'Archiving television:

history from the bottom up - two case studies'

Presentation to: Media in Transition 6: *stone and papyrus, storage and*

***transmission*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, April 25th, 2009**

Máire Messenger Davies, University of Ulster

ABSTRACT

This presentation discusses some issues raised in the preservation and
analysis of television material including: ephemerality versus permanence; the
status and nature of television archives; access to archives; the competing
rights of producers and 'consumers' of TV material – including the needs of
researchers; the value of specific kinds of TV products, which can determine
what survives and what does not, as well as what will be made available for
public access; the problems of changing formats. These issues will be
discussed primarily through reference to two case studies, in which the author
had experience of, and access to, some rare and inaccessible TV archive
material. This access came about through serendipitous means, which
suggests that much valuable archive audiovisual material exists not just (or
even primarily) in official archives, or corporate strongboxes, but also in private
collections. Some of this material may find its way onto the world wide web via
You Tube and other 'scrapbook'-type outlets. But much may not, and it is
argued that scholars need to be vigilant about possible untapped sources of
evidence when discussing and analysing audio-visual media and their histories.
The first case study to be addressed in the presentation is of a children's and
young people's TV news program, Channel 4's *First Edition* now no longer
aired; the second is a prestigious costume drama, produced and aired by the
now defunct commercial British television company, ATV, in the 1970s,
Clayhanger. Both illustrate the importance of the Jeffersonian principle of

'multiplicity of hands' in preserving and making more widely available, significant public records. Some of these issues have been discussed in the publications below.

HISTORY FROM THE BOTTOM UP: ARCHIVING TELEVISION:
TWO CASE STUDIES

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'Digital communications have increased exponentially the speed
with which information circulates. Moore's Law continues to
hold, and with it a doubling of memory capacity every two years;
we are poised to reach transmission speeds of 100 terabits per
second, or something akin to transmitting the entire printed
contents of the Library of Congress in under five seconds.'

Introduction to MiT6 Conference, on the 'mission' page
http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit6/subs/mission.html

The contrast between the 'exciting and terrifying' (to quote the conference
website again) speed at which we will be able to 'transmit the entire contents of
the Library of Congress in under five seconds' and my experience in preparing
material for this conference (and also for other teaching and research
situations), produces in me a hollow laugh. It took me a full working day,
involving three people (myself and two technical staff) to sort out some video
clips for this presentation – and, at the time of writing, I am still not sure whether
they will work when I stand up to speak. This is a situation I am very used to
and my presentation has been prepared, as always, with a Plan B. Bearing in

mind that there's a high chance there will be some technical glitch with the TV material, I have prepared still images too, and of course, I have the ever-reliable printed and spoken word. Once upon a time, not so long ago, I could have lined up a couple of videos to the point at which I wanted to play the tape, put them in a VCR myself and pressed 'play'. I could then have paused them when I felt like it. Incorporating moving image clips into a digital format and transferring them onto a powerpoint slide can indeed, be a useful way of putting all teaching material into a relatively small space. But, speaking as a longstanding teacher of television, I sometimes ask myself, is it really worth the effort?

In this presentation I want to raise some issues based on my experience as a teacher and researcher of television. The first is the issue of function and use: who *needs* to download the Library of Congress in five seconds and for what purpose? And if nobody does need to do this, why do it? With regard to the medium of television – arguably the most important, versatile and universally accessible mass communication medium ever invented, and certainly one of the most influential - what is the point of the constant changes of format the medium has been exposed to? Are they in the interest of the viewer, or the public at large, or the citizenry? Or do they primarily serve corporate and commercial interests, with not much regard to the convenience of the rest of us? My perspective is that of a teacher and researcher, as well as a viewer, and I want to question whether the formats in which the medium of TV has been produced and stored make my job, and that of my students, easier, or not. These questions, for me, pour a certain amount of cold water on the thrilling prospect of all the world's knowledge being available in a matter of seconds. When it comes to retrieving the artefacts of television's past, whether for the purpose of scholarly scrutiny, or simply for personal, pleasurable consumption, there is no way that retrieving all the knowledge contained in them in five seconds, or even five centuries, is ever going to happen. Because of the particular problems of preserving television, its past is in constant danger of disappearing, and much of it already has disappeared.

