

Artists, Activists, Neighbors and Strippers:
Preserving the Legacy of Public Access Television

By Caroline Rubens

Moving Image Archiving and Preservation
Tisch School of the Arts
New York University
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Public access channels have been part of the cable television landscape since the early 1970s.¹ Through agreements between local governments and cable providers, these stations are reserved for use by any citizen, to televise whatever they wish, subject only to the limitations of libel and obscenity laws. There are no scheduling biases in a programming day. Program slots are given on a first-come, first-served basis, and “block programming”—the grouping of thematically related shows—is discouraged as being antithetical to the democratic ethos of public access. Some have criticized this outpost of cable television as an un-navigable sea of amateur hour programming and personality-driven vanity productions. Supporters view it as a corrective to mass media’s focus on a narrow set of interests, and as a way for local issues to find expression in an otherwise overwhelmingly mainstream environment. However public access is perceived, these channels have been a ubiquitous presence on cable television since the 1970’s and have grown in number and reach with the rise of the cable industry.

Public access programs have significant archival value as records of independent media production, local history, the activities of community media centers, and the phenomenon of the national public access movement. This paper seeks to illuminate the place of public access in television history, to establish the imperative for preserving this body of material, and to examine the current status of early public access collections.

¹ The first channel was actually launched in 1968 in Dale City, PA but it did not last past the experimental stage. (Linder 6)

HISTORY

As we move deeper into the Internet age and away from traditional entertainment dissemination models, the captive audience is being replaced by an active (or reactive) one. Collective public amnesia will soon obscure the supremacy of network television in twentieth century American culture, and the fact that for much of its history the television broadcast spectrum was monopolized by three commercial content providers. Their programming was designed to court the widest possible audiences and to avoid content that had narrow or only local appeal. In the 1960s a broadcast reform movement of media activists, religious leaders, and First Amendment advocates called on the Federal Communications Commission to reassert the Commission's mandate to regulate broadcasting "in the public interest." In 1967 Congress passed the Public Television Act which created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. This renewed interest in the public service possibilities of television coincided with the rise of "cablecast" distribution technology, in which many observers saw an opportunity to break the network monopoly (Boyle 32; Engleman 21).

The impulse to develop the public, civic and interactive uses of electronic communication technology has historically conflicted with the interests of commercial providers. As early as 1844 Samuel Morse offered to sell his patent for the telegraph to the government in an attempt to protect it from becoming a privately owned resource (Engleman 12). In 1926 Bertholt Brecht espoused the two-way communication possibilities of radio in his essay "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication." Radio, Brecht wrote, could "let the listener speak as well as hear" and "should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers" (53). In the early 1920s, most

radio stations were, in fact, ham stations run by amateurs. Many early licenses were in the hands of local providers such as educational groups, church groups, local governments, and small businesses. When the 1934 Communications Act created the FCC to regulate the airwaves, the promise of public service was implicit in the Act's declaration that the broadcast spectrum was a public resource. But with the growth of commercial radio, noncommercial uses of the airwaves fell to the wayside as licenses were bought up and consolidated in the hands of large commercial broadcasters (Engleman 17, 24).

In 1967, through the Public Broadcasting Act, the government reasserted its place in promoting the public service mission of electronic communications by creating the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Yet by 1968 the CPB had become highly politicized, a development that crippled the early years of public television. The Nixon administration heavily criticized public affairs programs for having a liberal agenda and loaded the CPB board with presidential appointees. Political or controversial programming was largely eliminated (Engleman 3). This embattled public television climate contributed to a desire for channels that were beyond the reach of governmental influence.²

Community Antennae Television (CATV)

As the major networks and public television stations faced increasing pressure to provide more public-interest content, cable companies jockeyed for a place in the industry as alternative content providers. Coaxial cables had initially been used in 1948

² Early public television stations tried to expand diversity with innovative programs, and at least one station experimented with an open forum program that invited local citizens to air their views. The program, called *Catch 44*, was produced by WGBH in 1971. It did not last beyond the experimental stage (Engleman, *Origins*, 3).

to transmit television to remote towns and rural areas that were unable to pick up broadcast signals. Local hardware dealers often ran cables from towers and “community antennae” served local households for a small fee. The antennae picked up broadcast signals and retransmitted them to local households. As the technology improved, it was possible for cable stations to import signals from distant markets (Eisenmann). The system raised a red flag for the networks, who claimed that the cable suppliers were siphoning their programs. The FCC wanted to regulate the new industry but had no apparent authority since cable technology did not use the broadcast spectrum. There was also confusion over how to define the cable system. Was it a broadcaster or common carrier? The new industry originated and telecast some of its own programs, yet it also acted like a telecommunications service, transmitting information and collecting fees from subscribers. In the 1960s the FCC moved to assert its authority over cable as a common carrier and issued must-carry rules, which required a CATV system to carry all local stations within its range. While the networks viewed cable as a market threat and the FCC sought to control the new industry’s effect on established broadcast systems, some media observers viewed cable as an alternative television frontier that could end the “big three” oligopoly and open electronic communications to the public (Freedman 67).

In late 1960’s an idealistic FCC Commissioner, Nicholas Johnson, expressed his support for the development of cable television for the public good. He invited input from non-governmental agencies regarding the future of cable and put out a call for formal assessments. In response, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation assembled a commission to study and report on the social implications of cable’s expansion (Price 553). In 1971 the commission produced a report which asserted that the growth of cable

and its abundant channels was in the public interest because of its potential noncommercial uses—specifically, channels for education, for delivering social services of local governments, and for “public access.” It recommended designating at least two publicly accessible channels for the airing of community grievances and “local cultural expression” (Linder 37).

In addition to its grassroots applications, public access was endorsed as a way to fulfill the demands of the 1949 Fairness Doctrine, which mandated broadcasters to provide time for a diversity of views on controversial issues (Massey). The abundance of channel space made room for expanded debate on issues of public importance, and the subscriber system would subsidize these channels.

While the government pondered the future of cable television, public access channels had already begun to emerge. Developments in New York City were especially influential in the access movement; the franchise agreement reached between the city and their local cable companies became a model for other municipal negotiations (Janes 17).

