

UNLOCKING TELEVISION ARCHIVES IN THE DIGITAL ERA

EDITED BY

**LUCA BARRA, MATTEO MARINELLO, EMILIANO ROSSI,
SUSANNE EICHNER, ANNE-KATRIN WEBER**





16TH MEDIA MUTATIONS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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The cover image is a reworking produced with ChatGPT based on a photograph from the Antenna 3 archives in Legnano

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ATLas - Atlas of Local Televisions



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Introduction

Making Sense (and Value) of Television Archives

Luca Barra, Matteo Marinello, Emiliano Rossi,
Susanne Eichner and Anne-Katrin Weber

The sixteenth edition of the international conference *Media Mutations – Unlocking Television Archives in the Digital Era*, held at the Department of the Arts of the University of Bologna on 26-27 May 2025, aimed to critically investigate the history and the recent transformations of television archives and audiovisual archival practices from theoretical, methodological, and operational perspectives. The symposium was grounded in the assumption that, in an age of multi-channel distribution and digital platforms, the use of archives as historical and creative sources entails constant and even more intricate negotiations between technology and memory, opening new avenues for both public and media history and emphasising the political dimensions of cultural heritage reuse, valorisation and exploitation.

Since the inception of television, the storage and preservation of complete programmes or fragments of broadcast content have constituted a persistent challenge for the industry. In recent years, however, it has become evident to which degree the relationship between media and audiovisual archives has undergone a major reconfiguration. Digitisation, recovery, access and sharing have become guiding principles across the entire creative production and distribution chains, while video collections have increasingly been reinstated as resources for storytelling, memory-making and identity building, as well as for commercial and corporate branding strategies. This transformation has unfolded unevenly across geographical and institutional settings, raising issues of material feasibility, editorial value and economic sustainability, especially when considering the differing scopes and resources among public service broadcasters, long-standing commercial networks, or less institutionalised companies as local channels.

Developed in parallel with the final stages of the PRIN 2020 research project *ATLAS – Atlante delle Televisioni Locali* (Atlas of Local Televisions), the conference stemmed from the awareness that medium-related archival practices and material retrieval efforts have been fragmented or inconsistent. As a result, significant portions of audiovisual cultural heritage have been partially or entirely lost, and others remain scarcely accessible. Against this background, the conference promoted a close dialogue among academic scholars, independent researchers, representatives of professional forums and *consortia*, and industry practitioners.

Discussions addressed current practices, regulatory frameworks and emerging trends concerning the implementation, curation and long-term maintenance of television archives, while also engaging with complex questions related to fair use(s) and sustainability. Attention was devoted not only to well-established and widely documented cases, but also to lesser-known experiences explored within and beyond academic research, adopting a transnational and not merely Eurocentric perspective that reflected a broad diversity of cultural geographies.

Among the recurring themes that emerged during the event – then refined, widened and systematised in this collection of essays – was the persistence of legacy media within today’s digital environment. Rather than being displaced by digital technologies, older forms continue to coexist, intersect and complement newer ones, blurring boundaries that were once clearly defined. Archival work is therefore required to negotiate a balance between pre-digital routines, digital workflows and the emerging contours of a post-digital condition shaped by algorithmic systems and AI. This task seems to be particularly demanding in the case of television, a medium historically shaped by ephemerality, flow, liveness and immediacy.

Secondly, the contributions highlight how audiovisual archives are deeply entangled with questions of agency and power, a relationship that is inscribed in the etymological origins of the term “archive” itself. This dimension becomes especially apparent in processes of recontextualisation, whereby original audiovisual materials are made available within new interpretative frameworks. Such reframing involves the attribution of multiple meanings to archived video items and a move beyond purely descriptive approaches, while simultaneously requiring philological rigour and respect for the integrity of the original sources. Television archives thus emerge not only as sites of storage and preservation – entailing specific infrastructural and operational logics – but also as active spaces where technology, memory,

public interest and private enterprise converge and, at times, collide, while offering visibility and voice to subcultures and counter-narratives.

