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GROUNDING TV'S MATERIAL HERITAGE

PLACE-BASED PROJECTS THAT VALUE OR VILIFY AMATEUR VIDEOCASSETTE RECORDINGS OF TELEVISION

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Abstract: VCRs were once prized for their ability to allow amateurs to create material records of ephemeral television broadcasts. But what value do amateur video-recordings of television have at their late stage of obsolescence? This article outlines some of the discursive parameters surrounding the perceived use-value of amateur video-recordings of television, drawing on case studies of video collection projects that are divided on the question of whether amateur television video-recordings continue to have merit. It argues that both advocates and detractors of videocassette recordings of television tend to rely on place-based heritage discourses in order to value or vilify them.

Keywords: video, recording, amateur, VCR, television, heritage

Nam June Paik's *TV Garden* (1974) installation was one of the first artworks to conceptualize television content as material excess. Responding to a proliferating landscape of cable and satellite television, audio from Paik's *Global Groove* (1973) encouraged visitors to imagine a time when the "TV Guide would be as thick as the Manhattan telephone directory".¹ Placing working televisions among tropical plants, Paik represented TV's ecosystem as a rapidly growing content jungle.² This organic metaphor understands TV content to be expanding, but ephemeral. For the typical TV viewer of 1974, programming was analogous to the short lifespan of plant life—it appeared to live for a moment on the screen and then die. Television transmissions might have been considered invasive or excessive, but they could not yet be contained by viewers in material form.

1 *TV Garden* first appeared at the Everson Museum of Art (Syracuse, NY), and has been remounted several times since. For a description of the original installation, and a discussion of issues to be considered when remounting it, see John G. Hanhardt, 'Case Studies: Nam June Paik, *TV Garden*, 1974', in Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolio and Caitlin Jones, eds, *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003, p. 170-177.

2 Building on Hanhardt's reading of *TV Garden* as a "playful and profound meditation on our expanding media environment" (2003, p. 72), I've found *TV Garden*'s metaphor of television excess to be a useful way to arrive at archival issues that plague television accumulation projects. See, for example, Jennifer VanderBurgh, '(Who Knows?) What Remains to be Seen: Archives and Other Pragmatic Problems for Canadian Television Studies', Marian Bredin, Scott Henderson and Sarah Matheson, eds, *Canadian Television: Text and Context*, Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2012, p. 39-57.

COLLECTION ONLINE

ARTISTS

MEDIUMS ▼

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ▼

DATES ▼

MOVEMENTS ▼

VENUES ▼



Figure 1. Screenshot from "Nam June Paik, TV Garden," [Guggenheim Collection Online](#).

The following year (1975), Sony released the first videocassette recorder (VCR) for the domestic market.³ In the years that followed, multiple brands of VCRs were marketed as interventions that gave home viewers "newfound agency" to transform content that was previously experienced as ephemeral into material record.⁴ VCRs enabled new engagements and negotiations with TV content, which could now be recorded, replayed as well as paused/rewound/fast-forwarded, edited, and collected.⁵ In transcribing television transmissions onto videotape at home, amateur video-recordings became "containers" for television that had material textuality outside of TV receivers.⁶ While Paik's

3 Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright*, Duke University Press, 2009, p. 247. Michael Z. Newman's work offers the useful reminder that while "the history of home video" is usually tied to "the release of the Sony Betamax in the mid-1970s," as an emergent technological innovation, it was "regularly described and reported on in the popular press and demonstrated in public" since the mid-1950s. Newman reports that "[h]undreds of news items described videotape in the later 1950s," and that "[b]y 1968, there were more than 20,000 [Video Tape Recorders] in use in the United States, compared with 5,000 being used in the TV business." Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium*, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 21-22.

4 "[N]ewfound agency" is in Newman's *Video Revolutions*, 2014, p. 25.

5 Will Straw explains that "[t]he cultural effects of the videocassette have been discussed primarily in terms of the repetition of unitary experiences that it permitted..." Will Straw, 'Embedded Memories,' in Charles R. Acland, ed, *Residual Media*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 6.

6 However, in writing about the remote control as a way of engaging with television, Caetlin Benson-Allott makes the important distinction that while "control can feel empowering... 'control' is not synonymous with 'power'." "Power," writes Benson-Allott, "is an ability to change the world around you; it is not defined by preexisting parameters, as is control." Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Remote Control*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. xvii.

project recognized the proliferation of ephemeral television content, with videocassettes, a new kind of material television excess was born.



Figure 2. Screenshot from a promotional video for Project Get Reel, a Canadian for-profit tape recycler, illustrating the environmental impact of videotape accumulation⁷: <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/> and <https://vimeo.com/158437762>

As Will Straw explains, “[l]ike any container, the videocassette” functioned to “transport and stockpile the cultural knowledges held within it.”⁸ “[I]n stockpiling these knowledges,” Straw points out, “the videocassette, like any medium of storage, allows them to pile up and to persist.”⁹ But whether or not videotape’s persistence is considered a positive thing depends on attitudes toward its physical presence and the content it contains. Michael Z. Newman explains that “[t]he medium of video exists not only as objects and practices, but also as a shifting constellation of ideas in popular imagination, including ideas about value.”¹⁰ Lisa Gitelman’s account of the “cultural logic” of paper documents and copies also establishes that “[i]ndividual genres aren’t artifacts...they are ongoing and changeable practices of expression and reception” as well as “specific and dynamic, socially realized sites.”¹¹ As an early adopter of video technology and an early commentator on the politics of television transmission, Paik asserted that “10,000 hours tape of 1960’s TV programs will be very valuable for the future,” but Newman and Gitelman’s observations about the changing value of recordings call Paik’s claim into question.¹²

7 In September 2019 the company has put their recycling service on hold because they are [looking for a new location](#).

8 Straw, ‘Embedded Memories,’ 2007, p. 7.

9 Ibid., p. 7. Here Straw is thinking about how the videotape has facilitated the persistence of cinema, but as Andrew Burke has established, Straw’s ideas about the videocassette also apply to the persistence of television. See Andrew Burke ‘Memory, Magnetic Tape, and *Death By Popcorn: The Tragedy of the Winnipeg Jets*,’ in Zoë Druick and Gerda Cammaer, eds, *Cinephemera: Archives, Ephemeral Cinema, and New Screen Histories in Canada*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014, p. 326-350.

10 Newman, 2014, p. 3. See also Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*, Routledge, 2012.

11 Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, Duke University Press, 2014, p. 109, 2. Annamaria Mortrescu-Mayes and Susan Aasman point to Gitelman’s observation that “the genre of the document has widened over time as new types of format and carrier, such as pdf (digital), videotape (video), online videos or live streams invite us to reconsider these as ‘living’ sites that can be both fluid (different versions) and fixed.” *Amateur Media and Participatory Cultures: Film, Video, and Digital Media*, Routledge, 2019, p. 134.

12 Nam June Paik, ‘Expanded education for the paperless society,’ *Radical Software*, 1, 1, 1970, 8.

Aside from practical concerns such as whether storage space and playback equipment exists to access such collections, the answer to whether television recordings from the past have value depends, to an extent, on whether one values the *dispositif*, or the contextual apparatus of the video-recording.¹³ Historically, TV recordings made by broadcasters and production companies have been viewed as more authoritative textual records than amateur video-recordings, since they tend to be of higher aesthetic quality and have a documented provenance. However, someone who values recordings of television broadcasts might prize amateur recordings more highly, since they are more likely to reproduce TV shows along with context-specific broadcast ephemera such as commercials and station identifications that professional recordings tend to lack.

