Writing From the Archive: Creating Your Own

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The author hopes to address what counts as an historical record, especially in the area of media history, and to lay out how one creates one's own archive that might capture the media zeitgeist of the past, and might even reveal, however incompletely, how past audiences might have made sense of the media environments surrounding them. Using her own research, she focuses on 3 archives: one for a standard academic monograph that relies on existing and self-constructed archives, a second that is almost completely homemade on the representations of women in the media, and a third for an overview history of radio in the United States.

I am standing here in my basement, looking at three legal-sized, four-drawer file cabinets, and a large set of shelves filled with cardboard boxes. There are more boxes on the floor. They are all stuffed to the gills with Xerox-filled manila file folders, some about radio, the others about women's history and images of women in the media. These are my archives, and even though the books and articles they informed have been long since published, I cannot bear to throw them out. The hours and money that went into them!

In this article, I hope to address what counts as an historical record, especially in the area of media history, and to lay out how one creates one's own archive that might capture the media zeitgeist of the past, and might even reveal, however incompletely, how past audiences might have made sense of the media environments surrounding them. Unlike the other essays that will no doubt be much more philosophical and theoretical, this one recounts how you make your own archive that seeks to get at the role of the media in everyday life and culture, and what you can learn from such

archives. I will focus on three archives: one for a standard academic monograph that relies on existing and self-constructed archives, a second that is almost completely homemade on the representations of women in the media, and a third for an overview history of radio in the United States.

This essay is also something of an elegy for how we used to have to do things—all hardcopy, physically rooting around library basements, Xeroxing hundreds, even thousands of pages. It is so much easier and faster today to sit at the computer screen and download all those academic articles and magazine and newspaper stories from ProQuest and LexisNexis. However, there is a tactile and atmospheric quality to running your hands and eyes across the pages of old magazines and newspapers that gives you a much richer feeling for the media and culture of the past and how they interacted. Simply put, it is much easier to be transported back to past eras with the old bound copies—how they look, how they smell—than it ever is through your laptop.

As a graduate student, I was trained as an historian, and then there was a conventional notion of the archive: it was a place you went to, created by historical societies, libraries, state or federal governments, universities, museums, and other institutions. Much, although hardly all, of the material in them was top down: the papers of prominent political leaders, captains of industry, inventors, government agencies and the like. But what if you are interested in that evanescent, hard-to-pin-down factor, the culture of the past? What if you need to capture what was swirling around everyday people, especially through the prevailing media of the times? Well, there are archives one can go to, of course. But inevitably you have to make your own.

We know that all archives are incomplete, have their own biases on the basis of inclusion, omissions, and point of view, and the ones we make are no exception. However, the ones we create can be, and should be, a counterbalance to the ones created by institutions and political and corporate elites.

Existing archives are sometimes not nearly as easy to find or know about as one might think, and often one needs to be a relatively persistent detective to find them. (This may be easier now with the Internet.) As most media historians can recount, it often takes numerous inquiries to ad agencies, radio stations, individuals and families, movie studios, and the like before the desired treasure trove, sometimes previously undiscovered, emerges. When I was working on my first book, *Inventing American Broadcasting* (Douglas, 1987), I needed the records, diaries, and correspondence of the inventors and businessmen. Where were they? Did they even exist or had they all been lost, destroyed? One obscure book cited a collection at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I called, and, at first, no one knew what I was talking about. However, repeated inquiries produced a librarian who knew the collection and said it was at the Smithsonian. Off I went, and there it was—more than 200 boxes, all unindexed, many with

only the most general or cryptic identifiers on the outside. The slog began, and finally, I hit pay dirt: papers of three of the major radio inventors. They had been gathered up and saved by an engineer who had worked in radio and also had a keen sense of history. And they were chock full of technical and business details, rivalries, ambitions, hopes, betrayals, and failure.

