



**British Universities
Film & Video Council**
moving image and sound, knowledge and access

The Power of the VHS II
16 December 2010
Sparkbox, Hoxton Square
bufvc.ac.uk/powerofthevhs2



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The Power of the VHS I

9th December 2009

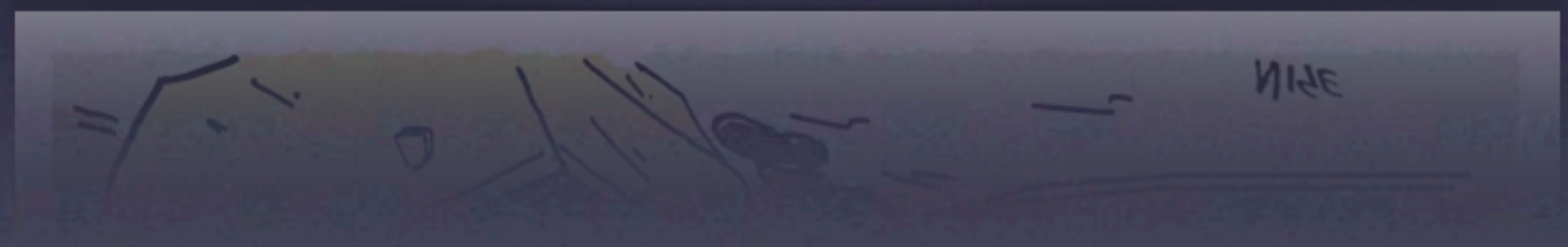
NFT3 BFI Southbank



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When historians come to study our society in detail, they will want to see, among other things, what was on the nation's television screens. How are they going to discover what an evening's programming was really like? If they have to use what little is kept now, they will get a strange picture.

No one disputes the power of television to condition our civilization. Occasionally a single programme on its own can bring about changes in our ways of thinking, but by far the most significant of television's effects is fostered by daily contact, the steady, drop-by-drop, accretion of an attitude of mind. Only with hindsight can we see, as the continuum of history is compressed by the perspective of time, how events and attitudes become folded into a point of view.

The makers of television naturally see their products as isolated individual creations, but the viewer's perception is different. We do not "read" television as we read newspapers, choosing to attend to the news page, the editorial, or the crossword when we feel in the right mood for it. Instead, television comes to us sequentially and relentlessly, and one item forms the context of the next.

If we wish to establish television's contribution to our way of seeing an issue, we must study the programming as well as the programmes. It is the effect of the totality of television that is important, yet there is no record of it either for the historian of the future or for the public of today.

Of course, some television material is achieved already; individual programmes, some series, the coverage of some

major events, such items are selected for long-term preservation as significant examples of the art of broadcasting, as typical examples of the better forms of television entertainment or as visual records of important people or events. The television companies themselves and the BFI Film Archive select what they feel is worth preserving, applying such criteria of significance and artistic values as they can devise. But this system is calculated to ensure that when historians come to study the television of our age, their evidence will already have been preselected for them.

More than a century ago,

Parliament decided that a copy of all newspapers should be preserved by law in the British Library. It did not establish a "clippings" collection and it did not ask the printers to deposit their hot-metal printing cylinders; it asked for a copy of what the customers got each day. Why shouldn't television be preserved in the same way?

This proposal is not new, but it is feasible now as never before. Recording devices are available designed precisely for recording and replaying an evening's television programmes. Home video-recorders can now give a replay that, to its intended audience, is indistinguishable from the original reception. And this

is what should be preserved; not the programmes as they were transmitted but the programming as it was received.

Hence there would be no need to collect specialized, bulky and expensive master video-tapes or cans of film. The recorded material can be preserved on ordinary videocassettes; they are the size of a small book and are an inch thick, storage box and all. A day's output from four channels would need only 20 inches of shelf-space; a year's output could be shelved on a single double-sided unit 8 inches high, 19 inches long. A standard videocassette costs about £8; a year's supply would cost £58,000, and adding on the cost of preserving local programmes would raise the total to about £100,000.