Amateur video-recording's object-value also tends to increase in contexts of perceived scarcity, either when there are gaps in broadcast or legacy archives (as in Kaleidoscope's example that follows), or in situations when the recorded content does not circulate freely outside of archives or restricted collections. In the absence of other accessible copies of these texts, amateur recordings of television become vital "documents," as Gitelman defines the term, "for knowing-showing".¹⁴

Building on Gitelman's ideas about the shifting cultural logic and value of documents, Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes and Susan Aasman argue that the contemporary prominence of participatory and web-based media cultures means, "[w]e need to rethink what constitutes a record, as a historical document, and what signifies an archive."¹⁵ To this end, Abigail De Kosnik's *Rogue Archives* and Nanna Bonde Thylstrup's work on the "infrastructures" and "infrapolitics" of digital collection projects are two recent works that we can use to think through the implications of how web-based performative and structural repertoires are remediating and reinvigorating analogue TV recordings in meaningful ways.

Certainly, however, not everyone is embracing video's materiality. At this late stage of video's "commercial obsolescence," there appears to be a range of attitudes about the value of the material presence of amateur video-recordings of television.¹⁶ In what follows, I sketch out some of the discursive parameters surrounding the perceived value of these recordings by drawing on case studies that are divided on the question of whether amateur video's material presence and its content continues to hold value. As I will argue, both advocates and detractors of videocassette recordings of television use place-based heritage discourses to value or vilify them.

1 Arguments for Video's Value

Home video-recordings of television are artefacts from a time when their material nature was considered a benefit. Newman points out that as early as 1958, videotape was advertised as an intervention and "extension of live television" that could make content last over time.¹⁷ Understood in relation to other contemporaneous analogue forms of media such as books, records, and photo albums, it was accepted that media that made content retrievable took up physical space. In today's context of digital storage and web-based media platforms, this is no longer the case. Once considered a convenience, videotape's materiality is now widely considered a detriment, especially since aging or inoperable VCRs render video content effectively inaccessible to many videotape owners. In these cases, with little

13 Mortrescu-Mayes and Aasman, p. 48. See also Roger Odin, 'Amateur Technologies of Memory, *Dispositifs*, and Communication Spaces', in Susan Aasman, Andreas Fickers and Joseph Wachelder, eds, *Materializing Memories: Dispositifs, Generations, Amateurs*, Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 19-34.

14 Gitelman, p. 2. Gitelman's media history of written/printed documents draws attention to a moment in 1984 when analogies were made between video-recordings and photocopies in the US Supreme Court lawsuit against Sony, p. 108-110.

15 Mortrescu-Mayes and Aasman, p. 134.

16 Benson-Allott's use of the term "commercial obsolescence" accounts for the way that forms of media shift from dominant to residual as a process. It usefully distinguishes between VCR/video's commercial replacement and its actual obsolescence which hasn't yet occurred. 'VCR Autopsy,' *Journal of Visual Culture*, 6, 2, 2007, 175. See also Charles R. Acland, ed, *Residual Media*, 2007.

17 Here, Newman cites an "advertisement for Ampex [video] products in the trade journal *Sponsor* in July 1958", p. 19.

apparent use-value, the physical presence of videocassette recordings is perceived to be excessive, and marks them as objects to be discarded.

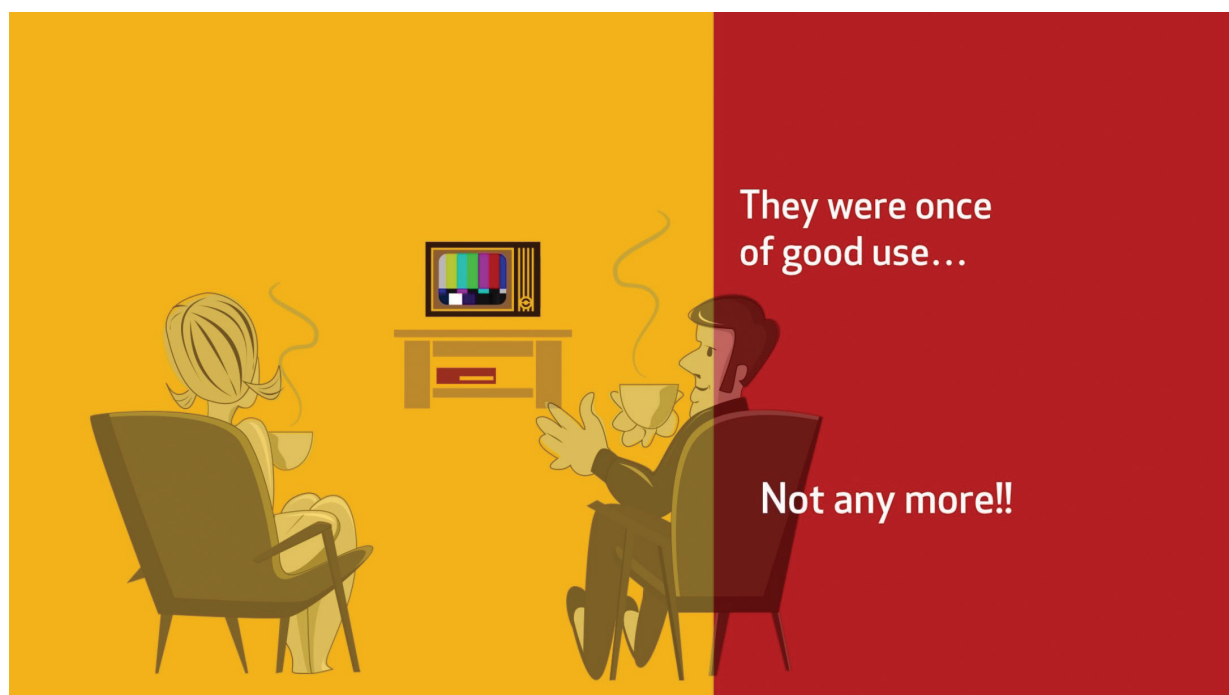


Figure 3. Commentary on the contemporary relevance of VHS tape from for-profit tape recycler, Project Get Reel's promotional video: <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/> or <https://vimeo.com/158437762>

Contemporary advocates of television video-recordings are unusual in that they continue to ascribe value to video's material presence. This tends to be for one of four reasons. As Michele Byers and I have advocated elsewhere, home videocassette recordings are often the only recordings of television content of the video era that exist outside of archives, broadcasters, and production companies, which can be difficult to access or can be restricted due to real or perceived copyright issues.¹⁸ Videotape recordings still hold value in this regard since they allow researchers, analysts, collectors, and enthusiasts to access and experience recorded television content that would not otherwise be available. While the duplication and circulation of difficult-to-find television recordings existed long before the web, Abigail De Kosnik draws attention to how the web has facilitated and consolidated the performative practices of legions of amateur "'rogue' memory workers," who remediate such texts as emancipatory or democratic gestures that are often intended to subvert the perceived restrictions of formal archives and mechanisms of capitalist distribution.¹⁹ The amateur labour of videotape remediation, while different in some respects from the home-mode of video-recording, can be viewed as an extension of its emancipatory spirit.

