

Collective Memory

Vanderbilt's Television News Archive keeps an eye on history.

By MICHAEL SIMS

OUR PLANET IS A busy place. For one thing, it's crawling with billions of human beings—citizens struggling for humane treatment, politicians making promises to their constituents, soldiers fighting wars, and businesspeople wrangling for advantage over their rivals. For more than half a century, television journalists have been pointing cameras at these frantic activities and bringing them into living rooms across the country.

History is the collective memory of the human race, and TV news broadcasts are history in the making. Yet, for many years after they began broadcasting, the networks did not keep copies of their daily news programs. Each network jealously hoarded files of its own raw footage, but made no copies of the final edited product. This absence left a serious gap in society's memory. The evening news broadcasts—appearing in living rooms every evening at dinnertime, calmly surveyed by a familiar talking head—not only document events but shape our opinion of them.

This journalistic sin of omission was corrected in August 1968, when the Vanderbilt Television News Archive began recording and cataloging the networks' daily updates on our

chaotic world. The archive was founded by a Vanderbilt alumnus, a Nashville insurance executive named Paul C. Simpson, JD'33. Working with Frank Gresham, director of what was then called the Joint University Libraries, and with the chancellor's office and the board of trust, Simpson built the initial archive with grants from various sources. Contributors ranged from the Ford Foundation and Mobil Oil to local Nashvillians such as Vanderbilt's David K. Wilson, BA'41. Nowadays the archive, which is one of 10 divi-



sions within the Jean and Alexander Heard Library, receives donations from many other universities. Vanderbilt covers the deficit that usually remains after fees and donations have been tabulated.

Originally, Simpson was the only staff member, and currently there are only five full-

time staff and a fluctuating number of student workers. They stay busy. Ever since 1968, the archive has been recording every evening news broadcast by ABC, CBS and NBC. "Nightline" was covered sporadically from 1980 to 1988, and comprehensively ever since. In 1995 CNN's nightly updates were added.

"Our collection tends to be American current events, sort of presidential-centered," explains John Lynch, the archive's director. One cyclical uproar the archive always documents is presidential campaigns. In fact, the troubled 1968 Republican convention was one of the first events recorded by the fledgling operation. (Simpson's new institution had yet to purchase its own recording equipment and initially borrowed items from Nicholson HiFi in Nashville.) There is no particular emphasis on foreign news, but naturally many events wind up documented. They range from the Watergate hearings to the Iran hostage crisis, from the Persian Gulf War to the terrorist attack on 9/11, not to mention the Clinton impeachment hearings and interviews with Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein.

"In many ways," observes Marshall Breeding, library technology officer, "the collection hasn't changed. We have been using the same criteria for collecting since the beginning. It has grown enormously in size, though, with a collection that spans 35 years totaling 30,000 hours of material."

Every taped program displays both the network identification and the date and time (in Central Time). This running clock coordinates the various aspects of the collection. Later, while writing a brief synopsis of each program, an indexer records the start and stop times of each news story, along with key items of information that will aid a search of the database.

"On the evening news," says Lynch, "we describe down to the individual item—every single story—and every commercial, although on commercials all we do is list the product."

As with all research institutions, the TV News Archive wrestles with budget issues that affect quality. For example, most programs are recorded on three-quarter-inch tape. Twenty-four hours a day, however, there are six-hour VHS tapes monitoring everything on the three major networks, just in case something comes up unexpectedly. These backup tapes are recycled if nothing momentous occurs during their watch. John Lynch explains the difference with an example: "If something like a big development in the war with Iraq comes, and the news stations and networks go 24 hours a day for a while, we use two-hour VHS." The larger tape costs many times as much per hour. Lynch explains that they simply cannot afford to run the more expensive tape all day long. Around-the-clock coverage also requires more staff time, particularly to catalog the resulting backlog accurately. "The last Gulf War," Lynch sighs, "just about closed the archive, it cost us so much money."

Copies of every evening news program or news special are available for loan, but copyright restrictions do not allow materials to be sold. Because of its unique collection, the TV News Archive is besieged with requests from many different kinds of patrons. One man is slowly working his way through the Watergate coverage. Another researcher wanted to document the progression of public discussion of diabetes over the years. Some

need duplications of complete programs, while others request specially created anthology tapes of various stories on a particular issue. Vanderbilt itself doesn't have a journalism department, but other University departments use the archive frequently—especially English, American studies and his-

will make the material available to researchers and students much more quickly. Patrons will merely have to find their item in the index, click on it, and view a small version of it on the computer screen, as easily as they might sample a movie preview on the Internet now. To begin evaluating the magnitude of the task



tory. Lynch says with a smile, "We're just getting old enough for history."

Eventually, like everything else in the world (for example, radiology departments, as discussed in the winter 2003 issue of *Vanderbilt Magazine*), the TV News Archive will switch completely to digital equipment. This change will take place slowly, but when completed it

of digitizing their materials, the archive has already completely digitized and indexed one entire month.

Now new copyright questions are being addressed. Sometimes the relationship between the networks and their independent collective memory has had its stumbling blocks. But no one denies the invaluable service the archive performs. "If you go to the networks for a broadcast," says John Lynch, "they will send you to us." In fact, in 1991 CBS anchor Dan Rather declared that in his work he faces two professional burdens—the viewer ratings and the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. In the long run, the latter may be more historically significant. Viewers can defect to another channel, but the crew at the TV News Archive is always watching. ▼

Michael Sims writes about science and culture. He is the author of *Darwin's Orchestra and the forthcoming Adam's Navel: A Natural and Cultural History of the Human Form* (Viking, 2003). He is a frequent contributor to *Vanderbilt Magazine*.