Public access in New York City was initiated by the Mayor’s Advisory Task Force on CATV and Telecommunications, headed by pioneering news producer Fred Friendly.³ In its 1968 report, the Task Force had recommended that the New York cable companies reserve two channels for lease by outside users who wished to present original programs. The city benefited from a confluence of interests; as the FCC and public interest groups pondered the future of cable as a civic medium, the evolving industry sought to promote its unique public service possibilities. In 1970 the cable companies Sterling and TelePrompTer negotiated with New York City for franchise agreements

³ Friendly was also a television advisor to the Ford Foundation and an influential force in television policy (Engleman, *Public*, 247).

(which granted them the right to use or “rent” the right-of-way to lay cable). The city won two public access channels from both companies. TelePrompTer opened a “storefront studio” for producers and provided equipment, a director and a technical crew (Janes 16). The success of the agreement was largely attributable to the powerful lobbying efforts of local community media activists, the most prominent of which was the nonprofit Alternate Media Center.

In many ways the Alternate Media Center (AMC) can be credited with launching the public access movement. In addition to its effective lobbying efforts in New York and Washington, the AMC was a major force in developing the community media center infrastructure that would form the backbone of the movement. The organization was founded in 1970 by NYU film professor George Stoney and filmmaker Red Burns. Stoney came out of the tradition of social documentary filmmaking and had just completed two years as head of the National Film Board of Canada’s “Challenge for Change” program.⁴ The AMC office on New York’s Bleecker Street was a hub of activity for public access and alternative television pioneers. The AMC trained and dispatched interns around the country to establish other access centers in Reading, Pennsylvania; Orlando, Florida; DeKalb, Illinois; and Bakersfield, California (Linder 7). The AMC also developed strategic relationships with cable companies and with FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson. These ties enabled it to become intimately involved in the cable franchising process in New York City—where it lobbied for access channels,

⁴ The “Challenge for Change” program developed a participatory style of documentary filmmaking that encouraged the use of film and video technology to give average citizens a role in telling stories about their communities. It encouraged citizens to take an active role in bringing their local concerns to lawmakers and the public (Engleman, *Origins*).

studio space, and equipment—and in Washington, where it urged the FCC to create federal requirements for access channels.

In a parallel development, Theadora Sklover began the nonprofit Open Channel, a Manhattan-based media center that helped people to produce their own programs. Sklover, like Stoney and Burns, was an advocate for the “vox populi” potential of public access. She asserted the importance of outreach campaigns that would convince average citizens that they, too, could be on television: “People are used to thinking of TV as something someone else does, not something they do” (Gent). Sklover also argued for the necessity of providing easy access to equipment and training. Using the revenue provided by the new cable franchise, users could be trained to make programming that was “neither rankly amateurish nor prohibitively professional” (Von Hoffman).

Emerging cable companies and community media activists were two interests whose mutual support was welded by the advent of the portapak. Introduced in 1968, this portable video camera and recorder unit launched a media revolution. It weighed about twenty pounds—not feather-light, but manageable and user-friendly. One person could operate all of its functions and, significantly, it had sync sound built into the unit. Unlike film production, which required a crew of at least two, the portapak encouraged a spontaneous, intimate style of documentary video.

The portapak and other amateur video technologies were embraced with great enthusiasm and intellectual fervor by the radical television collectives of the late 1960s and 1970s. The “guerrilla television”⁵ movement championed the advent of portable video as a tool “which enabled you to fight the ‘perceptual imperialism of broadcast

⁵ The name was coined by video activist Paul Ryan’s phrase “cybernetic guerrilla warfare” and was adopted by Michael Shamberg, for his 1971 book *Guerrilla Television*, which became the movement’s bible. (Boyle 30)

television' on a small scale.” These video artists and activists did not specifically focus on public access as the ideal anti-television apparatus, but they embraced cable in general as a new frontier and were very influential in shaping the ideals of public access.

Inspired by the underground press movement and the works of media theorists like Marshall McLuhan, video activists used their work and the publication *Radical Software* to promote progressive ideas about the uses of technology and broadcast systems.⁶ The intellectual energy and activities of these early video collectives were essential to securing the resources for public access (Freedman 75).

After years of deliberation, in 1972 the FCC issued the *Cable Television Report and Order*, which adopted the Sloan Commission’s recommendations for local regulation of the cable industry. It asserted the FCC’s control over the regulation of cable television (which would later be challenged in court), but gave communities authority in the development of franchise agreements. Among its rulings, the *Report* stated that cable companies in the top 50 markets must carry all local stations, and systems with more than 3,500 subscribers must provide at least three access stations—one for Public Access, one for Educational, and one for Government channels—aka “PEG” channels.

The PEG channels were set aside for public use, without censorship or control by the cable companies. “Public access” meant that cable companies would not only make open channels available, but also equipment. In some cases, a local organization

⁶ Some of the underground video groups in NYC were People’s Video Theater, Global Village and Raindance Corporation. Some, like Top Value Television (TVTV), were dependent on cable operators for access television distribution whereas other groups, such as Videofreex, set up their own broadcast transmissions. Some, like the University Community Video Access Center, turned to public television as an outlet while others used local origination community antenna television, as in the case of Broadside TV in Johnson City, Tennessee. Each group had its expertise and explored and disseminated information about video production (Freedman 78).

managed the access operation, and in other cases the cable operator provided the services (Freedman 41).

In the early 1970s *The New York Times* featured a series of articles on cable television and the phenomenon of publicly accessible channels. The *Times*'s television critic, John J. O'Connor, was an early, if wary, advocate, and he expressed fascination with its possibilities:

The content is miserable. The technical quality is often atrocious. And, as established television executives insistently note, nobody is watching anyway...Yet the experiments with public access on cable television continue to be among the more significant in contemporary communications...groups, or individuals, are afforded, without charge, an opportunity to present themselves directly, undiluted by the direction or inhibitions of media professionals. (O'Connor, "Public Access Experiments")

Both supporters and critics questioned the quality of programs, and some expressed concern over how the channels would succeed without improved production values. Nevertheless, citizens began producing content for the access stations. Newspaper accounts of early programs indicate that they included public affairs shows such as "housewife interviewing a young counterculture man," "violations in building construction," and the odd-to-imagine "Debate between American Nazi Party and KKK". The schedule included programs produced by kids, yoga instruction, television parodies ("The Underground Tonight Show") and the intriguingly-titled "Post-mortem Chess" and "Let's Go Flying." On one occasion, viewers witnessed the unique spectacle of a cable company televising the grievances of its own striking employees.⁷ Most interesting perhaps were programs whose titles suggest that public access was an early television