A second related point, made by Charles Acland, is that home-recorded videotapes are the only records that exist of television content as it appeared on TV, complete with ephemera such as advertisements, show bumpers, and station identifications.²⁰ In this sense, some scholars and enthusiasts argue that videotapes have value as records for the study of television content because they present a fulsome copy of original television transmissions.²¹

18 See Michele Byers and Jennifer VanderBurgh, 'Trafficking (in) the Archive: Canada, Copyright, and the Study of Television,' *English Studies in Canada*, 36, 1, 2010, 109-126; and 'What Was Canada? Locating the Language of an Empty Archive,' *Critical Studies in Television: Scholarly Studies of Small Screen Fictions*, 5, 2, Fall 2010, 105-117.

19 Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, MIT Press, 2016, p. 2.

20 Charles Acland makes this point in 'The Last Days of Videotape,' *FlowTV*, 12 November 2009, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2009/11/the-last-days-of-videotapecharles-r-acland-concordia-university/>

21 Acland, for example, argues that "television broadcast recordings offer contextual material."



Figure 4. Station identification for the now defunct Maritimes Independent Television from an amateur videotape recording from Halifax, Canada (ca. 1989-1994).

A third line of defense holds that video-recordings have value as aesthetic texts, as well as documents of particular television engagements that were enabled by VCRs. Advocates of this position tend to be interested in the palimpsest effects created by recording and re-recording on videotapes, the presentation of carefully selected or idiosyncratic recorded content, and methods of tape labeling and paratext creation which can be of aesthetic and sociological interest.²² This advocacy position sees videotape recordings as texts in and of themselves, not just as copies of television transmissions. At the same time, these textual gestures are produced by negotiating with existing television transmissions which are ultimately outside of viewers' control. In this sense, video recordings also document viewers' engagements with television transmissions and remember ways in which viewers intervened with the presentation of the mass medium to suit their interests. In this way, video recording can be viewed as an extension of what William Kaizen reports was Nam June Paik's "chief preoccupation" in his 1960s television-themed gallery installations, which encouraged participants to manipulate television as the point of reception and, in so doing, "transform [their][sic] TV

²² Hilderbrand provides a useful overview of 'Analog Video and Aesthetics' in *Inherent Vice*, 2009, p. 11-16. For one case study description of videotape palimpsest, see Jennifer VanderBurgh, 'Considering Todd's Tape: The Textual Transition of Videotape Miscellany,' *PUBLIC: Art/Culture/Ideas*, 57, 154-162.

set from a passive pastime to active creation.”²³ VCRs allowed people to engage with television in individual, and even “narcissistic” ways.²⁴



Figure 5. Personalized paratext on a videotape recorded in Halifax, Canada (ca. 1989-1994).

A fourth point, articulated by Lucas Hilderbrand, has less to do with videotape's intrinsic value as a record of TV than with skepticism about the capability and reliability of digital platforms and practices as they relate to moving-image heritage. Hilderbrand uses the term, “access entitlement,” to refer to a set of widely held cultural expectations that reflect people's feelings of entitlement to accessing moving-image texts.²⁵ These views are brought about by the use of digital content platforms such as YouTube that have acculturated people to expect that the full catalogue of moving-image history has somehow been collected and made available (for free) via the web. Particularly with respect to television, the myth of access is based on digital utopian misconceptions about how much television content has

23 William Kaizen, *Against Immediacy: Video Art and Media Populism*, Dartmouth College Press, 2016, p. 44. Kaizen quotes Paik from *Videa 'n' Videology*, 1959-1973, Everson Museum of Art, 1997, p. 11. In participatory TV installations, Paik had participants manipulate video images by speaking into microphones or by turning a dial connected to electromagnets, in one case, distorting the image of Marshall McLuhan. For illustrated examples see John G. Hanhardt, ‘Nam June Paik: Art & Process,’ 30 April 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2CNFCQm86w> [13:25-27:12], also Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*, Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2000, 108-127.

24 Reading Paik's artwork, Hong Hee Kim-Cheon relates the idea of the reflective TV screen to the idea of narcissism, writing that “[t]he television monitor has a mirror structure which reflects the observer (the artist or the audience) and creates the same narcissistic situation of split-self as in the psychoanalytical process of self-identification. From this we can define video as an aesthetics of narcissism...” ‘Nam June Paik's Video Art: Participation-TV as an Extension of Happening,’ M.A. Thesis, Department of Art History, Concordia University, March 1989, p. 100. More pragmatically, Hilderbrand has established that “[v]ideotape enabled television audiences to become participatory viewers who interacted with the technology and recorded texts,” p. 7.

25 Hilderbrand, p. 10, 228-243.

actually been recorded, saved, and migrated forward to digital formats.²⁶ De Kosnik also cautions us to avoid the myth that the Internet is “auto-archival” in nature, and draws attention to the vast amount of “techno-volunteerism” needed “to create and sustain” existing online archives and collections.²⁷ Similarly, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup’s work on the politics of mass digitization projects draws attention to the legal, material, disciplinary, and cultural infrastructures of web-based platforms that dictate whether and how material is presented on the web, and determine its lifespan.²⁸

While the web has certainly made some television content more accessible than ever and has provided platforms for people to share examples of content from the past, utopian ideas about access can be damaging for television heritage when it leads people to view the internet as a de facto archive, causing them to throw out recordings of television transmissions on the assumption that other copies exist. This is particularly a problem in places without accessible television archives such as Canada, where amateur video-recordings are sometimes the only surviving records of television shows that are accessible to the public.²⁹ Even established archives such as the British Film Institute (BFI) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) have come to recognize the value of amateur recordings to film and television heritage, soliciting viewers to send in copies of “lost” recordings to fill gaps in their collections.³⁰

Amateur video-recordings can hold valuable content, and yet the volume of material that exists at this late stage of video obsolescence also means that it is not realistic to expect that everything that has been recorded on video can be saved. Videocassettes need to be digitized in order to maximize their contemporary use, and this process can only take place in real time, which means a 1:1 ratio of text time to transfer time. Considering that the capacity of videocassettes that were set to record on extended play could be upwards of six hours in length, transferring video to digital format has significant labour and storage implications, as well as tagging and retrieval concerns. Video therefore finds itself at an odd stage of precarity. On the one hand, its impending obsolescence marks it as endangered, and yet its material excess can prevent collection projects from proceeding. Even if we were to be compelled by the arguments above, accumulating “videotape recordings of television” is simply too unwieldy a focus for a collection.

