

A Tale of Two Archives

National Ideal vs. Local Reality

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◀ ABSTRACT

The period of 1976 – 1990 stretches from the height of the network era of television in the US through deregulation and the proliferation of cable in the 1980s, resulting in the “multichannel” era of the 1990s. Throughout these changes, US television viewers mostly watched nationally-distributed content – whether on a local affiliate of the three big broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) or one of the new cable channels (HBO, MTV, ESPN). But throughout this time, “local television” was also being made by local stations for local viewers. In fact, this was a rich period for local production, much of it inspired by federal regulations requiring stations operate in the public interest. Because local television productions specifically addressed local audiences – often freed from commercial expectations – they are a rich resource for rethinking television and reconstructing cultural history. While this cultural value has not always led to adequate preservation, a number of archival approaches have emerged to preserve and encourage greater attention to, and appreciation for, local television in the US.

KEYWORDS

Audiovisual preservation; local TV; Peabody Archive; USA

Confession: I haven't always appreciated local television. Like many, I have taken local TV for granted, even found it a little embarrassing – at least compared to what is produced by broadcast and cable networks, or even local stations in big cities. My turn to researching, writing, and editing books about local television came unexpectedly. Ten years ago, I was given an opportunity to immerse myself in a television archive for several months, just to see what was there. What was in that archive, 1000 miles from my home, was a whole lot of *local* television from all over the country. It was this exposure to local television, not my own, that eventually led me to look closer to home in the second archive I will discuss.

1. Archive #1: the Peabody Archive

The Peabody Archive was created from submissions to the Peabody Awards, the most prestigious award in US television, headquartered at the University of Georgia, in the town of Athens, far from the media capitals of Los Angeles and New York. There the Peabody Awards collection has been accumulating since the first awards were given to television in the late 1940s. Every year, national networks, television producers, and local station managers, and others self-nominate by submitting programs for award consideration. A few receive awards, and the rest are kept in the archive.

My job for several months was to immerse myself in the archive, surveying what had accumulated over the decades, most of it never written about or even watched in years. Sure, there were the winners that people would already know about, but what about the rest? As director of the awards, Dr. Jeffrey P. Jones likes to say, what distinguishes the Peabody Archive is that these programs are what television professionals themselves believe constitutes their best work. In this sense, the Peabody Archive is an archive of the “best” television across American television history. Programs outside

the norms of what TV is expected to look and sound like, that expand story-telling formulas, laugh-making strategies, and truth-seeking reporting. These don't always become hits, but they are the kind that their proud producers might submit for Peabody recognition.

In other words, what I was hoping I would find was programming whose value would be self-evident, if I just gave appropriate attention to them. This is not quite what happened. I did spend months watching hours of old television every day, and the archive digitized what additional materials it could for me. I also spent many hours going through non-video materials, including the submission forms completed with nominated programs, press books, viewer letters, and other materials submitted as evidence of excellence. What I found was many, many local television programs, that did not have high-production values, whose quality status was far from self-evident, and which, instead, I found myself wondering, why did someone think this deserved an award? For instance, what was it about these series of undercover investigations of TV repair shops in Miami in the 1970s, or this documentary about a breakdancing competition in Denver, Colorado in the 1980s, that inspired someone to think it deserved a Peabody? What I ultimately realized is that what united these submissions was that these local television submissions were indeed what the submitters thought was “their best work” – the best examples of how they made television to address a *local* audience, using *local* resources.

But why did these local stations bother to make these programs in the first place? Most local stations are affiliates of the national networks; the content they produce is determined by the network/affiliate relationship that has dominated US television, as well as the amorphous term “public interest” employed in its regulation. This history pre-dates television. The Radio Act of 1927 defined broadcasting as a national, commercial enterprise, and established that the federal government would grant licenses not to networks but to individual stations – local stations – which agreed to serve in the “public interest, convenience, and necessity.” However, this act did not explain what constituted “public interest,” or offer other guidance for how media technologies were supposed to serve the needs of the public (Sullivan and Herold 2025). While commercial stations would have to do more than just maximize profits to maintain their broadcast license, the lack of clear guidelines meant that the federal approach to regulation would fluctuate. The Federal Communications Act of 1934 solidified the commercial model of US broadcasting in which national networks supplied content

to local affiliate stations, who profited by selling local ad time. These local stations would produce local TV to fill gaps in the network schedule, and that content would also be used to demonstrate the station operated in the public interest.