⁷ Employees of TelePrompTer cable went on strike in May 1972. Alternate Media Center taped employees stating their grievances. The tape was cablecast over TelePrompTer's access channels (Wurtzel 5).

forum for marginalized cultural groups, e.g. “Chinese language broadcasts,” “Gay Activist Alliance,” and “Black Collective News” (O’Connor, *ibid*; Wurtzel 5; Ferretti)

New York public access reflected the atypical, eclectic, and cutting-edge character of the city’s underground art scenes and sex industries, and thus saw its share of controversial programming. Evening cable viewers could stumble upon a transsexual unveiling the results of her operation or a woman sensually exploring herself (Wurtzel 5). The program *Anton Perich Presents*, which featured downtown artists such as Taylor Meade, televised “an obscene act with a light bulb” on its debut show and was cut off by the cable company staff (although future episodes ran without incident). *Midnight Blue*, a notoriously raunchy program produced by *Screw* magazine publisher Al Goldstein, got its start on public access.⁸ Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, downtown New York video artists, filmmakers and musicians made use of public access television channels to show their work and document the art scene.⁹

While guerrilla television groups eventually disbanded, their legacy of anti-television television was carried into the 1980s by public access program collectives such as Paper Tiger TV. Paper Tiger was launched in 1981 by a collective of New York-based media activists who sought to de-mystify the medium. Programs were deliberately informal to make viewers feel that they, too, could make television shows. They featured scholars, community activists, critics and journalists who examined and critiqued the conventions of mainstream newspapers and media such as the *The New York Times* and television news. The founders of Paper Tiger later created a public access satellite

⁸ While it began on public access, by 1980 this program had migrated to “leased access” for which users paid a nominal fee and on which they could run commercials.

⁹ “The Downtown Show: 1974-1984,” an exhibition sponsored by NYU’s Fales Library in Winter 2006, brought to light such programs as *Nightclubbing*, Jaime Davidovich’s *Live Show*, Greg O’Brien’s and Chris Stein’s *TV Party*, and other artists’ works that were seen on “cable access” in the 1970s and 1980s.

network, Deep Dish TV, which since 1986 has distributed the work of regional producers to access stations around the country.¹⁰

While groups like Paper Tiger promoted left-wing activism and media critique, the open mandate of public access also allowed for the dissemination of radical right-wing programs such as *Race and Reason*. Produced by an ex-Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, *Race and Reason* originated in San Diego and was distributed to access stations around the country. Kansas City's local cable company wanted to avoid the controversy and protests that descended upon stations that aired the program, yet they were required to cablecast virtually anything submitted by a producer. In order to absolve the cable company of its obligation to show the program, Kansas City's City Council voted to abolish the city's public access channel. In its place they created a "community access" channel over which the cable company would have editorial control enabling it to reject *Race and Reason* ("Some Realism About Pluralism").

Throughout the 1970s cable companies aggressively lobbied against the PEG requirement. They gained legal support in 1979 with the case *FCC vs. Midwest Video Corp.* In this case the cable industry claimed that access channels were a violation of their free speech, because they were "forced" to air programming over which they had no control. While the court rejected this argument, it ruled that the FCC did not have the authority to mandate access channels (*FCC vs. Midwest*).

In 1984, the Cable Communications Policy Act threw out the federal access channel requirement. It allowed, however, for local governments to continue negotiating for channels, permitting each municipality to negotiate a franchise agreement with the

¹⁰ The Deep Dish collection was assessed by the author as part of a class assignment in 2005. This is discussed further in the section on preservation.

cable company providing service in its area. These agreements gave local governments leverage to demand local PEG channels, franchise fees, equipment and studio space (Linder 26). The Telecommunications Act of 1996, in a move to “increase diversity” in the industry, opened up the communications field, allowing television, computer, and telephone companies to compete to deliver the same services. This led to the merging of communications companies, the effects of which are now altering the infrastructure of the cable industry. Telephone companies are entering the cable television business using high-speed broadband connections to provide services, and they are lobbying for nationwide, rather than local, franchise agreements (Glenn-Davitian 18-19).

Public access television is at a crucial moment in its history. As the system is built upon the “rental” of land to lay cable, the future of the PEG channels lies in the hands of broadband cable providers. At the time of this writing, the U.S. Congress is preparing to pass a new set of telecommunications laws that will enable phone companies to have nationwide franchises, which would end the local franchise requirement. Such legislation could result in the dissolution of the PEG system.

Public access television history represents three decades of marginalized strategies of production, action, resistance and pleasure. (Freedman) The faces, experiences and opinions that have appeared on public access have been historically absent from mainstream media. Some programs have national scope and significance, while others are uniquely local or personal. Because the majority of early public access programs were recorded on analog videotape, which has a short lifespan, and because the future of public access television hangs in the balance, efforts are urgently needed to safeguard these records of its legacy.

TELEVISION/VIDEO PRESERVATION

Television is generally an under-preserved medium. Even some of the most popular network programs are no longer viewable because the original tapes were discarded (e.g., early episodes of the Johnny Carson Show have been famously lost). Local television stations have been hit particularly hard by the loss of content. In the 1970s, for example, scores of 16mm news film libraries were dumped when stations cleared space for videotape (*Television/Video Preservation Study*). According to the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) Local Television Task Force:

Despite their value, local television materials are among the most endangered of our moving images...With over 50 years of television history already behind us, a national strategy to preserve local television has yet to be implemented. ("Local Television Project")

Community media centers are similar to local television stations in that they generate unique audiovisual records of community life. In its 1997 study on the state of the national television heritage, the Library of Congress addressed the precarious state of community and alternative media:

No comprehensive effort has been made to list, catalog, or document let alone preserve this remarkable record of the use of [community] video as a two-way street of communications... Tragically, for lack of preservation funding, the remaining audiovisual evidence hangs on the edge of the abyss. (*Television/Video Preservation Study*)

There have been some efforts to preserve the works of independent producers and early activist groups such as Raindance and Videofreex. Electronic Arts Intermix and Video Data Bank distribute early guerrilla television videos, and there have been instances where producers have donated their public access programs to archives and libraries.