The archiving of television material – that is, the preservation, storage, documenting and accessing copies of television's content – presents a number of problems which have been raised and discussed at greater length in for example, Wheatley (2007); Messenger Davies, (2007) and Messenger Davies, 2000. Very briefly, they include:

Ephemerality of early material – broadcast live, and hence not recorded
Ephemerality even after video was invented: much material was either thrown away or taped over
Rights issues – including
Problems of changing ownership, with media mergers and the disappearance of corporate identities
Problem of over-supply: measuring content simply at the programme level, and leaving aside supporting documentation, such as scripts, production memos, contracts, listings, reviews, and so on, there are billions of television artefacts. How can we keep them all?
The question of value: is television content 'worth' preserving?
The question of cultural value: even if it is not economically 'worth' preserving, should we keep it anyway?
And who decides?

The internet is not the first medium to raise questions of speed of transmission and ephemerality; television has been seen in this light too - with the concomitant implication that if communication is fast, (as with fast food), it is unlikely to be of very high quality. John Corner wrote in 1999: 'Study of television has often been preoccupied with the contemporary moment, it has been the study of a perpetual present.' In 1974 Raymond Williams famously coined the term 'flow' to describe the experience of watching television in his American hotel room. This way of watching television involved sitting (or lying) passively while a stream of apparently undifferentiated images and sounds was

beamed at him from the TV screen. It was linear, time-based and the 'flow' was impossible to capture or stop. You either caught it or you didn't. Now the experience of watching television – we are told – is profoundly different from that of Raymond Williams in 1974. (See, for example, Lynn Spigel's and Jan Olsson's edited collection, *Television after TV*, 2004) Now we *can* stop the flow, reverse the flow, add tributaries to the flow, bottle the flow and sell it in packages. However, even if we leave aside all the lost material that has already flowed away for good, now that we have the packages which enable us to retrieve and store TV material, will we be able to access them in the future? And will we be able to access all aspects of television material, or only those with some commercial sell-on value – the boxed-set criterion of permanence?

In addressing (very briefly and superficially) these issues, I want to look at a couple of case histories from my own experience of archiving television. Both of these I have described as 'history from the bottom up', because in each case the material that has been retrieved and is now available for scholarly access, did not come via official or commercial archives and would have been lost if it had not been for individual enthusiasts. This material has survived thanks to the efforts of amateurs. I suggest that, in so far as anything remotely resembling a representative sample of television content *does* survive for future examination, it is likely that much of the material will come from members of the public, not from official or industry sources. We know that there is a very great deal of audiovisual material in the hands of ordinary citizens and that much of television's past – including revealing ephemera such as advertising, channel idents, newsflashes, public service announcements and so on - is contained in this material (see Fanthome, 2007). But there is one major obstacle to accessing this material: unfortunately, much of it is contained in a nearly obsolete format: videotapes.

There are (at least) two major problems of access here: Firstly, this videotaped material (in my case and in the case of many fellow teachers, researchers and

friends, going back to the 1980s), belongs to individual members of the public. Even if they/we were willing to donate the material to a public archive, the second problem is that it is unlikely any archive would want it. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first place, video is increasingly no longer playable because VCR machines are no longer sold or serviced. The solution is to transfer them to DVD – but, just as we begin to get at least a partial set of DVD archives, along comes Blu-Ray. And what will be next?. If we decide to go ahead with DVD transfer, as many archives have done, including our own at the University of Ulster, the MultiMediaResourceUnit (http://www.cemll.ulster.ac.uk/site/about%20the%20centre/mmru), there is the ongoing question of who is to pay for the expense of transferring: for the technicians' and archivists' time, for the machines, for the DVD discs themselves, for the ongoing labelling, storing and archiving. These questions remain unanswered for many of us.

