

VCR'S: THE END OF TV AS EPHEMERA

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Although the VCR is often written about in scholarly literature, it is usually discussed in relation to Hollywood videotapes and rental stores. This study fills a gap in the current literature by presenting a significant history of the VCR in relation to TV during the period regularly referred to as the VCR's first decade, 1975 to 1985. Specifically, this study is a look at the divergent discourses of the TV industry and the public opinion of TV viewership during this early era that offer insight into how we have come to contemporarily conceptualize TV. While the TV industry considered the VCR as a technology with the potential to disrupt their business, TV viewers interpreted the VCR as a way to take control of their hobby. Through the device's main uses, time-shifting and library building, TV viewing became an activity defined by viewers' choices, conveniences, and desire to preserve TV programs.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE VCR

In existing literature on the VCR's history, there is a proclivity to color its past solely in relation to Hollywood's prerecorded videotape industry. The inundation of discourse that represents the VCR as synonymous with watching Hollywood films is understandable, because renting and buying prerecorded VHS tapes to use at home emerged as the dominant use of the VCR after its first decade shook out. But previous literature about the VCR foregoes a significant history it had with television, both as an industry that had to adjust to the emerging VCR technology and as a cultural institution that consumers accessed via the technology. In an attempt to tip the balance away from the saturation of Hollywood-centric discussions of the VCR, this study will discuss what most other histories of the VCR have largely eschewed: how home-tapers (consumers who regularly used the VCR to record TV programs), TV content, and the TV industry were represented in discourses within VCR's early days as a consumer product.

This is a study of new media, what Benjamin Peters refers to as "media we do not yet know how to talk about."<sup>1</sup> Specifically, my research of the home taping of TV programs will be within the time range of 1975 to 1985, the period leading up to when VCRs became overwhelmingly thought of as machines to watch prerecorded Hollywood videotapes. Congruous with new media studies, drawing from research of the media's initial period means focusing on a time when both the industry and the consumer did not know how to understand it, or how it would take shape commercially and domestically. In *Veni, Vidi, Video*, Wasser makes the case that the prerecorded video industry revenue

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<sup>1</sup> Peters, Benjamin. "And lead us not into thinking the new is new: a bibliographic case for new media history." *New Media & Society* 11.1-2 (2009): 18.

and rental culture point to Hollywood playback as initially a “mainstream”<sup>2</sup> business and activity by 1986. Though it had been popular in the previous years, Hollywood videos had significantly matured to a new status. This maturity sale was seen in the advent of two-tier pricing for videocassettes (making Hollywood tapes affordable to buy instead of the usual renting), the consolidation of video store chains (*Chicago Tribune* ran an article in the opening days of 1986 called “Video Rental: Fast-Forward Era is Over.” The article cites *Video Store Magazine*, saying the nation had the potential for 30,000 video rental stores<sup>3</sup>), and home video revenue finally equaling box office revenue. Further echoing the start of stabilization, Wasser states that by the end of 1986 the video industry had begun to shake loose the industry’s more “experimental business practices.”<sup>4</sup> So, the enduring dominant discourse of the VCR as synonymous with Hollywood movies assists in maligning TV as “experimental.” This discourse also shaped the material understanding of the VCR simply as a conduit for prerecorded Hollywood VHS tapes, or as that dusty black box next to the TV that video store patrons push the rental tape into. Thus, TV (content accessed through the VCR) was relegated to the shadows of the popular film industry - just one manifestation of a historical social construction of TV, watching as a marginalized activity, as opposed to the culturally celebrated hobby of filmgoing.

In focusing on this early VCR era, I aim to analyze the TV industry discourse in order to articulate how business insiders understood the device before its association with Hollywood. I will also analyze the discourse of the popular opinion of home video

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<sup>2</sup> Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, vidi, video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*. University of Texas Press, 2009: p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Elsner, David. “Video Rental: Fast-Forward Era is Over.” *Chicago Tribune*. Jan 8, 1986: B1.

<sup>4</sup> Wasser, 130.

technology in relation to TV at this time to bring forth a similar knowledge of how the VCR was perceived. These contrasting discourses will manifest the dissonance that exists between industry and popular thought, giving agency to the latter. Both discourses will also reference how the VCR was used to curate personal programming schedules and libraries of content drawn from consumer TV sets, although this would later be seen as an “experimental business practice” in light of the permeation of Hollywood VHS tapes. Considering the imbalance of cultural value between TV and film content, I will illustrate how a disparate relationship between popular reception and a TV industry expectation of the VCR reveals a viewer desire for time-shifting programs and the preservation of TV. Some viewers desired TV content as something more than fleeting entertainment, meant to be consumed once and during its scheduled time slot. By focusing on this early relationship between the VCR and the TV industry, specifically the discourses of broadcast and cable networks, TV providers, TV content, and TV viewers, this study will recount a neglected and absent history of the VCR that is currently distorted due to a pervasive cultural bias rendering TV an unimportant medium.