For example, the late video artist Andy Mann left his ½” open reel tapes to the Aurora Picture Show archive, and New York-based artist Jaime Davidovich recently donated his 1980s program *The Live Show* to Fales Library at New York University. Another New Yorker, John Wallowitch, donated tapes from his long-running Manhattan Cable cabaret show to the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound at The New York Public Library. The more common scenario, however, is that the work of public access producers disappears from view and is forgotten after it is cablecast.

Access producers often work through community media centers (CMCs). These organizations are wellsprings of local production that document community events, elections, and citizens airing their views on a variety of topics. The average CMC is analogous to a local television station and the cumulative media material it generates contains a wealth of information about local culture, politics and personalities and documents the practices of alternative television producers. Much of this material is historically valuable both to the communities in which they are produced and to the national television heritage.

Community Media Center Overview

According to the Alliance for Community Media, the organizing body for PEG access organizations, there are over 1,000 PEG access television providers throughout the United States.¹¹ Many of these organizations are CMCs that operate as independent nonprofit organizations or are administered by local governments. Other CMCs are part of cable companies, educational institutions, and libraries. They usually manage the production and transmission of one or any combination of governmental, educational,

¹¹ The ACM website states that the organization “represents over 1,000 Public, Educational and Governmental (PEG) access organizations and community media centers throughout the country.”

and public access programming. The centers survive through various funding sources, including municipal monies, fundraising, workshop fees, grants, and sometimes even fees paid by cable companies to air programs. However, many derive most or all of their budgets from the franchise fees that cable companies charge to subscribers, which are allocated to stations by the local governments at their discretion.

With a few exceptions, CMCs are not equipped to act as archives for community media. Their primary functions are to provide equipment, training, studios, and airtime and to cablecast, or facilitate the cablecast, of PEG programs, live or taped.¹² Many also produce their own programs. Like other broadcast television operations, CMC producers and staff tend to be oriented towards immediate production needs. Independent access producers deliver their tapes for transmission, and they are often responsible for claiming them later. Unclaimed tapes are often recycled (Yoder 43). However, as I discovered when researching this paper, staff and administrators at many CMCs either formally or informally save programs.

While CMCs are not designed to be archives, they have become the primary institutional repositories for extant public access television videotapes. Although there is anecdotal evidence that community media is finding its way into traditional repositories (e.g. libraries and historical societies), public access programs and related material are not yet being actively targeted for collection. Considering the precarious state of the PEG system, it is a crucial time for those who wish to preserve and safeguard the audiovisual legacy of the public access television movement. Such action will not only ensure the survival of important records, but it will assert the important status of the

¹² Some now stream to the web. CMCs also offer workshops, media literacy programs and free Internet to the community.

movement in the nation's cultural history and may contribute to national efforts to save the public access television system.

Problems with magnetic media

Public access content produced from 1970s to the present day is primarily carried on video. Videotape is vulnerable to information loss, and specific conditions and practices are necessary to preserve it. Under normal environmental conditions, the shelf-life of videotape is believed to be 10 to 15 years. Climate fluctuations and high humidity levels can accelerate the aging process (while cool and dry conditions can slow it down). Magnetic tape images are often lost due to chemical reaction in the tape binder that causes a condition known as "sticky shed," in which the tape surface softens and becomes gummy. In fact, the condition is often discovered when a tape is run through a playback deck and cannot advance smoothly without sticking and squeaking. In addition to indicating a state of deterioration, sticky shed tapes can clog and damage the heads of playback decks.¹³

Older tape formats, such as open reel and 3/4" cassettes, are further threatened by the increasing scarcity of playback decks. This problem is compounded by the lack of maintenance resources, such as parts for working machines and technicians who know how to repair older decks. There are video restoration companies that handle a variety of formats and transfer endangered tapes, but their services are expensive. Three videotape formats are considered especially vulnerable and require immediate attention: 1/2-inch open-reel videotape (1965 to 1975); 3/4-inch Umatic videocassettes that date from 1973

¹³ For more on tape degradation, see Vidipax's web page "Magnetic Tape Preservation" under "Problems with Magnetic Tape" at <http://vidipax.com>.

to 1983; and original VHS tapes that are more than ten years old and contain content deemed to be of long-term value (IMAP).

The problems of tape deterioration and obsolescence complicate and often define efforts to save video collections. Conventional archives with videotape holdings, when possible, create preservation plans to prolong the life of the media and make the content accessible. This activity includes raising funds specifically for preservation; assessing the collection's content and formats, and appraising and selecting tapes for retention, cataloging, and migration of the content to stable preservation masters and dub masters for making access copies. Despite their limited staffing, budgets, and space, it is worth exploring whether community media centers can add to their missions the preservation of local media, by acting as either custodians or facilitators towards the archiving of this material.

Survey Overview and Methodology

I would like to begin this section by describing the origins of my interest in public access television preservation and the conception of this thesis. In 2005, while a master's candidate in the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program at NYU, I performed an assessment of Deep Dish Network's video collection in lower Manhattan. The uniqueness and historical value of Deep Dish's collection was striking, as it was comprised of compilations of national public access programming dating from 1986 to the present. The assessment project raised questions regarding the disposition of other audiovisual records created by access producers. Given the durability issues of videotape and the ephemeral, low-budget nature of public access production, I decided to

explore the existence of other collections and address how the national record of public access television could be archived and preserved.

In February 2006, I surveyed community media centers to assess what may have survived from the early days of public access and to find out whether CMCs were acting as *de facto* archives for these materials. I limited my survey to the first two decades of public access, with 1989 as the cutoff date. I felt that narrowing the focus to this time period would address (1) the most historical materials, representing the “first generation” of access and (2) the most at-risk video formats—i.e. analog tapes from the 1970s and 1980s. I also reasoned that, in addition to the physical and technological risks to these tapes, early analog formats are also the first to go when there are management “purges” to clear shelf and office space.

Working from the *Community Resource Directory 2004* contact database published by the Alliance for Community Media, I e-mailed surveys to 201 CMCs founded in 1989 or earlier. I presented fourteen questions which were roughly divided into three sections: (1) Collection (Is your organization collecting older materials? Are the materials centralized?); (2) Formats (Which formats are represented? Can they be played?); and (3) Mission (Does your organization consider archiving to be part of its mission, as either a custodian or a donor?).