Then, there is the ever present problem of rights. Material recorded for personal use at home is not infringing any copyright ownership; neither does any material copied under the terms of the Educational Recording Act (UK 1980). But once it goes into a public archive, where other people may access it, there are likely to be problems of copyright infringement, which make librarians and archivists conservative about accepting donated videotaped material or loaning it out. Finally, given that it is quite impossible to preserve everything that has ever been videotaped, who decides what is worth preserving and what can be safely thrown away? Material needs to be seen as valuable in some way for it to be worth all the time and expense of the transfer to digital formats, and value has a number of components. As TV historian Cathy Johnson (2007: 63) has put it: 'Any evaluation is an assessment of how well a particular text performs a particular function within a particular context. This may be an evaluation of historical importance, of artistic creativity or of quality.' Much valuable material has probably already been unwittingly destroyed by members of the public desperate to reclaim shelf space in their homes. And when it hasn't been

destroyed, how do we even go about finding out what's still there, recorded on tapes in a haphazard way, lying around in people's living rooms and offices? As Mr Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* put it, 'it seems an hopeless business.'

I want to talk about my two case studies which address at least some of these problems:

The first is *First Edition*, a news programme for children, made for Channel 4's Schools service in the UK, produced by an independent production company, Libra, in conjunction with the main commercial news service in the UK, ITN. *First Edition* was broadcast twice weekly in the mornings between 1997 and 2003. This case study raises (and has not yet solved) the problem of video-to DVD conversion. The second case is *Clayhanger*, a costume drama series produced by a defunct British regional commercial TV company, ATV, broadcast in 1976 in 26 weekly hour-long episodes. This programme raises (and in this case, has solved) the problem of incomplete amateur collections. Both cases have a problem of relative inaccessibility. But both programmes, I believe, were worth preserving and archiving, because they do represent important and socially significant examples of British television programming, which should be of interest to current and future historians and media scholars.

CASE STUDY NO 1. *FIRST EDITION*.

COMPONENTS OF ARCHIVE: Material relating to *First Edition*, a twice weekly, Channel 4 Schools news programme, 1997-2003, produced by Libra Television and ITN, presented by Jon Snow.

Archive lodged at Cardiff University; creation of the archive was funded by a small grant from the British Academy, 2003

Archive home page, see
http://www.cf.ac.uk/jomec/research/archives/firstedition/archive/index.html

It consists of:

18 videotapes - all editions of the programme from 2001 onwards

122 television scripts

50 newspaper cuttings

801 letters - Photocopies of Hillhead, Glasgow, primary school children's weekly letters

PLUS

12 audiotapes of focus groups and interviews and transcripts of research on the programme carried out in Glasgow by M. M. Davies and C. Carter in 2002

1 website

Some gaps - e.g. tapes prior to 2001 and some production documents.

For those interested in the database structure, here is the plan of it drawn up by our archivist on the project, Frances Meredith:

Database Structure

ITEM TABLE
Unique ID
Date
Description of Item
No of Items
Format
Colour or B/W
Dimensions
Location
Creator
Copyright
Data Protection

PROGRAMME TABLE
Programme ID
Date
Presenter 1
Presenter2
Producer
Studio Director
Engineer Director
Picture Editor
Music Editor
Titles Editor

FEATURE TABLE
Feature ID
Title of Feature
Date
Duration
Keywords
Type of Footage
Reporters Name
Report Type
Studio Interview Type
Footage Interview Type
Studio Interviewee Name
Studio Interviewee Type

This archive became available as a result of a personal contact between myself and the producers of the programme, Madeline Wilshire and Lea Sellars, at a conference organised by a viewers' activist group in the UK, the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, in November 2001, soon after September 11th. This obviously meaningful date led to the topic of the conference (on children and media) being changed to take account of the impact of the events of September 11th on the young. One of the presentations at the conference was from the producers of *First Edition,* discussing how they had presented the attack on the twin towers in the following week's programme (September 18th 2001, the first programme of the season's series). My first clip shows some of this edition.

The producers mentioned that they had been receiving letters from a primary school in Glasgow in response to each week's programme, encouraged by the class teacher. They quoted some of the letters in their presentation. As a researcher on children's responses to television, I was fascinated by this material, and asked them if it might be possible to see copies of the letters. Permission was received from the school and the children, and eventually photocopies of the letters were sent to me at Cardiff University. Here is an example, written to the programme when the Iraq war was being proposed, leading to a great deal of active public resistance, among young people as well as older ones. This boy is clearly very news-conscious – four current news stories are referred to in this letter.