2 Place-Based Heritage Strategies

Projects that collect amateur video-recordings of television are rare, but those that have been successful seem to have built on the above arguments with one key, unifying addition: they have made strategic use of already established place-based heritage discourses. By this, I mean that such projects tend to justify the value of the television content that is collected and contained on videotapes by leveraging existing discourses about the importance of documenting heritage in a particular location. This discursive line of reasoning holds that videotapes have value because they are records of here, and records of here are important. Place-based heritage discourses hold that videotape recordings remember what places looked like on television, and how television was created and packaged in and for specific locations. This fifth point used to defend the value of video-recordings appears to have been the most persuasive rhetorical strategy in leveraging support for amateur video accumulation projects. In these cases, videotapes are not regarded with material “technostalgia” as Tim van der Heijden puts it, but rather, as containers that have managed to capture content that is of value from a heritage perspective.³¹

26 Add to this the fragmented, excerpted nature of what tends to be available of television on web-platforms like YouTube. In 2006, YouTube co-founder Chad Hurley distinguished the platform’s “clip culture” (watching only a part of a whole text) from the “lean back” experience of enjoying a half-hour show while reclining on the sofa.” Author unknown, ‘Clip culture: A start-up shows big media and mighty Google how to do web video,’ *The Economist*, 27 April 2006, <https://www.economist.com/node/6863616>

27 De Kosnik, 46-56.

28 Ibid., 26.

29 See Michele Byers and Jennifer VanderBurgh, ‘Trafficking,’ 109-126.

30 For film see <http://www.bfi.org.uk/explore-film-tv/bfi-national-archive/archive-projects/bfi-most-wanted> and for television see <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-34075649>

31 Tim van der Heijden, ‘Technostalgia of the Present: From Technologies of Memory to a Memory of Technologies,’ *NECSUS*, Autumn 2015, <https://necsus-ejms.org/technostalgia-present-technologies-memory-memory-technologies/>

Drawing on place-based heritage discourses seems to contribute to the success of these video collection projects in a number of ways. Practically, it provides them with a guiding logic that can be used as a method to triage vast amounts of material and determine what is relevant. Rhetorically, it helps to support the project's claim about why accumulating television recordings is important. It is interesting, however, that although these initiatives tend to articulate themselves as interventions in existing archival frameworks, in using heritage discourses to justify their work, these projects can end up reproducing and augmenting existing hegemonic infrastructures for memory-keeping rather than challenging them. This raises the question, are these collections actually augmenting existing archival frameworks, thereby entrenching them?

In tracing the historical development of brick and mortar, public and private television archives in the United States, Lynn Spigel reminds us that television collection and archival initiatives are tied to “discursive formation(s)” and “corresponding institutions and bodies of power.”³² Among them, Spigel draws attention to the importance of “nationalist rhetoric” and the “logic of governmentality” in constructing “historical research on television,” including the construction of television archives and collections.³³ While place-based heritage frameworks for video accumulation projects are often micro-national and regional in scope (as in two of the examples that follow), the discursive impulse for these counter-archives is perhaps less “rogue” than their collections and methods of collecting. What follows describes a few case study examples.

3 Kaleidoscope (Birmingham, UK)

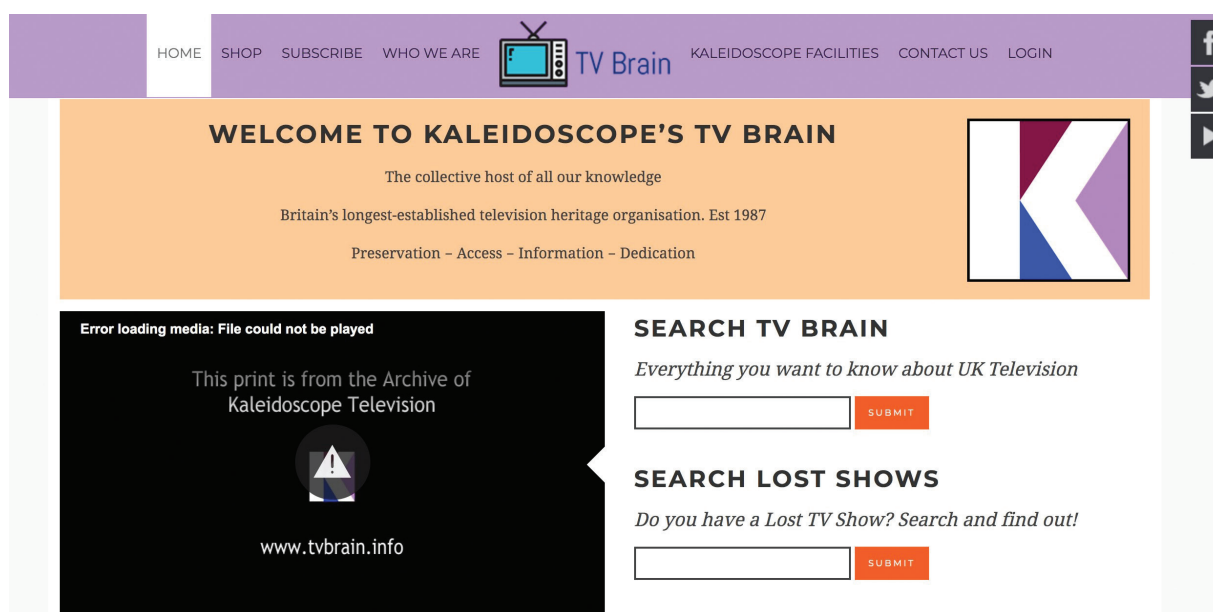


Figure 6. Screenshot of Kaleidoscope's "TV Brain" information page.

Kaleidoscope is a UK-based television archive and repository that uses a national television heritage framework as its place-based organizing logic.³⁴ Based in Birmingham, Kaleidoscope was established in 1987 and has over 750,000 items in its collection, including upwards of 89,000 videotapes.³⁵ While Kaleidoscope TV Historian, Chris Perry,

32 Lynn Spigel, 'Our TV Heritage: Television, the Archive, and the Reasons for Preservation,' Janet Wasko, ed, *Companion to Television*, John Wiley & Sons, 2005, p. 68.

33 Ibid.

34 <https://www.tvbrain.info/>

35 The figure, 750,000, is cited in <https://www.tvbrain.info/who-we-are>. 89,000 videotapes is cited in <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-34075649>

remarks that “many people have said...[they’re] mad to keep it all” he reasons, “you never know what someone’s going to want in 30 years time, and that’s why Kaleidoscope has always fought tooth and nail to keep everything.”³⁶

Billed as “Britain’s longest-established television heritage organization,” the archive’s website uses the metaphor of a TV Brain to conceptualize itself as a “collective host of all our [TV] knowledge,” an intelligence that is achieved by the sum of its parts.³⁷ Aside from stockpiling deaccessioned material and providing safe harbour for large personal collections, since 1993, the archive has also been working with the British Film Institute (BFI), and later with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the UK-based Independent Television service (ITV) to track down “lost” shows or television episodes that are missing from British institutional collections.³⁸ In box lots and personal donations, Kaleidoscope has found over 300 episodes of shows that were missing from the main archives and institutions responsible for Britain’s television heritage.³⁹ Once publishing an annual list of its successes, titled “Raiders of the Lost Archive,” Kaleidoscope now communicates its “latest discoveries” over social media, and maintains a searchable database of wanted “Lost TV” shows on the homepage of its website in an attempt to crowdsource additional finds.⁴⁰ Kaleidoscope recently launched a campaign to find The Top 100 Lost TV shows deemed significant to British television heritage, accompanied by a book that outlines their importance.⁴¹



The Avengers: EXCLUSIVE footage of missing episode - BBC Newsnight

25,866 views

222 10 SHARE SAVE ...

Video 1. “The Avengers: EXCLUSIVE footage of missing episode.” BBC Newsnight segment. November 2, 2016.