A further recurring motif concerns the human factor underpinning archival practices, a theme that has become particularly salient in an era shaped by synthetic media and increasingly pervasive forms of artificial intelligence. As this edited collection demonstrates, archives are not inert repositories but living entities that shed light on both past and present realities. Human agency proves determinant not only in defining the limits of automation, machine learning and speech-recognition technologies, but also in areas such as the educational deployment of archival materials. In this respect, scholarly mediation, professional filtering and curatorial intervention emerge as essential tools for navigating contemporary digital abundance. At the same time, human judgement is increasingly invoked to counterbalance the excesses of commercial exploitation and to critically assess the corporate agendas driving some archival initiatives. The “humanity” of archives also encompasses their material dimension: physical collections operate as interfaces between humans and technological apparatuses and require continuous stewardship, performed by experts with distinct professional cultures. Moreover, ethical considerations and issues of bias further underscore the indispensable role of human oversight in mitigating distortions in cataloguing and inventory practices, while also considering policies and institutional guidelines related to intellectual property, data governance and copyright. Within this conjuncture, and against the backdrop of budgetary restrictions and austerity measures, the role played by universities and institutions as custodians of audiovisual heritage appears increasingly fragile, yet more crucial than ever, as several of the reflections gathered here demonstrate.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, engagement with television archives entails a strong emotional investment. This is expressed through interviews, the collection of testimonies, and encounters with documents and images that traverse both the public and private dimensions of individual lives, before they are reconfigured into digital artefacts and incorporated into exhibitions, repositories or multimedia platforms. As readers will discover, it is precisely here that the relationship between television archives, society and public history becomes most tangible, fostering connections with audiences, local communities and the wider public, within the context of national, regional and local identities.

This edited volume collects the vast majority of the contributions presented at the *Media Mutations* conference, which greatly enriched the dis-

cussions that accompanied the conclusion of the ATLAS research project, deepening its knowledge and broadening its scope. Most of the articles published here are not mere transcriptions of the conference speeches, but rather they have been significantly reworked, amended, expanded, in consideration of the authors' broader research and the fruitful debates that took place at the conference among scholars with diverse perspectives and traditions.

The articles are divided into five distinct sections. The first one contains the contributions of the two keynote speakers, Kit Hughes and Ethan Thompson. Both authors question traditional hierarchies of value in television history, and show how institutional, local, and "non-prestigious" forms have been systematically overlooked. They also argue that archives shape what counts as television history, calling for broader definitions that recognize every day, local, and professional practices as historically significant. Hughes introduces the concept of "useful television," referring to the many televisual practices that operate outside traditional categories of art, entertainment, and taste. Television has been used by institutions for purposes such as surveillance, training, education, worship, and workplace management; however, dominant high/low cultural hierarchies have rendered these forms largely invisible. Even efforts to reclaim low or ordinary television still rely on taste-based frameworks that exclude forms considered "not culture". Useful television is often local, addressing specific communities, spaces, and institutional needs; it parallels local channels in its emphasis on service, intimacy, and geographically bounded practices. However, useful television faces severe archival challenges due to material fragility, private ownership, and the ephemerality of live feeds, all partially distorting everyday media history. In his contribution, Thompson compares two television archives to explore how local TV is valued, preserved, and understood in US media history. Through the Peabody Archive, he examines a national collection that frames local television as "the best work" submitted by professionals. In this framework, excellence is defined from within the industry. Local programs often prioritize serving local audiences with limited resources over achieving high production values. This idealized archive contrasts with the reality of a single local station: KIII in Corpus Christi, Texas. There, changes in media regulation, ownership consolidation, and technology have reshaped production and archival practices, leaving preservation uneven and precarious. Despite these challenges, shows like *Domingo Live* demonstrate the cultural, commercial, and community value of local television. In sum, local

television should be understood on its own terms, not merely in comparison to national programming, and communities and audiences have a crucial role in preserving local television history, in the United States and beyond.