Throughout the twentieth century, local television stations typically filled out the schedule, and believed they fulfilled their public interest needs, by producing local news. The equipment and personnel required to produce news shows was significant, but the programming was commercially profitable. Local news was content the network could not provide, but local audiences and advertisers wanted. Resources used to produce the news could then be put into service in other kinds of related productions, such as broadcasting local sporting events and public affairs shows, which might not be as profitable on their own.

The number of programs submitted by local television stations to Peabody increased dramatically in the early 1970s, and constituted the largest source of submissions until the early 1990s. As Eric Hoyt has written, one way to explain this boom is the increase in competition among local channels in major markets in the 1970s, who turned to news to attract audiences, and the Peabody awards to counter criticism of sensationalism in reporting. By the early 1990s, submissions from local stations returned to numbers similar to those the early 1970s, while submissions from cable – leading up to so-called “peak TV” in the 2010s – skyrocketed.

Cable’s rise was not just in Peabody submissions, of course. The post-network or multichannel era of the 1990s was the context for The Telecommunications Act of 1996, by far the most significant legislation affecting media, and ultimately local television, in the United States since the Federal Communication Act of 1934. The act overhauled ownership rules, paving the way for media consolidation in two ways. Companies could now own multiple radio and television stations in the same markets, and also provide multiple communication services (e.g., telephone, cable, Internet). The station groups who began buying up local stations were increasingly distanced from the communities those stations served. These rule-changes would have profound effects on local television station ownership, production practices, and content.

The Peabody Archive constitutes a national collection of local television, spanning these historical developments and continuing into the future. It offers an ample supply of local television, but what is looking at that local TV good for? The dialogue between what is produced locally versus nation-

ally is key. As Lynn Spigel (2019) writes, “By exploring local programs historians can discern “accents” not registered in prime-time network fare. For example, cultural affairs programs produced by local stations demonstrate how different parts of the country deal with – or fail to deal with – issues of importance to their local communities and/or the nation and world.” Doing so can bring surprises, and even, as Spigel writes “help derail the big city bias of Hollywood or New York production, and the often untested (or even unconscious) assumption that programs produced in major metropolitan areas such as Boston, New York city, or San Francisco are always more politically “progressive” than local programs produced, say, in Little Rock or Des Moines.”

For example, in 1972, a network affiliate in Nashville, broadcast an investigative report on homosexuality which it submitted for Peabody consideration. As Susan Douglas (2019) has shown, this is an example of how social activists, such as 1970s gay and lesbian activists, made themselves heard on local TV *before* they found a place on the networks. Crucially, the Peabody includes not just the text of the *Coming Out* itself, but a variety of materials that help us to see how it was made sense of at the time. Interestingly, the submission emphasized that the program engaged the audience, and not in a way that was universally embraced. The submission included viewer letters both in support and critical, as well as a log sheet simply listing reactions that were phoned into the station as either “compliment” or “complaint.”

These supplemental materials or “paratexts” provide crucial context to local television. Taken out of context, local television can look cheap or silly, even. For example, consider a program submitted to Peabody by WCKT, an NBC affiliate in Miami, Florida. The program aired in July of 1976, which was the “Bicentennial” summer of nationwide celebrations of the 200-year anniversary of the American revolution. While we might expect to see a patriotic celebration of national unity, the clip instead highlights local history: which included significant resistance to the revolution. One package reports on a loyalist protest in which the “terrorists” and “rebels” who signed the Declaration of Independence are burned in effigy. Another reports on the lynching of escaped slaves. *Sunday News Update* '76 demonstrates how local television, by being tailored to a local address, could cut against the grain of the national discourse uncritically celebrating unity and American history. WCKT couldn't produce a historical drama with Hollywood production values, but it could make a fake news show. By simulating its existing news format, the station produced ideological complex historical programming.

2. Archive #2: KIII

The Peabody Archive approaches an “ideal” of a local television archive because of the multiple depths of its holdings: geographically, programs come from local stations across the country; chronologically, they go back many years; and textually, not just programs, but print and other materials are also there to be studied. But the most important question to ask of any television archive, is what “television” is in the archive? While national in scope, the local television in the Peabody Archive is not uniformly deep across the nation. Some stations are over-represented in the archive, while many more are entirely unrepresented, having never submitted for consideration (Thompson and Hatlen 2019). For most station managers, news directors, and local TV producers, addressing the local audience, using the best means available, is simply day-to-day business.