While Kaleidoscope makes use of the web to crowdsource material and communicate its findings, it does not upload digital copies of its holdings to the web. In addition to the archive providing free storage for certain collections where “copyright holders...retain copyright” to their material, the archive also licenses its holdings to “television production companies and broadcasters” and “accredited” researchers with the Federation of Commercial Audio Visual Libraries

36 ‘The Avengers: EXCLUSIVE footage of missing episode–BBC Newsnight,’ 2 Nov 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGxRBOjfZCc> [4:46-5:08]

37 <https://www.tvbrain.info/>

38 <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-34075649>

39 Correspondence with Kaleidoscope’s CEO, Chris Perry, 24 April 2018.

40 <https://wipednews.wordpress.com/features/raidersofthelostarchives/>

41 Correspondence with Chris Perry, 24 April 2018.

(FOCAL).⁴² The archive's mandate is therefore to provide safe harbour for existing television records in the British interest, to add to existing archival collections, and through the development of metadata search aids and publication of program guides (via Kaleidoscope Publishing), make British television records more transparent and retrievable.

4 Retrontario (Toronto, Canada)



Figure 7. Retrontario's **home page**.

Retrontario is another example of a videotape accumulation project that is grounded by a place-based heritage strategy.⁴³ Its tagline, “[r]econstructing our televisual past, one tape at a time,” uses a collective pronoun to bind a group of TV viewers by their shared experience of watching television in the Canadian province of Ontario.⁴⁴ A web site that showcases over 300 excerpts of 1980s and 1990s television content sourced mainly from home videocassette recordings, Retrontario understands television heritage to reside at the point of reception. While most of the site's content is Ontario-produced, mainly in the Toronto area, the inclusion of excerpts of transmissions from US stations in Buffalo and Detroit, suggest that place-based viewing nostalgia is evoked by content that viewers experienced in a location, rather than where that content was produced or where the transmission originated.⁴⁵ This place-based understanding of television reception as heritage has proven popular with visitors to the site and has earned it the distinction of a Toronto Heritage Award (2016).

42 'Storage of Archive masters,' <https://www.tvbrain.info/kaleidoscope-facilities/storage-of-archive-masters>, and 'Kaleidoscope Footage Licensing,' <https://www.tvbrain.info/kaleidoscope-facilities/kaleidoscope-footage-licensing>

43 <http://www.retrontario.com/>

44 <http://www.retrontario.com/about/>

45 The site lists content originating from Buffalo stations WGR, WIVB, WKBW, and WNED 17.



Figure 8. Website banner.

Retrontario's curator is Ed Conroy, a Toronto-based journalist and video producer who, since 2006, has remediated found video recordings of television to the web. Conroy refers to this practice as "video archeology."⁴⁶ Launched in 2008 as a YouTube channel, Retrontario is now a project that has its own web site and makes use of existing social media platforms for promotion and as additional carriers for its content.⁴⁷ In remediating video recordings of television to the web, Retrontario attempts to reacquaint viewers with their "fuzzy memories" of 1970s-1990s TV by providing a platform on which they can access it.⁴⁸ In this sense, Retrontario creates synergy between old and new media, with the web providing a distribution platform for video recordings.⁴⁹ The site's "About" page stresses this idea of Retrontario as an access intervention for obsolescing video content carriers, "created to celebrate the neglected corners of Ontario's rich televisual history; to put back into circulation material [that] which...was for all intents and purposes, lost."⁵⁰

Videotape recordings, writes Conroy, are "perhaps the closest we'll ever get to re-living the common televisual experiences we have shared during the last few decades."⁵¹ But while the web makes it possible in theory to share the entirety of what Conroy has collected on videotape, legal issues governing the distribution of television recordings limits the content that Retrontario can make available.⁵² Although recording television transmissions for personal use is legal, remediating them is considered a form of distribution that comes with a myriad of copyright and licensing issues and ambiguities. Retrontario protects itself against legal action with a statement that "[n]o copyright infringement is intended," as "[a]ll content is distributed under fair dealing." However, as fair dealing, which is a provision to use copyrighted material under Canadian law, is a defensible position, not a blanket exemption, the site takes steps to minimize its risk and selects material with this in mind. While Retrontario's video source material transcribed whole programs and long stretches of broadcast transmissions, the site's interface only provides a curated collection of excerpts, most of them less than minute in length.

Owing to the legalities governing the circulation and sharing of recorded television, most of Retrontario's content is TV ephemera—such as commercials, public service announcements, and station identifications—or the opening title sequences and theme songs of shows. In this way, Retrontario provides viewers with a nostalgia-inducing sampler of Ontario-based television heritage. In doing so, it keeps knowledge of television alive, and encourages a renewed interest in TV content that has effectively disappeared. While the site, on the one hand, heralds a set of nostalgic viewers who remember the content originally, its presentation as a site that displays curiosities of Ontario-based television heritage also heralds new generations of visitors who are encountering this content for the first time.

46 <http://www.retrontario.com/about/>

47 Examples listed on the side include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Vimeo, Soundcloud, <http://www.retrontario.com/>

48 <http://www.retrontario.com/about/>

49 This is in line with Will Straw's argument that the Internet "provides the terrain on which sentimental attachments, vernacular knowledges, and a multitude of other relationships to the material culture of the past are magnified and given coherence." 'Embedded Memories,' p. 3.

50 <http://www.retrontario.com/about/>

51 <http://www.retrontario.com/about/>

52 Hilderbrand explores the history of copyright and remediation in the U.S. context.

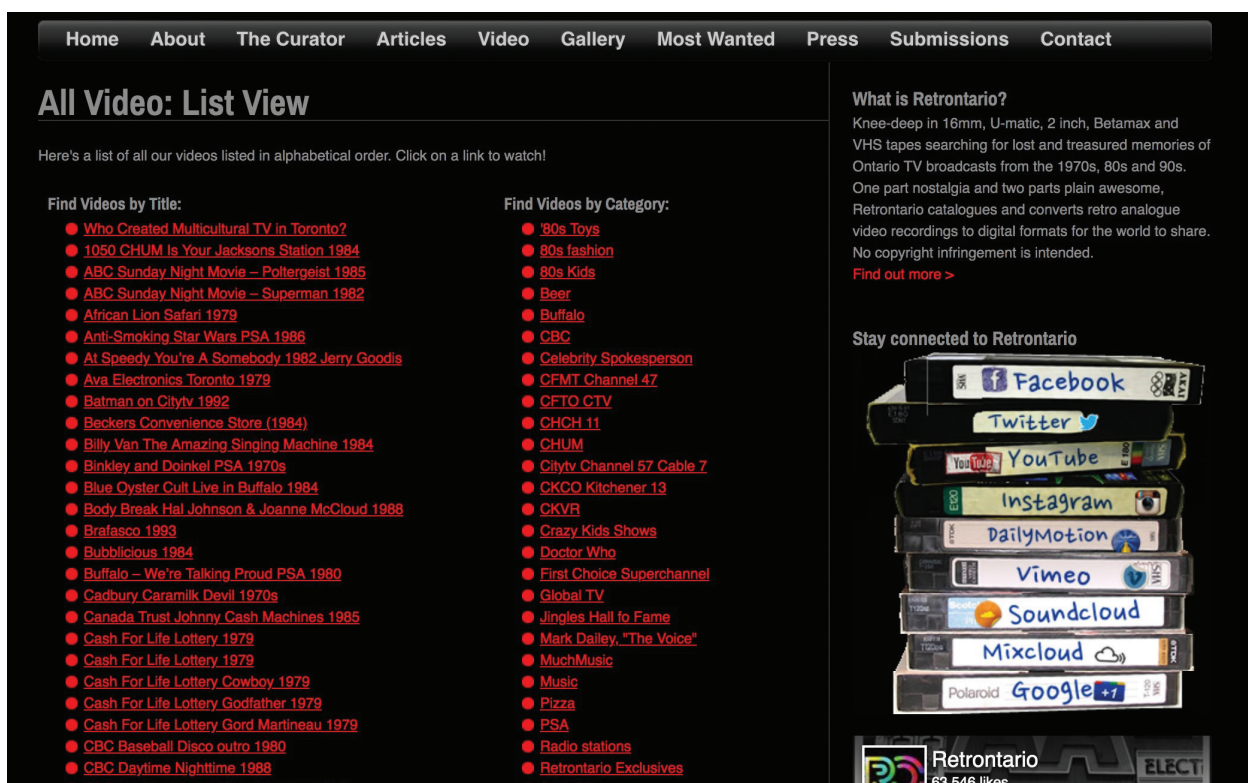


Figure 9. Retrontario features a page that **lists the site's accessible clips**.