Forty-six CMCs responded to the survey, and, strikingly, 32 surveys were returned within the first 24 hours. Several respondents expressed great interest in the preservation study, and many offered invaluable supplemental information which was not

addressed in the questionnaire. Two of the returned surveys were not included in the analysis.¹⁴

The Alliance for Community Media divides its membership into eight geographical regions, all of which are represented by the returned surveys. There was a heavy concentration of replies from the Central and Northeast regions (65%), while two regions were represented by only one CMC each (Southeast and Mid-Atlantic). Of the total 44 organizations reviewed, twelve were founded between 1971 and 1979, twenty between 1980 and 1985, and twelve between 1986 and 1989.

Few of the responding CMCs serve only public access television channels. Most are PEG stations, which handle educational and governmental program transmission in addition to publicly available channels. In the survey letter and questionnaire, I emphasized the fact that my interest was restricted to public access programming, and the respondents appeared to make this distinction when assessing the contents of their collections.

The annual budgeted expenditures of the stations surveyed ranged from \$5,000 at a cable company-run center to \$1 million a year at a local government center. A majority of the respondents—60%—rely on cable franchise fees for over 50% of their funding (*Community Media Review Directory*).

SURVEY

Section One: Collection

The first question on the survey was:

¹⁴ In one case it was unclear whether the respondent was referring to their public access, governmental, or educational collection. In the other case the center's public access channel was initiated after 1989.

Does your organization keep an on-site tape collection?

By using the term “collection” rather than “archive”, this question intended to distinguish an accumulation of materials at a CMC from an archival repository; that is, records retained for historical reasons with institutional or community memory in mind. Ninety-five percent of the respondents answered in the affirmative, either “yes” or “some.” Comments ranged from, “Yes, we have between 15,000 - 20,000 items” to “We have a few programs stored away.” One respondent cut right to the storage issue, pointing out, “Yes, too much is saved. We are running out of space.”

The second question sought to establish whether the collection had historical record-keeping purposes:

If yes, does the collection include archival materials that may have no immediate use, but are being saved as records of institutional or local media history? (This would include complete program masters, production elements, edited promos, and clips that appear in "best of" compilations).

Of the stations that kept collections, 100% answered “yes,” indicating that every respondent to the survey kept what they considered to be an archive.¹⁵

Some of the added comments described the parameters of the archive, ranging from “We try to save all material or complete programs that have any historical value for the city” to “Very limited, for our own use, not community circulation.” Some indicated that they primarily keep programs produced by the center itself, or programs that would be rebroadcast. Others indicated that they only keep historical events of importance to

¹⁵ I should note here that the lack of negative responses to these first two questions can be attributed to the likelihood that centers that are not keeping collections or archives chose not to respond. I had hoped that these centers would complete the questionnaire anyway, as there were some non-archive-related questions--for example, about relationships with community producers. It would have also been illuminating to know their thoughts about archiving this material, and why they or their predecessors chose not to do it.

the city or the organization, such as meetings, community events, and self-produced programs.

To account for materials that may not be kept in what the centers consider formal archives, question number #3 asked:

If there is no formal archive (or, in addition to the formal archive), do past or present staff members keep tapes in their offices, at home, etc.?

Forty percent answered “Yes.”¹⁶ The frequent explanation was that the staff members are also producers or involved in production and keep their own footage and programs on hand. Several respondents expressed a desire to see these tapes join the formal archive.

Section 2: Formats

Once it was established that a CMC was keeping an archive, the next set of questions were designed to obtain an estimate of the number of pre-1990 elements being saved and their formats. The first of these questions asked:¹⁷

To the best of your ability, please estimate the total number of archival public access tapes in formal and/or informal collections.

The answers here ranged from 27 to 17,500 tapes, with four centers reporting archives of 10,000 or more tapes. Significantly, two of the CMCs with over 10,000 tapes were managed by libraries (indicating the potentially important role of library-based archives in preserving community television material).

To obtain an estimate of the number of *historical* tapes in the archive, the next question asked:

¹⁶ One respondent pointed out that this situation existed because “this is a home office studio” and that “the organization has a staff of one, me.”

¹⁷ When a respondent estimated a range, I split the difference for calculation purposes. For example, an estimate of “1500 – 2000” was entered as “1750.” Similarly, if an answer gave only a percentage, I extrapolated a total number from any numerical information given. So if the total number of tapes in the archive was given as “17,250” and the pre-1990 estimate was “about 50%,” I calculated 50% of 17,250 for the total number of pre-1990 tapes.

Approximately how many of these tapes were produced before 1990?

Six respondents indicated that they had no pre-1990 public access-related programs in their archives and one person left the section blank. Of the CMCs that reported having pre-1990 tapes, 20% had 1,000 or more units in their archive, with the largest estimate reaching 9,500; 35% reported keeping between 100 and 1,000 tapes. This left about 45% of the remaining collections with fewer than 100 tapes, ranging from three to ninety. The approximate total number of pre-1990 tapes was 32,500.

The next set of questions asked respondents to focus on these pre-1990 tapes and to identify their formats. Question #6 listed specific formats, and respondents were asked to indicate which ones they had and in what quantities. To determine their playback capabilities in relation to collections, question #7 provided the same list and asked respondents to indicate whether they had playback machines for those formats and to note whether or not they were working. The formats as listed were:¹⁸

- 1/2"
- 1"
- Umatic
- VHS
- S-VHS
- Betacam SP
- Other

Tape format results

- 1/2" Open Reel

¹⁸ I made the mistake of using shorthand for the tape format terminology. While these formats were listed in quasi-chronological order, beginning with the 1/2" reel to reel, I did not specify reel to reel. At times I detected confusion over the intended meaning of 1/2". Some people assumed I was referring to VHS or S-VHS. In addition, there was occasional confusion over the term Umatic, and one or two people noted that they had 3/4" tape in the Other section. I amended the format wording in a second mailing of the questionnaire, but the majority of respondents used the first version.

With founding dates ranging from 1972 to 1982, seven CMCs indicated that they have ½” open reel tapes.¹⁹ Four of the stations possessed twenty or fewer reels, and one did not specify a number of tapes. The other two had approximately 300 and 950 units, respectively.²⁰ Four of the seven centers had working ½” playback decks.

- ¾” Umatic

Thirty centers indicated that they kept pre-1990 Umatic cassettes. Four had 1,000 to 3,000 tapes, eleven had 100 to 500, and fourteen had fewer than 100. Two did not specify a number. Of the centers with Umatic tapes 80% indicated that they possessed playback decks. Whether the decks were working was only sometimes specified. Two respondents indicated having tapes but no working playback deck.