This brings us to my second archive, much closer to home – KIII, the ABC affiliate in Corpus Christi, Texas. Not only is its building a five-minute drive away, but KIII is a station I grew up watching, as my hometown is less than an hour away. More importantly, this station illustrates how changing regulations and technology have dramatically impacted local television stations since the 1990s, including their archival practices. For most of its history since its founding in 1964, KIII was owned by a company with just four stations, McKinnon Broadcasting. In 2010, KIII was purchased by the London Broadcasting Company, then the Gannett company in 2014. That company split its broadcast and digital media off into a new company called TEGNA. Headquartered in Virginia, TEGNA now owns or operates 67 television stations in 54 markets across the United States.

When I toured the KIII facilities to see its “archive” recently, the station manager told me KIII no longer considers itself a TV station; it is a “media company.” KIII moved into a new building in the early 2000s, but that building’s time as a teaming-center of local television was brief. Indeed, everywhere I looked I saw ghosts of television’s past. The enormous marble atrium at the center of the building, was completely empty of people except for those in the large photos high up on the walls, decorations from when it first opened. Much of the labor (such as the advertising and marketing staff) now are centralized and operate out-of-state. Technology (such as robotic cameras) have reduced the need for local employees in other positions. Despite its absentee owner and a near-skeleton crew running the station, KIII continues to produce local programming. But aside from the daily

news broadcasts, and a once-a-week live show I will talk about in a moment, the “master control” running KIII is operated remotely in North Carolina.

The KIII programming archive houses an eclectic collection of videotapes in a variety of formats. The determining forces of what is kept in that archive seems to be 1) content that is valuable because it might be reused in future broadcasts, 2) news coverage that might be requested by the community, and 3) content that the station manager just didn’t want to get rid of. This third category includes movies recorded from satellite for broadcast in the 1990s, such as the original Batman movie from 1966, *The Terminator*, and *Naked Gun 2 ½*. Also in the archive: tapes for the FOX animated series *The Simpsons*, kept from the years it was running in syndication on the station.

“Those are worthless,” he said, but he had kept them for nostalgia’s sake, because there is so much room he might as well. The content on the tapes is not locally produced; nor is it in danger of being lost to history. But these tapes do hold “local television.” They were broadcast over local airwaves because they were considered something the local audience would watch. In the same room were examples of local TV not available anywhere else, like a local high school talent show, and annual recordings of a parade. Wooden shelves held advertising spots produced for local businesses by the station, which would make commercials for local advertisers for free, then keep the tapes, selling just the airtime. This entrepreneurial practice – sometimes ads were made on speculation, betting that a business would be impressed and buy airtime – was now over, as those staff positions had been cut. While the historian in me recognizes the cultural history of local advertising strategies on those tapes, I assume the corporate owners of KIII would consider them as “valueless” as those of *The Simpsons*. If one of the local businesses featured in a spot still existed and wanted to buy ad time, the chances that they would want to re-use a 20 or 30-year-old spot are negligible. But there is currently plenty of space in the KIII building, so they remain.

The effects of media consolidation and technological convergence on local television practices are visible everywhere in the KIII building. But the station still produces a live program every week that should have been nominated at least once for a Peabody, since it first went on the air in 1964. That show is *Domingo Live*, which airs for two hours every Sunday morning starting at 10 am. Its mainstay is live music, but there are also conversations with local community organizations, and the show often broadcasts on-location from local events. In other words, *Domingo Live*, which is produced mostly in Spanish, is both an entertainment and a public affairs show.

The music featured on *Domingo Live* is Tejano – a local style blending Mexican and American influences including rock, country, and R&B, but also often earlier influences such as the accordion and the polka. Selena (Quintanilla-Perez), who performed a more pop-influenced style of Tejano, is the most popular and influential Tejano star of all time. Growing up in Corpus Christi, she performed on *Domingo Live* multiple times. Those tapes are the most valuable in the KIII archive, and this value is evidenced in a separate room on the first floor that houses them, and other *Domingo Live* recordings in a format which can be easily accessed and converted to digital platforms for editing and distribution. A few tapes of older episodes of the show the 1970s and 1980s exist, but in formats that are inaccessible and expensive to convert. They lie in cardboard boxes upstairs.