Retrontario intends to be a curated digitization project, not a legacy project like Kaleidoscope, and yet, in the absence of an Ontario television archive, Conroy's fulsome collection at the back end of the site is more than likely unparalleled. But while Retrontario may actually be a de facto legacy project, legal issues around the practice of remediating television recordings to the web limits the project's ambition of crowdsourcing "the ultimate online museum of Ontario TV history."⁵³ While Retrontario, unlike Kaleidoscope, gives people online access to excerpts from the videotape recordings that it collects, both projects use social media platforms to cultivate a sense of community around the appreciation of their collections and to crowdsource additional material.

While both Kaleidoscope and Retrontario rely on videocassette recordings as source material for their projects, there is a key methodological difference with respect to how they deal with their original content carriers. Kaleidoscope, as a television legacy project with dedicated archival space, keeps videotapes after they have been digitized. This practice is in keeping with the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives' (IASA's) advice that because of "potential for improvements in information retrieval, transfers of primary and secondary information from carrier-based formats cannot necessarily be considered definitive."⁵⁴ As a result, they suggest that the "[o]riginal physical carriers and suitable reproduction equipment must therefore be preserved after digitisation of their contents whenever possible."⁵⁵ Retrontario, on the other hand, does not have space to keep its video content carriers. Once tapes are digitized, most of the originals are eventually discarded. Conroy reports that for a while, an artist would come to collect the project's videotapes and transform them into garden furniture. This example is a reminder that even dedicated television collectors that see the use-value of videocassettes can also view them as excessive material objects.

53 <http://www.retrontario.com/about/>

54 IASA Technical Committee, 'The Safeguarding of the Audiovisual Heritage: Ethics, Principles and Preservation Strategy,' Will Prentice and Lars Gaustad, co-eds, Version 4, 2017 (= Standards, Recommended Practices and Strategies, IASA-TC 03), International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives, 12, <https://www.iasa-web.org/tc03/ethics-principles-preservation-strategy>

55 Ibid., 12. I am grateful to the International Federation of Television Archives who alerted me to this document as a guideline of best practices.

5 Marion Stokes (Philadelphia, U.S.)

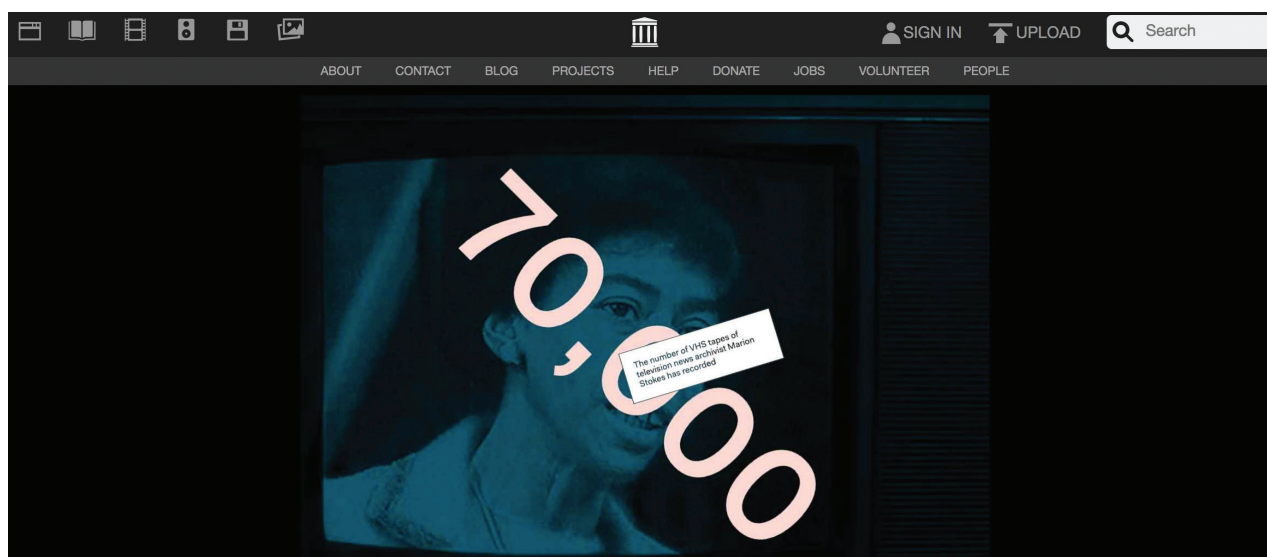


Figure 10. **Internet Archive.**

Although relatively rare, personal videocassette collections occasionally surface that have been systematic in recording television with a place-based heritage logic. One notable example is the 2012 discovery of 40,000 VHS and Betamax tapes of local and national news shows that were recorded by Philadelphia area activist and current affairs enthusiast, Marion Stokes.⁵⁶ Between 1967-1969, Stokes was a co-producer of a Sunday morning Philadelphia talk show called *Input*.⁵⁷ Dedicated to the idea of journalism as social document, between 1977-2012, Stokes recorded an extensive collection comprised mainly of local and national television news shows.⁵⁸ According to reports, Stokes would have up to eight VCRs recording at once, and arrange her daily schedule to ensure that she was at home in time to replenish her machines with a constant stream of six hour tapes.⁵⁹ A former librarian, Stokes was also meticulous in hand-labelling each tape in her collection.⁶⁰ According to Sarah Kessler who first wrote about the collection, “[a]s [Stokes] recorded, she made stacks [of tapes] so high they would fall over.”⁶¹ The collection ultimately became so large that it needed to be stored across “several apartments” which she acquired for this purpose.⁶² While others may have considered the collection eccentric or excessive, Stokes’ son, Michael Metelits, reports that when people inquired about why she was amassing the collection, she would tell them, “I’m archiving...”⁶³

56 The initial estimate was reported to be 140,000—100,000 over the actual number of tapes—which speaks to the difficulty of estimating and accounting for such an excessive amount of material. See Sarah Kessler’s article (and retraction), ‘The Incredible Story of Marion Stokes, Who Single-Handedly Taped 35 Years of TV News,’ *Fast Company*, 21 November 2013, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3022022/the-incredible-story-of-marion-stokes-who-single-handedly-taped-35-years-of-tv-news>

57 Stokes’ affiliation with *Input* is mentioned in her obituary, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/philly/obituary.aspx?n=marion-stokes&pid=161826563>. Different dates are given for Stokes’ affiliation with *Input* (1968-1971) are given in this article: <https://www.dailydot.com/upstream/marion-stokes-vhs-internet-archive-input/>

58 Roger Macdonald, Director of the Internet TV News Archive reports that the Stokes acquisition is “unique collection of local news from Boston (1977-1986) and Philadelphia (1986-2012),” ‘A Dream to Preserve TV News, on the Road to Realization...with Your Help,’ 22 November 2013, <http://blog.archive.org/2013/11/22/a-dream-to-preserve-tv-news-on-the-road-to-realization-with-your-help/>

59 Kessler.

60 Nick Vadala, ‘Germantown’s Marion Stokes archived 35 years of TV news,’ *The Inquirer*, 4 December 2013, <http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/entertainment/television/Germantown-woman-videotapes-35-years-of-broadcast-news.html>.