- VHS / S-VHS

Twenty-seven centers indicated that they had VHS tapes and thirteen indicated S-VHS holdings. All had working decks. In most cases centers reported between ten and 500 cassettes, whereas only a few stations had numbers in the thousands for these formats.

Less common formats

- 1” Open Reel and Betacam SP

1” open reel and Betacam SP were the most “professional” formats listed, though I was unsure about the extent to which CMCs may have used such formats. Two CMCs indicated that they had 1” open reel tapes, owning five and 250, respectively. These were among the oldest centers surveyed, and neither had playback decks. These two centers were also among the only three that reported having Betacam SP tapes (5, 25 and 250).

¹⁹ An eighth station indicated that it had ½” tape, but it was founded in 1988 so I presumed there was a case of confusion over the format terminology.

²⁰ Again, significantly, these are the two survey respondents that are part of libraries, and both indicate in response to a later question that preservation of these materials is part of their organizational missions.

Only one of these three centers indicated that they had a working Betacam deck. The dearth of 1” and Betacam SP tapes may be explained by the historical prevalence of amateur and mid-level professional formats (such as Umatic) in public access television production and transmission.

- Other

Two centers cited Betamax tapes among their holdings, and one indicated that it possessed a working Betamax deck. Also listed in the “Other” column were current digital formats (DVD, DVcam, miniDV, etc.). It was often unclear whether these represented formats to which pre-1990 tapes had been transferred, but it is suspected that respondents simply chose to list *all* of the formats used at their facilities.

Section 3: Mission

The next section explored the role centers have or could possibly have in the active preservation of public access material. Could they help local producers to archive their programs, leading to their preservation? Would they be willing to work with collecting archives? It addressed strategies for preserving early access materials and explored the role of CMCs in this process.

Question #8 asked:

Does your organization know of, or maintain contact with, individual or collective producers who were affiliated with your organization before the 1990s, and who may be saving their program tapes?

Fifty percent answered “Yes,” that they maintained contact with pre-1990 producers.

Notably, nonprofits were much more likely than local government-based centers to stay in touch with producers: 70% vs. 20%. This may be due to the fact that nonprofit access centers tend to be run by producers and volunteers who have closer personal ties with other producers and the community (Linder 36)²¹ Respondents’ comments included: “Not formally”; “Many still make programs. Others still live in town”; and “We used to

²¹ This could be kept in mind when developing preservation awareness campaigns aimed at local producers.

have one producer who saved all his tapes until his house caught fire in the early 90's. Since then, he stores all his master footage, [here at the center].”

To find out whether CMCs view the preservation of independent producers' work as part of their organization's mandate, question #9 asked:

Is it within your mission to preserve works by local producers, even if the tapes are not currently within your possession?

The nonprofit organizations were evenly split on this issue—47% indicated “Yes” or “Maybe” it was within their mission, while the remainder did not respond or said “No” (one nonprofit added “but we do it anyway”). Meanwhile, most of the local government respondents indicated that it was *not* in their missions to preserve: 20% answered “yes” or “maybe.” The two cable company-run centers indicated “No,” while the libraries said “Yes.”

I had expected more of the city-run CMCs to maintain older public access programs since they are public records. In contrast, the two library-based centers indicated a strong directive to save their access materials. This may be attributable to the fact that library institutions are generally inclined towards saving and conserving documents. The nonprofits, meanwhile, are often independently run and, judging from the survey comments, tend to develop stronger or weaker archival policies depending on the values of existing management personnel.

The comments that accompanied this section proved to be especially insightful regarding the centers' archival policies, or lack thereof. Several respondents stated that they are actively archiving materials, either formally or informally, and that they consider the tapes to be valuable resources. One commenter wrote that his/her CMC's contracts

with producers contain a provision that the center may keep program copies “for archival purposes” (this respondent also indicated that archiving was not within the CMC’s mission, adding that tape degradation had curtailed the number of tapes actually kept). One city-run center responded that its programs are considered public records, and that it is required by the state to make them available upon request.

A handful of respondents who answered “No” regarding mission added that they collect programs anyway. A few of the “No” respondents cited problems that inhibit their ability to archive materials, such as staff and time limitations and, commonly, storage space issues.

The next set of questions was intended to explore alternative repositories for public access materials. To assess the willingness of organizations to assist with the transfer of tapes to collecting institutions, question #10 asked:

If it is not within your mission, would you be willing to facilitate the collection of these materials by another organization?

Fifty-two percent of the respondents answered “Yes” or “Maybe.” Several respondents mentioned that they already have donor relationships with other collecting institutions.

Questions #11 and 12 attempted to home in on the possibility of donation as a possible route to preservation:

Are you aware of institutions in your town, state or region that collect community media or have community media as part of their collection policy? (This could include libraries, archives, universities, historical societies, etc.).

Would you be interested in donating your tapes to an institution that collects community media? (If you have already done so, please elaborate.)

Fifty-two percent of the respondents indicated that they were aware of institutions, which suggests that there is a strong recognition of specific collection repositories that could be enhanced through awareness efforts. Fifty-two percent answered “Yes” or “Maybe” to having interest in donating tapes, though there was a high number of “Maybes”—44%, which indicates some ambivalence; one respondent commented that his/her CMC would only make copies for donation, and others noted that they would need to obtain rights from producers. Nevertheless, at 30% the portion of pre-1990 tapes represented by these centers is significant. With some clarification of the terms and the location of appropriate repositories, there is a strong potential for partnerships between these CMCs and archival institutions.

To assess general attitudes towards the documentation of CMC activities and history, question #13 asked:

Does your organization keep paper documents related to the institutional history of the organization that you feel should be retained for historical purposes, either on-site or in an archive?

Seventy-five percent stated “Yes” that they kept other records related to the institution’s history. The high positive response rate indicates that many CMCs make efforts to retain records of their own activities and safeguard the institutional memory of the organization. Future preservation plans for CMC collections could also address the preservation of these important paper records.