This was my first major lesson in archives, and how you had to absorb so much from them, yet also be skeptical of them and learn to read between the lines. At first, given the excitement of finding such rich primary materials actually written by the main actors in my story, and hearing their voices, I succumbed to their self-presentation, their point of view. But gradually you learn that in memos, memoirs, oral histories, correspondence, diaries, people posture; make exaggerated claims; attack others unfairly; see slights where none existed; blame others for their own failings; say too much or say too little; tell the truth and lie; and often fail to tell you exactly what you need to know. David Sarnoff, for example, the head of RCA, liked to suggest that he was the only ham radio operator conveying updates about the fate of the *Titanic* when it turns out hundreds of hams were on the air. So you must always be questioning the motives of those in your archive, even if they are primarily noble.

These inventors were all trying to sell equipment to the U.S. Navy and hated dealing with them. Their complaints seemed justified; I took their side. But then, you really do have to get the other side. So off I went to the National Archives, only to learn that the boxes I requested could not be found. Taking pity on me, the archivist let me go back into the stacks, and after much rummaging—talk about the absolute importance of serendipity to successful archival work—I basically stumbled upon the exact boxes I needed.

The things you do to complete your story—I learned that Marconi's daughter was living in northern New Jersey, wrote to her, and she permitted me to come and read his personal correspondence, which was filled with details not available elsewhere. These were primarily letters to his wife or to close friends that presumably the family wanted to keep for their own. It is important to be relentless, because often such letters or diaries do stay inside families, away from business and corporate records.

But I did not want to tell only the technical and business side of the story. How was this new device, first known as *wireless telegraphy*, received? What sense was made of it, what did people think it might do to their lives, to society and culture? How did these understandings and imaginings evolve over time, as wireless itself turned into radio broadcasting? This is where you have to complement the existing archives with those of your own. So even as I was tracking down and visiting institutional archives, I began to create my own, starting with the technical journals of the time, such as *Electrical World* and *Scientific American*, and moving onto the more popular press.

What are the main principles that guide building an archive? For some archives, you need to include material from every single week of every single year of the period you are examining. For others—say a project analyzing the trends in print advertising over time—one can make an archive on the basis of a sample of several issues a year of selected magazines. Obviously, one must gather materials on salient events and turning points. The archive must be representative so that you get multiple viewpoints and versions of important events and trends. The archive needs to be systematic in how materials are selected and in how a chronology is constructed and maintained, as historical or topical gaps can do you in. And for media history, especially more recent media history, including trade journals is crucial to understanding how the industry talks to and about itself. All of this is guided by the criteria you set up for what you believe counts as salient, representative and the like; and it is a criteria you need to stick to. If you don't adhere to your criteria throughout the archive-building process—and it can become tempting not to as the months slog on—the archive will not be coherent or as systematic as it should be. And a set of criteria matter, so we don't search only for what we think might support a tentative, preexisting hypothesis and so we don't search for only what we want to find. Because archives often do—and should—take us to unexpected places that prompt us to rethink our larger analytical questions and frameworks.

Except for radio pioneers who left behind memories of radio's early days, there was, of course, no archive with everyday people's reactions to early radio. So newspapers and magazines had to serve as a proxy for these. But press accounts first, of wireless telegraphy and then, of radio, also played a central role in the social construction of radio, in shaping people's expectations of these devices and what they might afford. So the press accounts were also important historical actors on their own. My first archive building began (this was long before electronic databases!) with two crucial sources, *The New York Times* index and *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. Then, one had to develop a list of search words, including inventor's names, laws, and regulations proposed and passed, major shipwrecks (especially the *Titanic*) in which wireless telegraphy played a role, and the like. (The old, faded green-bound *The Reader's Guide* suggested alternate entries to consider, which helped expand the universe of possible articles.) I went through every year in both indexes from 1896 (when Marconi first demonstrated his device in England) to 1924, when the radio boom was at its height. This is how you build a timeline. For *The Times*, you really had to look at every story. For *The Reader's Guide*, stage one of archive building was Xeroxing all the relevant pages with appropriate entries. Once you had these, then you had to go through them and determine which articles about which events in which publications were most significant; my criteria were prominence or popularity of the publication, amount of coverage an event or trend received in multiple

publications, and new technical or cultural developments. Then, you used bags of dimes and started Xeroxing away.