61 Kessler.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.



Figure 11. *Recorder: The Marion Stokes Project* (Dir. Matt Wolf, 2019). [Official website of the documentary film.](#)

Kim Bjarkman's study of systematic TV collectors explains that some collectors record television out of a sense of "civic duty" in documenting either television or cultural heritage.⁶⁴ Stokes certainly seems to have fit that category. Bjarkman explains that the "pleasure" that some collectors find in video recording "is bound up with anxieties about television's resistance to the world of physical objects..."⁶⁵ Videotape thus enabled both casual users and serious television collectors to "navigate the paradoxes of a medium that is at once pervasive and scarce."⁶⁶

Stokes' collection is clearly an outlier in the context of home recording, both in terms of its size and systematic nature. Its thematic and Philadelphia-based focus unusually aligns it with archival collections, rather than with the typically haphazard nature of personal collections.⁶⁷

After Stokes' death, the collection was acquired by the Internet Archive (IA), which continues to source pre-2001 television news recordings in the hope of building a comprehensive, web-based (US- focused) TV News Archive.⁶⁸ IA's Television Archive Director, Roger Macdonald, referred to the Stokes acquisition as a "remarkable private collection," suggesting once again, that some videotape recordings of television have value beyond the homes and the lives of the individuals who recorded them. In 2013, Macdonald made an appeal to crowdsource funds to digitize the collection, and estimated that on account of its size, the project would take "a number of years."⁶⁹ Stokes' professional collection of 1" tape recordings of the Philadelphia show *Input* are now digitized and appear as the Marion Stokes Collection on the IA's Community Media Archive, which is a collection of programs created through community access

64 Kim Bjarkman, 'To Have and to Hold: The Video Collector's Relationship with an Ethereal Medium,' *Television & New Media*, 5, 3, August 2004, 226.

65 Ibid., 230.

66 Ibid.

67 Charles Acland describes video recordings of television as typically being "haphazard and idiosyncratic" in 'The Last Days of Videotape,' 2009. I make the point about the Stokes' collection as an outlier in, 'Considering Todd's Tape: The Textual Transition of Videotape Miscellany,' *PUBLIC: Art/Culture/Ideas*, 57, 154-162.

68 Macdonald.

69 Ibid.

TV.⁷⁰ Whether due to the volume of material, or legalities in remediating news programming that is commercial in nature, Stokes' VHS recordings do not, as yet, appear on the site. The fact that the Internet archive sent "four large shipping containers on trucks" to acquire them, however, suggests that they believe in their value and intend to find a way to use them.⁷¹

6 Video's Detractors

6.1 Project Get Reel (Toronto, Canada)



Figure 12. This image from [Project Get Reel's homepage](#), emphasizes the idea that videotape's material nature is unwieldy in a digital era. Interestingly, the featured tape labels are blank, suggesting that their content is irrelevant.

Not everyone values videotape for its content. At the same time that place-specific content preservation efforts are occurring in the name of heritage memory, videotape is also being vilified for place-based reasons and coming in direct conflict with efforts to preserve television content on videotape. In Toronto, for example, Project Get Reel (PGR) actively encourages people to surrender their videotapes for recycling, suggesting that these objects are an environmental menace that should be destroyed.⁷² While projects like Kaleidoscope, Retr Ontario, and the Stokes collection see home-recorded videotapes as valuable records of television heritage, PGR is one example of a video collection project that sees videotapes as objects that threaten the environment unless they are properly disassembled. Interestingly, whether videotapes are viewed as contributing to cultural or environmental heritage, both positions "ground" their claims about videotape's value by drawing on place-based discourses.

Run by co-founders, Philip Yan and Graham Lewis, PGR is "Canada's leading recycling service for VHS and media tapes," whose stated mission is to "divert" videotapes' recyclable components from going into landfills.⁷³ In this sense,

⁷⁰ <https://archive.org/details/marionstokes>

⁷¹ Macdonald.

⁷² <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/>

⁷³ Ibid.

PGR aligns itself with the video collection initiatives above that together, resist the pervasive idea of videotape as garbage. Its position, however, sees value in videotapes as objects to be recycled, not as content providers. PGR's starting position is that videocassettes are an obsolete medium. A promotional video on the project's web site asks viewers to "[r]emember the 1970s? That's when VHS tapes entered our homes in North America." "[Videotapes] were once of good use," it states, "but not anymore."⁷⁴ While PGR encourages the idea that videotapes no longer hold value as content carriers, it also aims to prevent people from throwing them away.



Figure 13. Screenshot from Project Get Reel's promotional video: <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/> and <https://vimeo.com/158437762>

One reason has to do with the sheer volume of material. The project's main promotional video uses animated images of videotape piling up and spilling out of landfills to illustrate the idea that the volume of excess videotape presents an environmental problem.⁷⁵ Visual references to a city skyline, farms and woodland emphasize the idea that landfills are connected to the lived-experiences of actual places that will be affected by videotapes' transition to waste. In a video posted to the crowdfunding site, Indiegogo, PGR illustrates the potential volume of video waste by using imagery that is specific to its Ontario location. Citing the statistic that "[t]here are 2.26 billion tapes sitting in Ontario households," the video states that "[i]f you were to stack up only 1% of these tapes, they would stand taller than the CN Tower."⁷⁶ The video claims that in fact, "1% would be equal to 994 CN Towers," which would "stretch from the CN Tower to Parliament Hill in Ottawa."⁷⁷ In using recognizable Ontario/Canadian landmarks to illustrate the scale of video's material excess, PGR strategically attempts to persuade viewers of its environmental/ecology/preservation discourse by building on existing place-based heritage discourses.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ At 27 seconds in, <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/get-reel-how-vhs-tapes-can-make-brighter-futures-/comments>

⁷⁷ Italian artist, Lorenzo Durantini, has also used tower imagery to represent the scale and environmental implications of VHS obsolescence. His 2012 Tower projects are built with thousands of videocassettes, and, in the example of Tower no. 5, represents the scale of video's materiality as a solid but gently curving spiral—its strong but organic shape suggesting permanence and ominous power, as well as a connection with the natural world, <https://inhabitat.com/lorenzo-durantinis-towering-sculptures-made-from-thousands-of-vhs-tapes-explore-obsolescence-and-outdated-media/>. See also 'VHS Studio,' for another visually compelling artwork about VHS excess, <https://vimeo.com/105512944>



Figure 14. Screenshot from Project Get Reel's promotional video illustrating the amount of VHS tapes waiting to be recycled that stretch from the CN Tower in Toronto to the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/> and <https://vimeo.com/158437762>