The fourteenth and final question provided an opportunity for respondents to add their thoughts and comments. Overall, the responses demonstrated a high level of interest by CMC administrators and staff in seeing public access materials saved. For some, maintaining an archive is clearly part of their mandate, and parting with any

portion of their collection or making copies for donation to another institution would not be considered. Comments also revealed, however, a pervasive note of pessimism among respondents, reflecting a belief that properly preserving older tapes is a daunting if not impossible task. Many acknowledged the fragility of the older material and noted that they would like to maintain tapes as long as possible. Several respondents indicated that they are trying to transfer their collections to DVD, and one lamented that his/her CMC cannot devote enough time to this activity.²² With even the best intentions to archive and preserve, it is clearly a difficult prospect.

It is encouraging that more than one third of the community media centers surveyed considered it to be within their mission to save public access materials and, of those who didn't, almost a third expressed a willingness to consider donating or facilitating donation to another institution. Since individual resources are scarce, an organized, collective approach may be essential to ensuring that a significant portion of public access television materials are preserved.

Summary

Based on respondents' estimates, a total of approximately 32,500 pre-1990 materials are residing in these CMC collections. Of these, about 12,000 are on obsolete or endangered formats (1/2", 1" and Umatic). Since the survey reflects only a portion of community media centers founded before 1989, it is reasonable to project that there are other at-risk public access collections. It is possible that the centers that did not respond have already lost or disposed of their collections. Since this survey only addressed pre-1990 materials, post-80s formats are or will soon be (if they are not already) similarly

²² These centers may or may not be aware that migrating analog tape content solely to DVD is not a recommended strategy for long-term preservation.

endangered. A preservation awareness initiative within the CMC community may help to safeguard past, present and future artifacts of public access television production.

STRATEGIES

In the past, the cable access television community has been effective at uniting around causes and mobilizing its members and producers to action on policy issues. Organizing efforts could also be applied to issues of archiving and preservation. On a national level, the organizing body for CMCs, the Alliance for Community Media, could take an immediate role in promoting awareness of preservation through its national and regional boards. The threat to the public access television heritage might be incorporated into its advocacy work to alert and educate agencies, institutions, and the public about the threat to the PEG system. Considering the level of interest uncovered by this survey, the *Community Media Review*, the ACM's member publication, should solicit articles that advocate for, and provide information about, preservation. An electronic listserv for the discussion of PEG archiving and preservation issues would facilitate open discussion of the problems with which CMCs are now struggling in isolation. The ACM website could lend further credibility to the preservation issue by endorsing the listserv and providing links to organization and project websites that offer advocacy, information, and web tools for media collections. These include the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the Independent Media Arts Preservation, and the Texas Commission on the Arts' *Videotape Identification and Assessment Guide*.

Initiatives to promote preservation could be implemented on a grassroots level at CMCs around the country through regional ACM boards. Following the model of the

Home Movie Day initiative,²³ events such as a “Preservation Awareness Day” could be organized at local media centers. The focus of such events would be to encourage producers with older materials to dig their programs out of the closet and bring them to the community center. If they passed certain inspection criteria (e.g. no sticky-shed) they would be publicly screened for the community. Local nonprofits could take advantage of their strong ties to the community to encourage attendance by the local politicians, local producers, and the general public. These events would coincide with awareness-raising for both past and present producers about preservation of their work. Extended outreach programs to older producers could help to uncover materials that might be candidates for donation to other archival institutions.

CMC staff members who work closely with preservation-oriented tape archives should be encouraged to participate in professional organizations such as regional archive groups and AMIA. By attending symposia such as AMIA’s annual conference, community media archivists could interact with other audiovisual archives, attend informational panels and workshops, and promote the concerns of the CMC community.

CMCs should also be made aware of funding resources that are available from such organizations as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Television and Video Preservation Foundation, and the National Historic Publication and Records Commission. (In 1999 the NHPRC funded a project proposed by Sierra Nevada Community Access Television to create a 30-minute video on the basics of archives and records management for distribution to stations in Nevada [Klintop and Del Cohen 5-7].)

It is imperative at this time for the archival community and proponents of independent media to recognize the urgency of safeguarding these collections. Outreach

²³ See the organization’s website at <http://www.homemovieday.com>.

efforts should be made by audiovisual archivists and preservation professionals to partner with the CMC community and work toward solutions that will enable these organizations to preserve the materials that are currently under their care.

Examples of CMC archives

Some media centers have made efforts to formally archive and promote their older public access materials. One CMC recently reviewed its twenty-year-old collection and established a “video library” for the community, making copies upon request. The center also runs a monthly program that features selections from the archive. Such programs help to expose the public to older programming and can be used to promote preservation. Another station reported having a “Heritage Archive” to which producers could donate their programs. One local government-based center reported that it is considering a plan to have all of its past programs digitized and made available as a pay-per-view or on-demand service. The Grand Rapids Media Center, meanwhile, has been saving local, regional and national materials for years and is working towards establishing a formal archive.

Perhaps the most progressive archive in terms of preservation awareness is Indiana’s Access Fort Wayne, which has been a department of the Fort Wayne Public Library since 1981. Because Access Fort Wayne falls within the library system, preservation and access are implicit in its mission and the institutional culture. Program tapes of all formats have been saved throughout the station’s history. Erik Mollberg, leads the archiving project, indicates that the CMC is in the process of transferring ½” open reel to DVCAM, Betacam SP, and DVD. Access Fort Wayne plans to keep files on

hard drives and servers, and to ultimately make the collection searchable via an online library union catalog (OCLC). Eventually the CMC hopes to become a regional archive that will compile materials from access centers in the AMC's Central Region (Mollberg).

Regional Archives

Regional repositories are a potentially viable alternative or supplement to individual on-site archives. In 2002, media consultant Mona Jimenez presented an outline for the establishment of a regional repository that would collect and make accessible materials that are of most significant to their region. Copies could be maintained at a local level, or they could be retrieved through remote access from a regionally maintained server. Centralized repositories could consolidate the costs of collection management, storage and re-mastering, removing the burden from individual centers that may not have the budget to support their own archive. They could also serve as temporary repositories for materials of national significance (Jimenez). If there is a strong desire to preserve materials on the part of community media centers within a given region, regional boards could help to initiate feasibility studies to look into appropriate sites for repositories that could serve member centers.

Donation

Another option for community media centers is to donate collections or make copies of materials to donate to institutions that collect historical media. These institutions could include local, state and national partners such as historical societies, universities, museums, libraries, etc.²⁴ In 2003, AMIA's Local Television Task Force conducted case studies of successful partnerships between local television stations and

²⁴ One specific example is the donation of the Intermedia Arts collection to the Minnesota Historical Society.

media repositories. These joint ventures could be models for donor relationships between CMCs and other institutions.