One might assume that, given the fact the show is on Sunday, and “Domingo” is Spanish for Sunday, that’s the origin of the program’s name. It’s not. *Domingo Live* was originally titled *Domingo Peña*, after its host, a local Spanish-language radio personality. That show began when KIII got its FCC license by promising to program several hours of Spanish-language programming each week. At the time, there was no other Spanish-language television in the Corpus Christi market, despite the fact that much of the local population spoke Spanish, many of them exclusively. The first year the U.S. census included the category of “Hispanic or Latino ancestry” was six years later in 1970; 56% of the Corpus Christi population then fell in that category.

In US television history, 1964 was a time of increased pressure for stations to operate in the public interest. FCC Head Newton Minow’s famous “Vast Wasteland” speech assailed television executives for ignoring the responsibilities that went along with the privilege of doing business via public airwaves. The networks responded by expanding news departments and documentary programs, but it was local stations who had to show the FCC they operated in the public interest. When the new owner of KIII pledged to broadcast some hours in Spanish, this was a savvy move signaling a public need would be met, in order to meet the station’s most basic need: an FCC license. *Domingo Live*, even prior to its inception as *Domingo Peña*, was both commercial and public service programming.

When I asked the station manager what he thought the chances were that production of *Domingo Live* would continue, given all the other cuts, without hesitation he told me it would. This was because of its legacy, but especially because it was still commercially viable, popular even. The sta-

tion's news director, who had just been looking at the Nielsen television ratings before my visit, reported it was the top-rated show in its timeslot every week of 2024, excepting several Sundays it competed with the Olympics and the US Open of Tennis. What the station manager did think was coming was *Domingo* would cease to be live. Broadcasting live requires the most staff on set and is the busiest day at the station during the week. As more and more people watched via the station's popular streaming app (KIII is a media company, not a TV station now, after all) it would stop making sense to do the show live.

Conclusion

Local television is produced to fill in the gaps of the network schedule. Likewise, local television can fill in the gaps of our understanding of US television history. So, one way of assessing value would be to point to the existence of programming like *Coming Out*, which shows how local television producers were willing to take chances at a time the networks weren't, and in places we might not expect. That approach values local television by how it compares with or breaks from national, network programming. But perhaps the better approach is to take local television on its own, considering how it addresses a local audience to meet local needs, using local resources. *Sunday News '76* is an example of a creative use of news resources, expanding the news format to make a uniquely local television special. Spanning over sixty years, *Domingo Live* can't help but seem more mundane. While it began as a nod to public service, it remains on the air because it has proven commercially viable. It is quality in the eyes of the corporate owner because it attracts commercial sponsorship at low cost. Like Tejano music, it is deeply hybrid: the cultural value of performances unavailable elsewhere is visible at the same time as the commercial value, signified by the on-screen commercial logos during broadcast.

We can't expect the Peabody Archive to hold all the local television worth watching, nor can we, as we see in the case of KIII, expect station owners to preserve their own history in perpetuity. Peabody has limited resources and is dependent upon grants to continue to digitize materials in old formats. KIII's cavernous building will eventually run out of space for the archive, or more likely it will simply be discarded when no one who cares about it is around anymore. With the Trump administration's radical cuts to arts funding, times are perilous for preserving the history of local television in

the United States, as there will be less grant money to go around for all kinds of projects in the arts and humanities; local television will be even less of a priority.

But local television is television people care about. It's the television that is useful to them, that tells them what the weather is going to be like, that reports on the scores of high school sports teams, that covers a community event that they participated in. It just takes one person to submit a TV program for a Peabody Award, and it need not be the producer or station who does it. But individual people also have a greater power to preserve local television, by recording and sharing it, on platforms like Archive.org and YouTube. It was from a fan's recording of a Selena special off-the-air that I found on YouTube and added to the clip about *Domingo Live* produced by KIII. For whatever reason, whether the tapes were incompatible, misplaced, or they feared legal action, they didn't include any Selena footage. The local audience, who value local television, may prove to be the most reliable ones to help preserve and share it in the many places, and for the many reasons, it continues to be produced.

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