PGR calls videotape “one of the biggest recycling problems today,” which has to do not only with volume of available material, but with the physical make-up of videocassettes.⁷⁸ Videotapes are not biodegradable, but according to PGR, 80 percent of their components are made from recyclable materials that could be repurposed.⁷⁹ Aside from containing six types of plastic that could leach toxins into landfills if not recycled, videotapes also contain four types of metal, and, if factoring in the tape case, cardboard and paper.⁸⁰ The recordable medium itself, a mylar material coated with hazardous metals, cannot be recycled. According to PGR, the process to disassemble videotapes is labour intensive due to the nature of their construction.⁸¹ In fact, VHS has been called “the most difficult household item to recycle” next to Styrofoam.⁸² PGR identifies the main issue as the five small screws that hold together the two halves of the videocassette’s shell. According to PGR, the placement of these screws is not standard across brands, and must be unscrewed by hand.⁸³ In exchange for its labour in dismantling the tapes, PGR charges people a fee for their donation (\$25 for the first 50 tapes, and fifty cents for each additional item). In doing so, PGR trades on a place-based logic that claims it provides a service that transforms videos from being hazardous to useful in Toronto. Citing playground equipment and automobile fenders as examples of what can be made with the recycled material, PGR claims that it takes a VHS tape and “ma[kes] it into something real.”⁸⁴ The implication that PGR turns videocassettes from unreal or passive objects into active ones, suggests that they are transforming material objects that no longer have use-value, into items that do.

From the perspective of projects like Kaleidoscope or RetrOntario, PGR’s initiative is content agnostic. It does not distinguish between commercially produced videotapes and home video recordings. As above projects demonstrate,

78 <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/get-reel-how-vhs-tapes-can-make-brighter-futures-/comments>

79 See slides at the bottom of the web page, <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/>

80 CBC TV Interview, 9 April 2015, <https://www.redpropeller.ca/projectnews/2016/3/12/lgmh69ofcg7oxs1jslesafgituv7pg>

81 <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/>

82 <http://www.greencitizen.com/how-to-recycle-vhs-tapes/>

83 <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/>

84 Mentioned in the second video down, <https://www.redpropeller.ca/getreel/>

however, PGR's blanket characterization of videotape as a dead or worthless content carrier does not apply to television recordings. PGR's co-founder, Philip Yan admitted that the project has been "very busy" responding to concerned parties about content that is being lost due to tape recycling. Josh Johnson, a filmmaker whose 2013 film, *Rewind This!*, celebrates VHS enthusiasts, stated that he is "very concerned with the fact that there doesn't seem to be any part of [the] initiative that ...[takes] into account what content is on the tapes."⁸⁵ "What should be added to the process," he proposes, "is a method for identifying what is being recycled before that recycling happens." "[I]f that aspect isn't incorporated into the plan," Johnson warns, [t]here's so much that we could potentially lose without even realizing it."⁸⁶

7 Conclusion

Sara Ahmed argues that queering our orientation to objects can help to reframe them in productive ways.⁸⁷ Videotape, at the end of its commercial life and at a late stage of its technological obsolescence, has taken a textual turn. Since videotape is no longer valued as a recording or playback medium, new arguments are being made about its usefulness. In the context of digital media, video's materiality—once considered a benefit—is now considered a detriment in virtually every context but television heritage. Television heritage projects rely on videocassettes to provide records of ephemeral television transmissions in the pre-digital period. Today's television record relies on these analogue forms of the past, and, what De Kosnik calls, the "techno-volunteerism" of citizen curators and amateur archivists who, however inadvertently, created records of television transmissions that no one else was collecting.⁸⁸ Kaleidoscope is one project that uses home video-recordings to fill gaps in existing collections. Retrontario sifts through videotapes in order to build its collection. Marion Stokes' collection has been adopted en masse by the Internet Archive.⁸⁹ In all three cases, digitization and social media platforms work in synergy with videotape content carriers to document place-based television history, although also, in each case, legal issues around the practice of remediation provide barriers to widespread access.

While Project Get Reel is content agnostic in its aim to dismantle videocassettes for profit, it joins the three projects mentioned above in harnessing existing place-based heritage discourses to collect its source material. While PGR's collects videotape by leveraging place-based environmentalist discourse, Kaleidoscope, Retrontario and the Stokes' collection evoke place-based nostalgia and heritage activism as a way to rhetorically justify their collections.⁹⁰

Aside from observing the use of place-based heritage discourses across these case study examples, it is worth considering the implications that at the present time, it seems that television accumulation projects need to be indexed to this particular rhetorical strategy in order to succeed. Does this method of justifying television collection and curation run the risk of further entrenching heritage discourses if left unchecked? Heritage, after all, is not a neutral narrative. Further work might investigate examples of where obvious heritage claims that could be made to preserve television recordings are being ignored. At the time of writing, for example, it was announced that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) will be disposing of its original content carriers (including video) once they are digitized.⁹¹ The public broadcaster also apparently refused the offer of a communications foundation who offered to find the original

85 Jordan Pearson, 'Why We Don't Recycle VHS Tapes,' *Vice*, 18 March 2015, <https://www.redpropeller.ca/projectnews/2016/3/12/r6pi69b96mm18m3ejumdf572sgfztc>

86 Ibid.

87 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006.

88 For De Kosnik's explanation of "techno-volunteerism," see p. 51-53.

89 Stokes' techno-volunteerism is celebrated in a documentary film directed by Matt Wolf called, *Recorder: The Marion Stokes Project* (2019), which, at the time of writing, is just being released.

90 <http://www.retrontario.com/>

91 Terry Pedwell, 'CBC is destroying its broadcast archives after they're digitized,' *The Star*, 19 April 2018, <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2018/04/19/cbc-is-destroying-its-broadcast-archives-after-theyre-digitized.html>

materials a home. In this case, we might question why Canada's public broadcaster is not being held accountable to the same heritage discourses that it uses to justify its existence to safeguard the original content carriers of its legacy materials.

Although television has expanded our sense of place, television content has not been experienced uniformly. This essay has shown how local and regional place-based strategies toward conceptualizing TV's material heritage are being used as a way to successfully organize and triage the preservation of television content on videotape, and at the same time, consolidate its central debates. Almost 45 years after *TV Garden*, we are still looking for effective ways to manage television's excess. Whereas *TV Garden*'s preoccupation was the increasing volume of ephemeral television transmissions, the subsequent introduction of home videotape recordings introduced the idea of television content as material excess. Place-based heritage discourses are one method that projects have used to "ground" their material collections of television, but have the infrastructures, *dispositifs*, and legalities of the web made these collections accessible enough to be useful? Time will tell whether videocassettes in their original format may have been the best method yet for making recordings of television transmissions accessible.

Biography

Jennifer VanderBurgh is Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada where she teaches courses on film, television and media. Her upcoming book, *What Television Remembers: Artefacts and Footprints of TV in Toronto*, explores how television has documented and affected lived experience, using case studies of TV shows and early TV encounters in the city of Toronto, dating back to the 1930s. Her experience with policies and practices that limit access to TV heritage in Canada has fueled a number of research projects about how TV shows and ephemera circulate outside of archives and institutions, especially in remediating VHS tapes. As part of the SSHRC-funded research project, Archives/Counter-Archive, Jennifer is also investigating the work and practice of government filmmaker, Margaret Perry, who made over 50 films from 1945-1969 at the Nova Scotia Film Bureau: <https://counterarchive.ca/case-studies/margaret-perry-and-nova-scotia-film-bureau-films>