Here was yet another side of this media history, the awe in which radio was held, the fantasies about what it might do, the anxieties it evoked, the greed it stirred up. And again, skepticism is crucial here too. *The New York Times* positively adored Marconi and his invention, even though it performed somewhat poorly at first. So you had to ask why. There were several answers, but a not insignificant one was that *The Times* hated the transatlantic cable companies because they charged so much for press transmissions, and Marconi suggested he could eventually compete with them and offer newspapers a cheaper rate.

It was through this archive, the one I created, that the past communicated to me about what radio meant to people. Most moving were the multiple newspaper and magazine accounts (combined with Marconi's own letters to his wife) of the *Titanic* disaster, the wrenching experience of watching loved ones drown, first person accounts of refusing to let one more person in a lifeboat because then it would sink, and thus watching him perish, and of how radio saved the lives of the survivors. No existing archive could have conveyed this. And this material showed me the central role that the disaster played in getting the first significant regulation of radio enacted.

Last, the radio magazines that sprung up in the early 1920s featured letters to the editor, and although these are, of course, an already selected and thus biased sampling of opinion, they did convey the multiple and sometimes conflicting attitudes toward radio programming, how the device was and should be used, the tensions between the desire for local versus national programs, and the like.

My next project, *Where the Girls Are* (Douglas, 1994), relied almost entirely on the archive I created, given the down-low subject matter, the representation of women in the media. And this had to be much more of a multi-media archive, consisting not only of print materials but also of popular music, films, old ads, past newscasts and television shows. The initial process was the same, pouring through *The New York Times* and *The Reader's Guide* indices, but at least, having lived through the period, I had a much stronger sense of a timeline and significant events. So, of course, one wanted to see stories about the introduction of the birth control pill, or reviews of *Sex and the Single Girl* and *The Feminine Mystique*, coverage of the women's movement, and so forth. But an archive that you create— which, yes, can be painstaking—allows you to see evolution as opposed to revolution.

For many people, for example, the women's movement seemed to come out of nowhere and burst on the scene during the Miss America pageant of 1968, followed by the outpouring of activism and demonstrations in 1970. But when you build your archive, slogging through every *The Reader's Guide* entry on "women" from 1945 to the early 1990s, you also

find, shockingly enough, references to feminism much earlier than 1968. One of the most interesting parts of building this archive was going through *The Ladies' Home Journal*—every issue—from the late 1940s and early 1950s.

And here, by the way, is one of the greatest losses to media historians, as researchers and teachers—the elimination of bound magazines from libraries, and having them only available on microfilm or microfiche. There is nothing like going through the original printed version of a magazine to get a feel for the times; how things looked and felt; what was being sold, and how; what issues were foregrounded; what dreams and dreads were being sold. I also used to love to give my students assignments that required them, for example, to compare the advertising in *Life* and *Ebony* in the 1950s, or to go back to *The Ladies' Home Journal* to look at the depiction of women and compare it to today. Now, no longer possible—all those magazines are in storage.

Back to *The Ladies' Home Journal* from the mid-to-late-1940s. I was expecting an instant "back-to-the-kitchen" drive given that the war was over and a full court backlash had begun to get women out of the workforce. But I was wrong. Instead, one saw a more gradual process, sincere debates about the role of women and, yes, feminism, given how much men had, according to certain columnists, screwed up the world. Really. The word *feminism* was used and only gradually dropped away over time. Similarly, I was surprised to see so much reference to what I would call *prefeminist* rumblings in the early 1960s, even before Betty Friedan's blockbuster would pull it all together. This is one of the key insights building your own archive provides—seeing, tracking the momentum certain ideas and trends develop, their origins and roots, and how and when they start to come together and then explode.