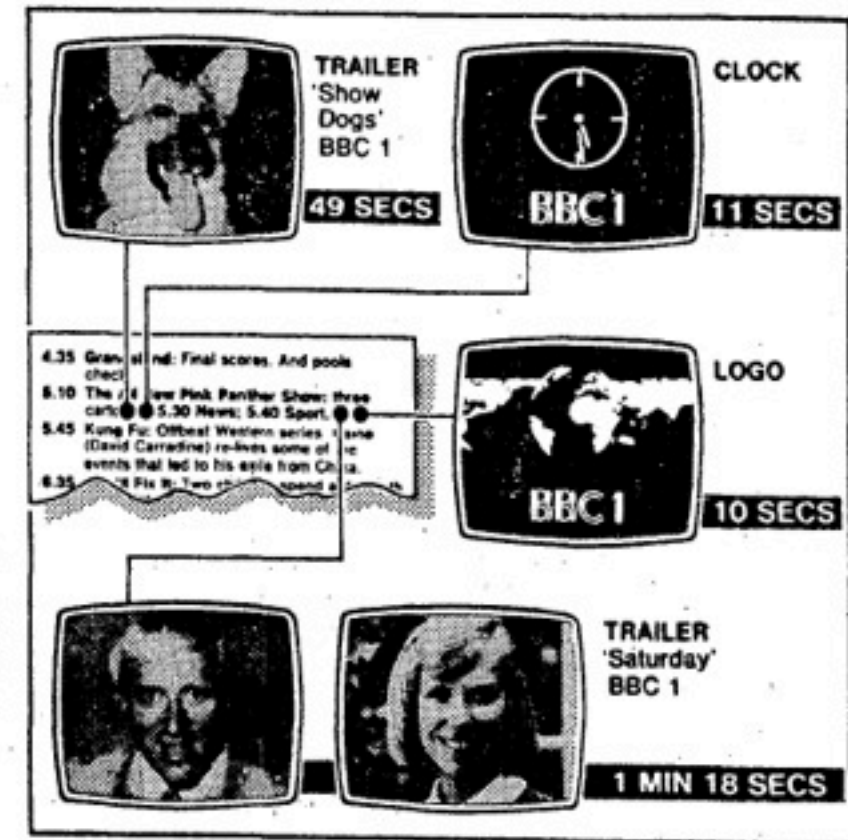
The machines themselves are not expensive; basic models costing less than £500 would serve. If we wanted a completely automatic process which would require a single operator for half a day, every day, to replace the cassettes, reset the time-clocks, and check the performance of each year.

If we then add to our annual material and equipment costs of £110,000 the wages of two part-time operators — perhaps £15,000 — the figure comes to £125,000.

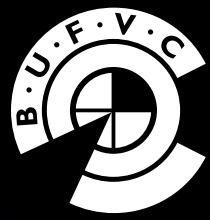
As little as five years ago it would have been impossible to preserve a complete record of television broadcasting. But now we could do it. We could start today to set up a centre to record the output of one metropolitan region, using the best of today's technology and planning for a minimum of 30 years' shelf-life.

**Nicholas Pronay
and David Clark**

Don't forget the bits in between



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from *The Times*
12th February 1982
Prof. Nicholas Pronay &
Dr David Rayner Clark

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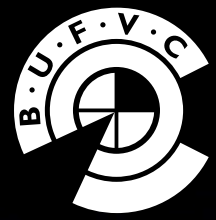
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Professor Phil Taylor (1954 – 2010)
University of Leeds

War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War (1992)

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Where we are in 2010

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- ‘selection’ continues to be the policy of the ‘national collections’
- it is regarded as naïve to aim to be ‘completist’ although scholars *and* industry would prefer this goal
- should we aspire to ‘parity with paper’?



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Friday, 17 December 2010

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What we discovered in 2009



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many thousands of hours of licensed content are gradually being lost

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- there is not yet a shortage of machines available to play out VHS content
- now is the time to make plans

What we discovered in 2009



What we discovered in 2009

- 40% of the off-air recording collections in UKHEIs hold between 1,000 and 10,000 recordings
- 7% hold between 10,000 - 20,000 recordings
- 4% hold more than 20,000 recordings

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- 56% had ‘no agreed retention/disposal policies’ for content acquired under licence and exception
- of those with centralised collections only 52% had off-air recordings integrated in their library catalogues

What we discovered in 2009

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- communication between collections is not well co-ordinated
- there is little or no sharing of catalogue data
- there is some informal content sharing
- a system of inter-library loan would be valued
- a shared services initiative might be welcomed

Where we are now

Where we are now

- UK higher education is in a privileged position to be able to acquire and store broadcast content
- operates under an exception in UK law
- with special licence to record, hold and use content
- de facto – a distributed national collection

Where we are now

Where we are now

- cost of licensing, recording, cataloguing, labelling, storing and managing an off-air recording on tape for ten years is estimated at around £300 per item
- a collection of 4,000 recordings may therefore represent an investment of as much as £1.2 million
- much of this content may never be transmitted again

Where we are now

Where we are now

- no formal national process, yet, for checking the value or rarity of a VHS recording before its disposal
- there is therefore an apparent undervaluing and lack of care for these recorded media

What we plan next

What we plan next

- create a union catalogue of off-air recordings held in the UK under licence and exception
- develop a UK research reserve approach to disposals
- link TRILT metadata to the BoB system
- deploy a remote ingest system for ERA+ licensed bodies to load content remotely for sharing

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