

Although all of them serve as repositories for cultural and historical information, there are major contrasts between the ways that archives, museums, and libraries process, conserve and provide access to the materials in their collections. Museums are often associated with artwork or artifacts of ancient civilizations, libraries with freely circulating commercially published books, and archives with personal papers or perhaps original negatives of films—however these distinctions are rarely so clear, with any of these institutions likely to have culturally unique items amongst their holdings. What is often distinctive to each type of institution, however, is the manner in which collections are maintained, and the priorities placed on acquisitions, conservation, and access. This investigation will look at how public access television material has made its way into various type of collecting institutions, why this content was deemed relevant to their collection, and how these materials have been handled.

Public access television programming provides a unique object of study, as it is material which is often pedestrian, poorly produced, or horrifyingly strange. Some public access television content shares the spirit of outsider art, while the cultural interest of other programs is as a document of local history or quotidian life. Public television stations, which provide average citizens in their local communities with the chance to create and broadcast their own television shows, grew with the spread of cable television. In exchange for the right to profit from the construction of cable television infrastructure on municipal property, the establishment of community access television stations by the cable television companies is often required as a means of paying back the community. Although many types of programming have filled the airwaves of these stations, including in-house productions and coverage of local government, it

is the content produced by average viewers that defines the popular notion of cable access television.

The public access television stations themselves can be seen as the first example of collecting institutions—they collect the content that they themselves produce, in the same way that content-producing institutions like TV and radio stations retain archives of their own material. One massive caveat to this statement is the fact that very few public access television stations have retained viewer-produced shows. This is owing to the fact that community-produced content is technically owned by these producers (not the station), although the stations almost always retain the rights to retransmit these programs. It is also frequently beyond the financial means of community producers to create an extra tape of the show to deposit in a station archive. Two local examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the New York City station Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) and Brooklyn Community Access Television (BCAT). Both of these stations have broadcast viewer-produced content since the early 1990s, and yet these programs are virtually non-existent in the tape libraries the stations have accrued. Rather, the two stations have retained almost exclusively the programs that they have produced themselves, in-house. Although it is frequently the case that broadcast institutions are too preoccupied with hectic production schedules to focus on historic collections and archival practices, cable access stations are lopsided examples of entities which have highly-unrepresentative archives of their own broadcast history.

While the stations themselves collect these programs (or don't) because they themselves broadcast it, archives and special collections sometimes acquire these shows when the content of community-produced access television becomes historically or aesthetically notable. One prominent example of this is the John Wallowitch Collection of Noncommercial Video

Recordings which was acquired by the New York Public Library's Library for the Performing Arts in 2005. It is a non-circulating special collection held within the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound. This collection represents the personal archive of Wallowitch, who produced and hosted the program *John's Cabaret* from 1980 until his death in 2007. *John's Cabaret* began its existence on the Metro Access station in Manhattan, which is noted for the rich community of artists and eccentrics who made use of its airwaves. The content of the show featured Wallowitch, a Julliard-trained pianist, hosting a live call-in where viewers requested that he play Broadway and cabaret standards. The host obliged, no matter how sketchily he knew the tune, and frequently interjected campy witticisms or humorous monologues. In addition to running on various access stations for over 25 years, special guests included many well-regarded figures of cabaret singing and songwriting. What makes this collection an interesting case study is the fact that, although amateurish and odd, *John's Cabaret* was deemed to be culturally significant by this important collecting institution. In fact, the collection itself documents how the aesthetics of cabaret singing and songwriting, not exactly at the height of their fashion during the show's lifetime, was kept alive by a community of enthusiasts (many of whom were part of the gay arts community).

The Wallowitch collection is made up of 400+ videotapes (181 U-matic, 82 Betamax, 149 VHS). Access to this collection is provided through the Performing Arts Library's sophisticated digital playback system, which does not allow the researcher to handle individual tapes, but rather has the content cued up for them by a library employee and remotely broadcast to a study carrel. However, only a small fraction of this collection is currently accessible. The finding aid (created by MIAP alumna Loni Shibuyama) indicates that the vast majority of titles as "Access restricted. Advanced notification required for use."—this is because so few titles have been

transferred from the master tapes. Interested researchers can request to see these tapes, whereupon an access transfer will be made for the researcher for a nominal fee and the cost of the tape stock.