One instance of a recent “donation” is worth noting, as it illustrates the grave risks facing public access collections. Austin Community Television, now known as PACT, represents one of the oldest and most successful access centers in the country. It is strongly supported by the community, and some of its programs have achieved national recognition. The station has gone through several management changes over the years, and in the shuffles between outgoing and incoming management, the tape archive was largely discarded. Upon learning of one of the more recent purges, the archivist at the Austin History Center rescued several boxes of Umatic tapes, saving a few popular programs such as *Elmer Akins Gospel Train* and *Carmen Banana’s Cooking*. Also saved was a Umatic copy of a 1976 Austin Juneteenth celebration that had originally been shot on ½” video (Hamblin).

Selection

Whether a CMC chooses to maintain its own archive or donate materials, it will be faced with making hard choices about what to save. Even when space and resources are scarce, custodians of public access materials may be reluctant to confront the problems of selection. To quote one survey respondent, “How do you decide what’s worthy of archiving?” For stations that have a mandate to save everything, this may not be an issue. But for those who are grappling with questions about what to save, it may be useful to discuss possible approaches to appraisal.

In a phone conversation, the executive director of one CMC articulated a few of the particular selection dilemmas faced by community media centers and how the democratic mandate of public access television may influence selection policies:

We were approached by the state historical society [to donate tapes], but we don't have the time to [sort through the collection] to know what we're giving. I couldn't tell you what's on our shelf... There are parades, election related stuff, award winning programs. No rhyme or reason to it. Is there a hierarchy of importance? Is Joe's program about African violets more important than a city council meeting?... [Do we save] the first talk show about gay people on our channel, or a parade with an important person? We try to maintain a content neutrality—everything has equal value. The guy who is obsessed with African violets has same right as city council meeting. (Respondent #33)

This sentiment illustrates two related problems that commonly impede archival selection efforts. One is the lack of resources available to allow a thorough assessment of what is in a collection; this process is necessary before an archivist can even begin to address the second problem, which is how to choose what to keep and what to discard. Even in an ideal situation, in which funding and volunteers are available to assess and catalog a collection, there is a potential paradox in the selection of public access materials. Does equal access mean equal archival value? When appraising what to save and what to discard, what kind of standards should apply? Selection appears to contradict the ethos of public access television, which is to eliminate television's "gatekeepers" so that literally everyone can have their say. An accurate reflection of access history calls for an appraisal and selection policy in keeping with the flow and spirit of public access programming. One possible approach, for example, would be to sample at least one program by every producer. Another might be to keep a day's full schedule of programs, alternating days across a calendar year.

Possible Selection Guidelines

A more comprehensive plan would combine the approaches mentioned above with guidelines that incorporate content evaluation with genre sampling.

Access Fort Wayne has developed a set of selection standards to direct the traffic of materials that enter its archive. Two categories of materials are accepted into the collection. They are (1) playback tapes that can be re-transmitted by the center and (2) tapes of archival value that will be incorporated into the long-term archive. Criteria for archive tapes includes (any may apply):

- Current usefulness and public demand
- Permanent value
- Authority and competence in presentation
- Relationship to existing collection
- Relative importance in comparison with other works
- Physical characteristics of item

At the end of each month, the Public Access Coordinator and Program Director of Access Fort Wayne meet to evaluate a list of programs created during the previous month. It is at this time that they determine which tapes will be placed in the archive for permanent retention.

In addition to this set of criteria, genre standards may be applied in order to expand selection options and represent the wide variety of program types that have characterized public access programming over the years. In 1975, Alan Wurtzel published a study of Manhattan's cable programming and developed a set of genre headings for types of public access programs, which was re-iterated in 1998 by Randyll Yoder in his dissertation on public access producers (Yoder 98-99).

Wurtzel examined the content of public access programming on the Manhattan TelePrompTer cable system during the first two years of operation (1971-1973).

Program content was determined from a questionnaire which producers were required to complete when submitting programs to an evaluation panel that was organized by Wurtzel.

Adapting the FCC's list of program definitions, Wurtzel devised the following list for public access program content:

- Entertainment
- News
- Public affairs
- Informational
- Religious
- Instructional
- Sports
- Political
- Children's
- Experimental Art
- Miscellaneous

Wurtzel found that the Informational category accounted for a whopping 76% of the total programming. Because this genre was so strongly represented, he broke the category down further into Ethnic, Community, Health, Public Relations, Consumer, Political and General categories.

This genre list requires some fine tuning, as it is adapted from network television programming. Furthermore, certain genre labels are dated (e.g. "Ethnic" may no longer be considered an appropriate or useful category). However, the list may be a useful starting point for developing a standardized list of public access television genres for the purposes of archival appraisal and selection. It might aid CMCs and archivists in applying universal selection criteria that would be to some degree "content-neutral" and allow for representative, proportional samples of local trends, while unifying the body of public access material across time and geographical locations.

Conclusion

Community media centers that facilitate and disseminate public access programs are facing difficult challenges. Simultaneous with the escalation of videotape obsolescence is the threat of a PEG system blackout. Impending changes in the telecommunications law may eliminate the local franchise system, which allows municipalities to negotiate for channel space and fees that subsidize PEG programming. As noted earlier, 65% of the stations surveyed rely on franchise fees for more than 50% of their funding. Many are struggling to continue the daily business of producing, programming, and providing access to cable channels. Current threats to the very existence of CMCs, however, is precisely what makes preserving this record of community media an even greater imperative. Firstly, the weakening or demise of CMCs will put their archives in even more serious peril. Unless those who are aware of the existence and value of these collections move to save them, many collections may end up in other hands that will unblinkingly discard them. A second reason why it is precisely the right time for an initiative to preserve this material is that a declaration of the significance of community media as part of the nation's cultural heritage may help prevent the demise of the PEG system.

With collective and creative efforts on the parts of the community media movement and the archival community, an archival support structure for these materials can be built. With applied selection criteria and a plan based on good practices towards preserving and making these materials accessible, coupled with support from the local producers, communities, and governments that benefit from the existence of public

access centers, it is possible to put forth an economical, workable approach to ensuring that these unique historical records are saved for posterity.

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