 22: 1235-1240.

8 Bob Woods, 'Management of memory impairment in older people with dementia', *International Review of Psychiatry* 1994, Vol. 6, No. 2-3, p. 153-161

- National cultures. Much of the most familiar and powerful TV material may be national in its reach, but it remains completely unknown beyond the reach of the specific broadcasters that showed it. It is also full of very specific references which may be incomprehensible to carers of a younger generation or from very different cultures. The very features that distinguish TV material from the Memory Bank material might make it difficult to use in practice.
- Online delivery. Historical TV is being made available online. This is fine for computer-based users, but care homes and other institutions dealing with the elderly are still anchored firmly in the culture of broadcast TV. Careful thought about the necessary infrastructure, the organisation and display of the material would have to take place to adapt 'point and click' interfaces to this environment. Future technologies which seek to merge the broadcast and online streams into one would be helpful (e.g. the [YouView](#) project in the UK), but, again, only if an interface were carefully designed for this specific use.

Online historical TV material has an unexploited potential in group reminiscence therapy, and also in one-to-one use at home with relatives and carers. It uses some of the characteristics of television, but adapts the material to a new and important context of use. My third example is more speculative still, and relies entirely on the nature of digitised TV material as data.

3. Medical And Geographic Data

It took the spread of photography to enable biologists to notice the curious fact that the human ear is the only part of the body that continues to grow throughout life⁹. Photographic portraits at various stages of people's existence have provided ample evidence of this process. In a similar way, it would be possible for television material to provide evidence of the physical changes in a large sample of human bodies.

Many actors and presenters have had long TV careers. Bruce Forsythe in the UK is still presenting *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2011 at the age of 83, and began his career presenting *Sunday Night* at the London Palladium in 1955. Both formats are live shows which require an agile presenter. This is probably an exceptional case: a career over almost 60 years in a light entertainment genre. However, many actors have had long careers in soap operas, situation comedies and other long running formats. This is all potentially useful data. It shows individual human bodies engaged in similar activities over a very long period of time. It contains details of movement and posture. It emphasises facial details. As these individuals age, their movements, vocal tones and perhaps even gestures will change. There may be patterns of longterm physical degeneration, and perhaps other more transient signs of physical or mental stress.

Further medical data about these subjects could be added to this basic audiovisual data, subject to the usual issues of privacy. This could include information about illnesses, chronic conditions, even cause of death. It would enable research into a possible form of diagnostics which has sometimes been hypothesised by general practitioners: the idea that a skilled diagnostician can notice changes in a familiar person. No proof has been possible as data has been impossible to gather. The data from online sources of historical TV material could fill that gap.

TV programme may well harbour other data as well. Certainly, there is valuable information about physical spaces: the use of public spaces, the forms of traffic management, the buildings that used to stand on particular sites. TV data would be useful as it shows not only spaces but people and vehicles moving through them. Combined with other data (still photos, maps, gazetteers etc), composite models of how physical space actually works could be developed. This material could then be used for envisioning new uses as well as tracing historical ones.

⁹ 'Human ears grow throughout the entire lifetime according to complicated and sexually dimorphic patterns--conclusions from a cross-sectional analysis.' Niemitz C, Nibbrig M, Zacher V., *Anthropologischer Anzeiger; Bericht über die biologisch-anthropologische Literatur* 2007 Dec; 65(4):391-413.

The tools for this kind of data-mining do not yet exist. They will be developed only when there is sufficient audio-visual data to make it worthwhile. It is useful to note that all of these potential uses (the repurposing of TV as data; uses in dementia therapy; uses in language learning) are best served by what Frances Bonner has called 'ordinary TV'. The established canons of judging TV programmes according to their quality have no meaning here. These uses do not depend on any belief in TV as a series of cultural objects that might endure. Indeed, their effectivity as uses would be linked to TV as a medium of the moment, an ephemeral medium that existed for a particular day, week or month, but has somehow endured until now. These uses, then, depend on the work of archivists in both preserving and annotating the material with accurate metadata, irrespective of any a priori judgments of value. Digitisation, it seems, remakes ordinary TV by rendering it less ephemeral and open to all kinds of reuse.

Biography

John Ellis is Professor of Media Arts at Royal Holloway University of London. His most recent publications are *Documentary: Witness and Self-Revelation* (Routledge 2011) and *TV FAQ* (IB Tauris 2007). He is chair of the British Universities Film & Video Council and blogs regularly at www.cstonline.tv