Another interesting instance of a special collection acquiring public access television content is the case of NYU's Fales Library Downtown Collection acquiring the work of artist Jaime Davidovich. An Argentine artist who spent much of his life in New York City, Davidovich hosted a bizarre and notorious show on Metro Access called *The Live! Show*. This program was notable both for its madcap, variety show-like format, and also the participation of the host's artist friends. Here again, we see a case where the content of public access television spills over into what are deemed more culturally significant realms, such that its status is recognized by an academic library. *The Live! Show's* aesthetic is wholly in line with the Downtown Collection's mission to represent the late 70s/early 80s arts scene in SoHo, TriBeCa, and the East Village. This entire collection of just over 50 videorecordings was preserved by Fales, who created Digibeta preservation masters of the tapes as well as DVD access copies for all titles. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the collection is the fact that Fales preserved many titles which are not recordings of the *The Live! Show*, but rather off-the-air tapes of public access television from the artist's personal collection. These tapes include whole episodes of other programs on Manhattan cable access (not just Metro Cable) as well as tapes which feature channel-surfing between the cable access stations currently on the air in New York City. The scarcity of documentation of public access television at this time is such that even an off-the-air VHS recording can be considered an archivally unique element worthy of preservation, due to the uniqueness of the content it documents. Examples of this scarce content is a live broadcast of the Metro Access Christmas party (which features several turns by John Wallowitch at the piano) as well as an

episode of the infamous and controversial *Ugly George Hour*, frequently referenced in 1980s literature on the graphic extremes of public access programming and extremely difficult to locate documentation of today. Interested researchers can make requests to view this content, on site at Fales Library, where they are simply required to state the nature of their research and then fill out cursory personal information upon their arrival at the archive.

One final repository for public access television content is not archivally sound, or a traditional institution at all, but is an important repository for rare programs. YouTube and other communities of online enthusiasts are now one of the main access points for viewer-created public access television, and many of these programs have become small sensations on YouTube. One example of this is the New York City-based show *Stairway To Stardom*, a *Starsearch*-like variety show featuring highly eccentric performers of varying talent. A YouTube user named sharpeworld (who is evidently an NPR producer who produced a piece on *Stairway To Stardom* as an online phenomenon) has uploaded many clips from the show, many of which have been viewed 5,000-10,000 times (some with as many as 70,000+ views). While this content is decidedly not being "archived" on YouTube, it is becoming an extremely popular and convenient access point to this content—surely much of it has now been viewed exponentially many more times than on its original broadcast). I would actually suggest that users such as sharpeworld should be reached out to by collecting institutions seeking out public access content, who could inquire as to what source tapes she was using to create these web videos. In a similar vein, my research on Metro Cable led me to the YouTube user profile of Coca Crystal, popular host of a long-running show called *If I Can't Dance, You Can Keep Your Revolution*. She has uploaded many clips from her show, but also several compilation reels of programming which are quite similar to some of the titles Fales Library has chosen as worthy preservation candidates.

Documentary evidence of this programming is so scant, that leads such as this YouTube profile should not be ignored. By contacting a user like this via the internet, an archive could locate a potentially-rich collection of materials which would otherwise be totally off their radar.

In all, public access television content makes for an interesting study, as it is frequently derided for its worthlessness or generally low quality. However, in many cases, the experimental nature of programs has transcended the assumptions about the medium and catapulted it into the subcultural or anti-establishment aesthetic realms. The do-it-yourself aesthetic of community access television, as well as the democratic access to means of creative production, makes this programming culturally unique. As the uniqueness and archival value of these programs is just starting to be recognized, there are only a smattering of archives and libraries who have acquired these materials. Who has acquired this content, and why they deemed it important, are interesting symptoms of how this materials will make their way into archives and libraries in the future.