'Tory Tony WILL NOT CHANGE MY MIND.'

George Bush said: "This is a war against global terrorism". – This is a war against a dictator <u>run</u> and <u>led</u> by terrorists. Tony can't improve our transport, invest in our NHS or even give fire-fighters £30K a year each – but, ah, he can put aside a healthy £5.5 BILLION for a war. MADNESS as the Mirror said.

11 year old boy, Glasgow, letter to *First Edition* (*emphases in original)*

The role of *First Edition* in encouraging a sense of civic engagement and interest in public affairs, was clearly articulated by the children themselves both in their letters and in later interviews, for example:

David (aged 11): "[before *First Edition*] I never read a paper, I never watch the news ever before. But after *First Edition*, I started getting interested in it."

Kate (aged 12) "it proves that these adults that make up the programmes, they think that children are smart enough to learn about it and would be interested in it. . . children need to be told what's going on in the world. We want to know what everyone's talking about… they don't let you know what's going on, and they don't talk about it… It's like a big secret you're not involved in."

When the programme ceased broadcasting in 2003, the producers contacted me again when they were clearing out their office, and asked if I would like the material associated with the show, including the videotapes. Naturally I said yes, although I did not know what could be done with it. At that time I was working at Cardiff University, and my colleagues Cynthia Carter, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Prof. Stuart Allan, now at Bournemouth University, and I, were able to obtain a small grant from the British Academy to pay for a part-time archivist to catalogue and archive the material to be kept at Cardiff University. Details are at:
http://www.cf.ac.uk/jomec/research/archives/firstedition/archive/index.html

The rationale which persuaded the BA to give us the grant (rare in the case of archiving) was concerned with documenting the important (and declining) role of

public service in British broadcasting policy decisions. *First Edition* was a schools' programme, part of Channel 4's public service remit, and they cancelled it in order to produce a more commercially-profitable documentary package series, called *Citizen Power*, also now cancelled. We wanted to examine the material in light of the cancellation of the programme and the resulting reduction of children's access to the mediatised public sphere, at a time when citizenship issues, world security and the declining role of broadcasting in educating young people about public affairs had become increasingly urgent. (For further discussion about *First Edition* and citizenship, see David Buckingham, 2000.) Our research aimed not only to catalogue the history of the programme, but to look at the rationales used by the producers for production decisions: news values; news selection criteria; child protection and possible censorship; the influence of the schools curriculum on editorial judgements; how children's feedback to producers affected these judgements; the use of children as reporters on-screen. Children's comments about the series, both in their letters and in our interviews with some of them, reveal a sense of ownership and agency in their relationship with news media.

From an archivist's point of view, the archive has a number of strengths: it is a modern archive and it has been preserved. It was successful in attracting funding which is rare in the world of archiving and it was homogeneous – there was only one archive to deal with. There was also a number of problems: it was not a complete archive; not all the copies are originals; there were legal issues of copyright and ownership which have been resolved by the University's Learning Resources Department (see the website for details); there are the serious problems of format - everything is still on video and when I last spoke to the librarian who is responsible for the archive, she told me that there was unlikely to be funding to digitise it. Lack of funding has also has meant that the database is not online and is thus not accessible from outside the university

From a scholar's point of view, the *First Edition* project, brought about by a

serendipitous meeting between an academic and producers at a citizens', not an academic or industry event, has been valuable as a continuing stimulus to research and to further external funding. It led to the establishment of the Children, Media Literacy and Citizenship Research Group at Cardiff University, and further publications and projects on children and news, as well as collaborations and conferences with international scholars in Germany, the USA, South Africa, Israel, Palestine and Holland. (See Carter et al, forthcoming; Carter 2007; Carter and Messenger Davies, 2005; Messenger Davies, 2007; Lemish and Goetz, 2007; see also the University of Ulster policy document, 'Children, media and conflict: the experience of divided communities: Ireland, Israel, Palestine' at http://cmr.ulster.ac.uk/pdf/policy/childrenconflict.pdf.) Our latest collaboration is the AHRC/BBC funded Knowledge Exchange research project, 'What do children want from the BBC?: Children's content and participatory environments in the age of citizen media, with special reference to *Newsround*'. This is a joint research project between the universities of Cardiff, Bournemouth and myself at Ulster which attracted further substantial funding in 2007 - 9. This study is ongoing and has a number of publications in the pipeline (e.g. Mendes et al, forthcoming).