This was also the first time I used the Vanderbilt Television News Archives, which, back then, were indexed in bound volumes, and today are conveniently available and indexed online. They only go back to August 1968, and how I would have loved to have seen how women and women's issues, if covered at all, were represented in the old 15-min rip-and-read news of the 1950s. But talk about a treasure trove for seeing how the women's movement burst onto the nation's television screens from 1968 onward. (For those of you who have not used this archive, you go through and ask for only those stories you want, and the Vanderbilt staff will edit them together chronologically for you. Then you have a complete news timeline about your trend or event. I also did this for *The Mommy Myth*, and got a 35-year history—22 tapes, 2 hr each—of how issues around motherhood and the family had been covered by the three broadcast news shows.)

I was expecting condescending and dismissive coverage of feminists and the women's movement, and some of it, especially the on-air editorial commentary by the likes of Harry Reasoner and Howard K. Smith, was actually worse than I anticipated. However, there was also sympathetic coverage,

including that from some men, because the obvious discrimination against women that feminists identified violated the core belief in fairness and what Herbert Gans labeled *altruistic democracy* that informed dominant journalistic values. In other words, the coverage was contradictory, providing a crucially important podium for feminists and their positions (and the length of the soundbites they got back then!), while dismissing certain demands and certain types of feminists as outside the mainstream.

Building your own media archive, as previously implied, constantly confronts you with the incoherence of the media, their contradictions, the tensions between their preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings. You see the process of hegemony, the struggle of it, up close. The archive I was building showed me that feminism and antifeminism, even in the late 1940s, and again by the early 1960s, clashed against each other, and that rank misogyny coexisted with more upstart media fare. In fact, it was by reading articles in, of all places, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and even *Reader's Digest* that I was able to understand the staggering success of *Bewitched* as not just some kitschy sitcom that used special effects well, but also as one that spoke exactly to women's simmering desires for more power and control in their lives during the prefeminist era of the early 1960s.

Which brings us to the video archives. Young television scholars today, their research blessed by endless "complete season" DVD collections, have no idea what it was like to hunt down episodes of *Bewitched* or *I Dream of Jeannie* in syndication on independent stations or wait for a TNT marathon of *Charlie's Angels*. These were serendipitous moments and you had to stop everything and make sure your VCR was endlessly loaded. But in addition to these, one had to go to the Motion Picture and Television Reading Room of the Library of Congress to look at episodes of *Father Knows Best* or *All In The Family*, and to what was previously called the *Museum of Radio and Television in New York*, now the *Paley Center for Media*. Today, with the invaluable Vanderbilt archives, and all those DVD collections of past TV shows, plus the Paley Media Center (and its counterpart in Beverly Hills), it is much easier to be systematic and thorough in one's viewing.

Now, there were problems with this archive, and ones difficult to overcome. With the exception of girl group music from the 1960s, the media fare I was collecting and examining was made primarily by White people, mostly men at the time, for a presumed White, middle-class, straight audience. Thus, entire groups of people were not represented, were written out of my archive. So I, too, was writing about primarily White, middle-class, straight representations. It was pretty impossible for me to infer how lesbian women or women of color, might have read this fare, aside from noting their massive erasure from our national screens. Thus, it is in building an archive that their inevitable partiality and biases are driven home.

The next archive I made was about the history of radio from the 1920s to the 1990s and by now, thankfully, I had various research assistants to

help with the archive-building process (Douglas, 1999). It was this archive, possibly, that contained the most false starts and dead ends, topics that I thought I might get to or would be interesting that I just couldn't. This is one reason it's hard to throw these old archives out—they still contain so much material yet to be mined. There were so many surprises here too— that radio was linked to a revival in spiritualism in the early 1920s, how White deejays sought to "sound black" in the late 1940s and early 1950s to address both an African American and white teenage audience. But this project again required linking the printed archive I had created with existing audio archives, at the Museum of Radio and Television, the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago, and the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Research Room of the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, and the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland.