The second section presents some of the main results from the ATLAS research project (its structure, goals and main outputs are accessible [here](#)). Each of the five chapters focuses on one of the local channels studied in their archives, documents and memories, and partially made available through the project's database. The networks operated in different regions and were studied by the four Universities involved. Together, they highlight the crucial role of local television as a site of experimentation where community engagement, political communication, entertainment, and commercial goals intersect. They also underscore the fragility of local television archives and stress the importance of alternative sources, such as oral histories, informal archives, and critical memory, in reconstructing histories that are often overlooked. In their chapter, Riccardo Fassone and Paola Zeni examine the case of Videogruppo, a local broadcaster active in Turin, Piedmont, and highlight its role in shaping civic participation and political communication. Using fragmentary audiovisual materials, internal documents, and oral histories, the authors reconstruct the station's informal archive and editorial vision as a local public service platform, emphasizing news, political debate, and direct interaction between citizens and institutions. Central to this mission was a live call-in program that allowed viewers to speak directly with Turin's mayor, and transformed the local communication into an accessible, dialogic practice, anticipating later trends in infotainment and politainment. Emiliano Rossi's account of Antenna 3 examines the early history of this Lombard private broadcaster, focusing on the central role of advertising in shaping its identity and programming. Excavating the channel's partially digitized corporate archive, Rossi shows how entertainment formats and in-house advertising strategies were deeply intertwined. Antenna 3 developed innovative forms of sponsorship, brand integration, and product placement in game shows, variety shows, and magazines. The advertising primarily promoted mass-market consumer goods, reflecting broader shifts in Italian consumer culture and the rise of large-scale retail. Here, advertising is framed not only as an economic necessity but also as a creative, cultural force central to understanding early local television in Italy. Giulia Crisanti and Damiano Garofalo's chapter analyzes TeleRoma56, Rome's first over-the-air local TV station. Contrary to the common narrative describing private channels as depoliticized "dream television," TeleRoma56 prioritized politics and news

over entertainment. Closely linked to the Radical Party and its leader, Marco Pannella, the station framed broadcasting as a form of political engagement from the bottom-up. At the same time, football also functioned as a key hybrid genre, combining information and entertainment, and allowing for commercial sustainability. Its sportscasting connected local, national, and international dimensions, making it a “glocal” broadcaster with roots in Rome. Matteo Marinello’s contribution reconstructs the history of TeleSanterno in Emilia-Romagna as a case study of the tension between local roots and national aspirations. Emerging from grassroots experimentation, the station blended regional folklore, dialects, and everyday stories with nationally recognizable formats and celebrities. This approach embodied the cultural ambivalence of the *provincia*, a space imagined as both authentic and marginal yet symbolically central to national identity. Entrepreneur Domenico Berti invested in production quality and promotional strategies, while events such as the 1979 fake UFO landing exemplified its imaginative ambition and self-promotion. Financial collapse in 1983 ended this venture. Lastly, Myriam Mereu examines the history of Sardegna Uno, founded in Cagliari, through the lens of archival absence and media memory. She combines institutional documents, private collections, and oral history to trace the evolution of a channel whose audiovisual archive is largely lost. Practices such as tape reuse, technological obsolescence, and financial instability resulted in the disappearance of shows, newscasts, commercials. This article highlights the fragility of local television heritage and the uneven geography of archives, while also arguing that oral testimony and fragmentary materials are essential for recovering forgotten media histories. Ultimately, Sardegna Uno – like most local channels – emerges as an “archival enigma” whose legacy survives through memory rather than footage.

In its constant intersection of historical, archival and television studies, ATLAS also crossed its path with other research projects, archival practices of public and private institutions, and individual study trajectories which explored archives not only as repositories of audiovisual heritage, but as dynamic infrastructures shaped by technological change, institutional frameworks, cultural politics, and modes of reuse. Certain that true comprehensiveness is impossible, the contributions in this edited volume are nevertheless a testimony to the sustained dynamism and multifaceted character of this field of study.

The chapters in Section 3, “Challenges for Archives and Archivists,” address the structural, ethical, and epistemological issues faced by audiovisual

archives today. Bas Agterberg and Dana Mustata reflect on two decades of collaboration between academics and television archives within the framework of FIAT/IFTA, highlighting how access policies, institutional diversity, and shared research agendas shape the production of media knowledge. Matteo Treleani examines the industrial reuse of archival footage, arguing that repetitive reuse practices can reinforce stereotypes and reduce representational diversity, a tendency further amplified by automated and AI-driven content production. Andres Kõnno offers a comparative analysis of metadata enrichment strategies in the archives of the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) and the Baltic Film, Media and Arts School (BFM) student film archive, showing how different institutional missions require distinct yet interoperable metadata layers. Several contributions focus on the growing intersection between archives and artificial intelligence. Roberto Balestri presents *AI Blob!*, an experimental system that employs large language models and semantic technologies to enable content-aware retrieval and recombination of Italian television archives, proposing new forms of archival narration and cultural analysis. Brecht Declercq, on the contrary, addresses the strategic, legal, and ethical dilemmas raised using public broadcasters' archives as AI training datasets, situating these debates within broader tensions between public service missions, commercial interests, and societal responsibility. Jacopo Rasmi shifts the focus to informal and grassroots practices, exploring "folk archiving," shadow libraries, and pirate care as alternative modes of preserving and circulating minor or neglected audiovisual contents beyond institutional frameworks.