The case of Clayhanger

I have written at more length on the question of this 26 part costume drama series from the 1970s in Messenger Davies (2007) so will give only a brief outline of the many issues it raises here. *Clayhanger* is a televised adaptation of Arnold Bennett's book of 1910 of the same name, plus its two sequels, *Hilda Lessways* (1911) and *These Twain* (1916). It is about a young man, Edwin Clayhanger, and his family in the second half of the 19th century, a period of great industrial, political and social change in Britain. Like several of Bennett's best books, it is set in the Potteries – the Staffordshire region of England, especially known for the manufacture of pottery and china. The region has considerable cultural and historical significance not least as the home of the

Wedgwood pottery dynasty, a dynasty which includes Charles Darwin. (The Wedgwood company is one of the many regretted casualties of the economic downturn; it has recently gone into receivership.) My reasons for being interested in *Clayhanger* were different from the way in which the *First Edition* archive came about but, again, were serendipitous and personal, not official nor commercial. I was a huge fan of the original book, and became interested in its neglected author, eventually joining the Arnold Bennett Society, where I hoped I might be able to see some copies of the TV series.

This personal, serendipitous approach, involving not only myself, but several other individuals, has eventually resulted in a valuable cultural artefact becoming available for scrutiny and scholarly investigation, if – at at the moment - in a limited way: all 26 episodes of the series are now on DVD, held by the Bennett society archivist. *Clayhanger* raises a different question from that of *First Edition*, but shares with it the broader question of 'value.' In judging what is worth preserving and what is not, the question is raised as to why this prestigious costly production has so completely disappeared from view when other 1970s and 80s costume dramas have been re-formatted and marketed and are still available to buy. In my article in the Wheatley collection (2007), I compared the fate of *Clayhanger* to that of *The Secret Garden*, a much less prestigious 1975 production in a much less prestigious 'slot' – children's early afternoon television on BBC1. This production of *The Secret Garden* is still commercially available, whereas the much more expensive, and star-studded adult serial has been lost to public access. Until recently, the only copies of *Clayhanger* available for anyone to see were in the official film and television archive for the UK, the British Film Institute, and in the Bradford Museum of Television, Film and Photography; each has one copy of one episode. These cannot be borrowed, only viewed *in situ*.

Once again, enter the amateur heroes of the situation: the Arnold Bennett Society, a literary society based in the author's home town of Stoke on Trent,

but with members all over the world (see
http://www.arnoldbennettsociety.org.uk/). The society is dedicated to the study
and appreciation of the Potteries novelist, although Bennett was actually a
much more cosmopolitan figure than this label would acknowledge. He was
well-known in French artistic, musical and literary circles at the end of the 19th
and the beginning of the 20th centuries; he was a respected literary critic and a
champion of radical new writers such as D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce (see
Drabble, 1974). He is also someone whose literary reputation has been
disastrously damaged by falling foul of Virginia Woolf and her Bloomsbury
colleagues. These privileged and upper-class writers were very distressed by
somebody who came from the English regions, who spoke with a regional
accent, and who wrote for money, rather than living on private incomes as they
did. (See e.g. 'Mr Bennett and Mrs. Brown' by Virginia Woolf, 1924)

In the 1980s, the Arnold Bennett society had video copies of only two episodes
of *Clayhanger*, recorded by a member. Then an Irish member donated copies of
her videos of some episodes recorded in Ireland in the later1980s to the
Bennett Society. In 1999 Peter McEnery, the leading actor donated further
missing video copies, bringing the total of video episodes to 18 altogether, out
of the original 26. In 2007, Tim Brearley, an independent TV producer and
Bennett fan, finally   hunted down a full set of the series. It had been parked in a
warehouse in France by the Granada corporation, who, after several transfers
of corporate ownership, now own the rights. Through his industry contacts,
Brearley got permission to digitise all 26 episodes for the Bennett Society. They
can be borrowed by Society members, and have been seen at various
conferences organised by the society, and by other scholars (for instance an
archiving conference at Nottingham, funded by the AHRC for postgraduate
researchers, in 2008). So these episodes are, to some extent at least, within a
publicly-accessible archive, and this is entirely thanks to the unofficial efforts of
enthusiasts. But so what? Does this matter to anyone apart from the
enthusiasts?