Thus, this archive required a particular archival practice: to listen, really listen, to a lot of old radio, to the different forms and genres, to the modes of address, to the humor, to the sound effects—I had to try as best I could to be an empathetic subject, to listen to the past, to recreate, however partially, the act of reception. I had to try to retrieve how radio, through its multiple forms and genres, hailed and constituted past audiences. Because radio denied sight to its audience, listeners had to imagine Jack Benny's famous vault, or a Joe Louis boxing match, or the blitz in London, which they heard via short wave. What talented radio broadcasters did, whether entertainers, sportscasters or newsmen, was provide detailed visual cues about what to see, and how to see it. So you had to listen to their strategies, how they did it, and what it enabled you to see. And then, in your writing, you had to unpack the strategies and how they worked. It was through this process that you came to understand that not everyone saw the same vault or right hook; but listeners were all imaging these at the same time, and that is a common cognitive practice that united the audience in a common cultural practice.

For example, when listening to Depression-era comedy on the radio, from *Amos 'n' Andy* to Jack Benny and Burns and Allen, I was struck by the centrality of linguistic slapstick and, indeed, verbal aggression and jousting from the likes of Joe Penner, Will Rogers, Ed Wynn, Burns and Allen, Jack Benny, and Abbot and Costello. Their comedy elevated the wisecrack, the witty comeback, the put-down to an art. Now, commentators noted, the air was filled with puns, malapropisms, insults, quips, and non sequiturs. Obviously, in this non-visual medium, that denied sight to its audience, words, tone of voice, and sound effects carried all the freight. But what remains striking is the nature of the linguistic acrobatics that went on over the airwaves in the 1930s, the centrality of verbal dueling, which suggests that radio comedy was enacting much larger dramas about competition, authority, fairness, and hope during the greatest crisis of American capitalism.

Through this wordplay, we are also struck by the anxieties about masculine authority that are repeatedly staged in these shows.

So one must relate the entertainment content of the audio archives to the historical, economic, and political content of the print archives. Let's remember that from 1929 to 1933, gross national product dropped by 29%, construction by 78%, and investment by 98%. Unemployment rose from 3.2% to a staggering 24.9%. Individual reaction to this catastrophe ranged from acquiescence, self-recrimination, and a sense of personal failure to outrage and a determination to find scapegoats and to restructure society. In 1934 alone—the same year that radio comedy, with all its insults and linguistic battles, established its primacy over the airwaves—nearly 1.5 million workers participated in 1,800 strikes (McElvine, 1993). Jack Benny was funny on his own terms, and his bits are still funny today. However, by placing the print and audio archives in conversation with each other, we appreciate even more that Benny's success stemmed from the way he set himself up as a self-inflated egoist in desperate need of deflation, often by women and ethnic minorities, during one of the great crises of American patriarchy.

This archive, too, has its weaknesses and omissions. I was focusing on national media and, for the most part, national broadcasts. Thus, regional and local radio was not represented here, written out. As younger radio historians are showing, regional and local radio often has its own distinct history, often at odds with the national story, and my archive, despite how huge it was, did not capture this at all.

For so many of us doing media history, we have no choice but to build our own archives, now increasingly multimedia, however incomplete they might be. The Internet makes this so much easier and faster, but, as previously noted, the speed and ease come at a price. And there are so many important archives yet to be created and written about. To choose just one example, how has advertising—to women, to African Americans, to teenagers, to men, the gay and lesbian population—evolved since the 1970s? There has been minimal work on this. Or, how has the Internet evolved, in the semiotics of sites, in the ads, in its affordances? Who is archiving all this? There are also many important, underused archives out there. How have the conventions of local news—still the most important source of news for the majority of Americans—changed since the 1970s? The archives of the George Foster Peabody awards at the University of Georgia is chock full of local news submissions for the award over the past several decades.

Thus, I think it's not only essential that we make our own archives. This is something we need to teach our graduate students, and they should be required, at some point in their training, to make an archive about a topic they care about. Because it's when you make your own that you learn, powerfully, how biased archives can be, how incomplete, how determined by built in assumptions around race, gender, class, region, and sexuality. At the same time, those of us who do this work believe powerfully that the

mass media are some of the most important constitutive institutions and forces in American life, so the archives we make of their evolution, their representations, their interactions, and their effect, can be some of the most important sources for our work and the work of future scholars.

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