Section 4, "Re-use, Curation, Exhibition," investigates how television archives are reinterpreted and made visible through curatorial practices. Daniela Cardini opens this section using an exhibition and a TV series made to celebrate the centennial of Mike Bongiorno, the most important Italian television host, to reflect upon archival strategies and dissemination, memory, and institutional legitimacy. Tamara Antona-Jimeno and Ignacio Nevado examine the role of historical archives in strengthening regional public broadcasters' OTT platforms in Spain, showing how curated archival content fosters cultural identity, nostalgia, and audience engagement in digital environments. Gregory Pritsas interrogates the Greek public broadcaster ERT's archive through a critical decolonial lens, questioning classificatory logics and advocating participatory, community-led, and counter-archival practices to challenge dominant narratives. Some other chapters focus on genre, platforms, and preservation practices. Alessia Casiraghi and Diletta

Cenni explore the role of television archives in post-2010 true crime series, where past audiovisual materials function simultaneously as sources, narrative devices, and objects of self-reflexive critique. Nicolò Villani addresses both the archival ambitions and limitations of studio portals such as Disney+, HBO Max, and Paramount+, arguing that market-driven streaming logics transform archival utopias into selective and homogenized collections. Ann Hardy documents a long-term collaboration between the University of Newcastle Library in Australia and NBN Television to digitize the Channel 3 television archive, in the context of which were developed innovative tools for curating endangered materials and accessing regional television history.

Finally, Section 5, “Insights from the Archives,” foregrounds case studies that emerge directly from archival research and institutional reflection. Hanna Šein-Meier analyzes in depth how the purposes and functions of television archives at Estonian Public Broadcasting have evolved over time, drawing on discourse analysis and illustrating the shift from archives intended as production storage to a public good. Vito Saracino examines the transnational and multilingual archive of TeleCapodistria, emphasizing its significance for understanding Cold War media pluralism and minority representation. Michelangelo Cardinaletti reconstructs the documentary production of Rai Puglia, revealing both the cultural richness of regional television and the urgent need for preservation and digitization. Through the lens of media archeology, Marco Manfra and Grazia Quercia analyze the Open University’s A305 course, reframing TV archives as agents of education and pedagogical innovation. Nicole Atkinson addresses the archival ruination of Channel 4’s support for artists’ moving image in the 1980s, advocating pluralistic and counter-archival methodologies to recover marginalized broadcast histories. Finally, Nanako Ota concludes the section, and the edited volume, by examining the hybrid audiovisual representations of radio programs in the archives of Japanese NHK, questioning how contemporary remediation practices reshape historical understanding and listening experiences.

In the end, we shall acknowledge how the multifocal gaze of *Unlocking Television Archives in the Digital Era* reflected the variety of Italian and European partners crucial to its conception and configuration. The conference was promoted by the Media Mutations Association and financially supported by PRIN 2020 ATLAS and DAMSLab/Dipartimento delle Arti, Università di Bologna, under the patronage of Italian scholarly associations

Consulta Universitaria del Cinema (CUC) and Società Italiana per lo Studio della Storia Contemporanea (SISSCO). Crucial partners were also *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture*, *SERIES. International Journal of Television Serial Narratives*, and the Television Studies section of ECREA – European Communication Research and Education Association. All the institutions, the scholars, the professionals involved in the conference and in this output showed well how television archives are negotiated, contested, evolving spaces, filled with tensions as well as with opportunities for academia, industries, institutions, and the contemporary media and television culture as a whole. The twenty-five chapters that enrich this collection, then, hope and intend to be both the conclusion of a research path, and the start for new original trajectories, and future outcomes, in what has been, still is, and will certainly stay a quite challenging, yet promising field.

MAKING SENSE (AND VALUE) OF TELEVISION ARCHIVES



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