Costume drama in the UK has been an important media product both culturally and commercially, and certainly historically. (See Brunsdon, 1997; Cardwell, 2002; Higson, 2003; Nelson, 2001; Messenger Davies, 2005). It has a significant place in the global television market through co-productions with the USA, Canada, Australia and through widespread international distribution as well as links with feature film production. Any historical account of this fascinating, important – and profitable – genre should certainly include an account of *Clayhanger*. It was the last of its kind – there were no more 26 episode series after this. It had an extremely starry cast: Janet Suzman; Peter McEnery; Dennis Quilley; Harry Andrews, and was produced by one of the most successful of British television producers, Stella Richman. Like many prestigious costume dramas, such as *Jewel in the Crown* (1984) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), it was produced by a commercial company, not – as my American colleagues are inclined to believe about all British costume series – by the BBC. ATV , the company which produced it, was a regional broadcaster, working within the English Midlands region, and, in line with its cultural remit, it produced in *Clayhanger* a major literary work by a regional novelist, filmed, and providing employment, within the Midlands region itself. Regional television is another threatened species in the brave new world of five second downloading of the Library of Congress – and, again, I have to ask: is this speed of access to all the world's knowledge any compensation for some of the slower, more materially-based cultural production processes that have gone? What have we gained in exchange for the loss of regional production, employment and cultural representation on television, as exemplified by *Clayhanger*? These are some of the 'value' questions raised by the exercise of trying to reconstruct *Clayhanger*, and they are questions for the whole of the scholarly community, and also for society at large.

I conclude with the words of Thomas Jefferson:

'The lost cannot be recovered; but let us save what remains: not by vaults and locks which fence them from the public eye and use, in consigning them to the waste of time, but by such a multiplication of copies, as shall place them beyond the reach of accident.'

Thomas Jefferson, (quoted in Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe,* Cambridge University Press, 1993)

My account of these two archive case studies is an example of the value of the 'multiplication of copies' in private, or semi-private hands, in reconstructing and preserving and making available for future study, some interesting and instructive television products. The case for 'amateur' archiving in preserving television would seem to be strong. From the researcher's point of view, it is a creative and enjoyable form of individual research. In the case of the tracking down of *Clayhanger*, it has almost been a form of sleuthing, with the story ending in the dramatic setting of an isolated warehouse in the middle of France. (Something that Arnold Bennett, a devoted Francophile, and also a sensational novelist, as well as the author of masterpieces, might have appreciated). Because of the enormity of television's output, it is obvious that not everything can be officially archived, but we should recognise the importance of 'the heirloom effect' - valuable evidence of the past can be kept by individuals, just as valuable pieces of china, paintings and furniture can be found in attics and turn up in *Antiques Roadshow*. These 'amateur' processes of preservation also help to establish value: personal, historical and aesthetic, as well as economic. My case studies raise issues of individual freedom and rights; the ownership of knowledge, in the form of all kinds of cultural artefacts, including television shows, as Jefferson said, needs to be dispersed, not centralised. I am sometimes called a Luddite because of my irritation with digital technology – but I am not, just cautious about getting too excited about mere machinery. I really can't get thrilled about pressing buttons. I am also concerned that downloading

TV content into temporary digital computer files is not as adequate a way of preserving TV material for future viewing as video has been. However, we should remember that no major communications medium has ever been completely supplanted by a later one, even though some formats may be superseded by others. So my advice for the time being is, if you care about the history of television: keep your videos and keep your VCRs; and so should archiving institutions.

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Clayhanger (1976), produced ATV,   producer Stella Richman, Dir. John Davies, adapted Douglas Livingstone

First Edition, (1997-2003), Libra and ITN for Channel 4, producers Madeline Wilshire and Lea Sellars, presenter Jon Snow

Jewel in the Crown (1984), Granada, Dir. Christopher Morahan, adapted Irene Shubik