### **Literature Review**

Throughout my review of literature covering video, the following categories emerge as the dominant themes: the social construction of technology, history of video, the hacking of or subcultural uses of video, and the domestication of video. The first theme, social construction of technology, is supported by literature that subscribes to a nuanced history, covering the social shaping of communication and media technologies. The history of video will describe the origin story of video, such as the competition between Betamax and VHS, and how Hollywood movies came to be available for home

video consumption. In the hacking of or subcultural uses of video theme, I illustrate how certain consumers adopted video and the VCR for certain alternative uses, such as early video mail clubs. More than a simple description of such uses, the works supporting this theme tackle how subversive adoption became cultural and social capital. The “domestication of video” section reviews literature that describes the use of home video, particularly its gender politics.

### **Social Construction of Technology**

Raymond Williams’ influential book *Television* opens with a mission statement to demystify or deconstruct the “unresolved historical and philosophical questions” that are implied yet opaque in the general discourse surrounding emerging forms of technology and the way in which they have shaped the society.<sup>5</sup>

Through a history of some key technological developments, such as electricity, telegraphy, and photography, Williams remarks that all of these were birthed into already established economic and social infrastructures. They were immediately seen as practical and useful in both the business and public spheres - but this was not the case for television.<sup>6</sup> Williams then contends that technological advancements do not always simply correlate to whether there is a “need” for the technology.

Carolyn Marvin also advocates for an approach to understanding new media that debunks technological determinism. In *When Old Technologies Were New*, she shifts her focus on communication technology “from the instrument to the drama in which existing social groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation, and knowledge with whatever resources are available.” She continues, “[n]ew practices do not so much flow

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, Raymond. *Television: Technology and cultural form*. Routledge, 2003: 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 7-11.

directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings”<sup>7</sup> Here, Marvin gives users agency over technologies, which are produced within an established society instead of creating new societies.

Claude S. Fischer’s social history of the telephone, *America Calling*, studies how the telephone took shape through a series of negotiations between competing telephone companies and a variety of consumer perceptions and adoptions (as well as government regulations, although less considerably). Bell’s consistent resistance and hesitance to adapt services to consumer demands emphasizes a historically hegemonic relationship between technology’s producers and its users. Though originally conceived for and deemed solely useful for business communications, with rural service considered a “stepchild in the system,” the telephone quickly became a pervasive domestic consumer good used for socializing.<sup>8</sup> In *America Calling*, Fischer points out the influence of technology’s parent technologies, which are the technologies that directly preceded a new technology. For instance, telegraphy was the parent technology of telephony. This relationship is of import because the new technology must be influenced by the parent technology’s own social construction.<sup>9</sup>

TV scholar Lynn Spigel aligns her book *Make Room for TV* among the previously mentioned communication technology studies that approach history without succumbing to technological determinism. She brings forth the popular discourses that TV was met with in order to illustrate a “dialogical relationship between communication technology

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<sup>7</sup> Marvin, Carolyn. *When Old Technologies Were New*. Oxford University Press, 1997. Kindle edition, loc 45.

<sup>8</sup> Fischer, Claude S. *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940*. Univ of California Press, 1992: 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

and culture.” Describing this relationship is pertinent to a proper telling of the TV’s history in the home because “what was said about the medium in turn affected television’s ultimate cultural form.” Spigel broadly, yet succinctly, states, “[t]echnologies such as automobiles, radios, and computers do not simply cause social change; instead, their uses are shaped by social practices and cultural expectations.”<sup>10</sup> She recognizes that technologies exist within cultural and social contexts that also need to be analyzed. For the TV, Spigel specifically considers discourses “in the context of wider cultural and social events of the postwar period” in order to discover why TV represented significant cultural dystopian fears and utopian optimism.<sup>11</sup>

As far as this literature is specific to video, Joshua M. Greenberg’s history of video, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, suggests that the separation of medium and message “into distinct categories is a social construction rather than a necessary schism.” Greenburg posits that successful use of a communication technology insist users imagine the device between themselves and a producer or sender, and they must discern “meaningful information” from their experience with the technology. More simply, “all it takes is a consensus among its users that information is being mediated,” and if we understand “that an essential part of a medium is its in-betweenness, we can begin to look at it from the perspectives of those on either side.” When examining the history of video, and communication technology generally, Greenburg instructs “we must do so without recourse to the innate properties of the artifact itself.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Spigel, Lynn. *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*. University of Chicago Press, 2013: 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, Joshua M. *From BetaMax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video*. MIT Press, 2010. Kindle edition, loc 176-88.

## History of Video

Like most histories of video, Frederick Wasser's *Veni, Vidi, Video* details the infamous home video format battle. He states, "the competition between Betamax and VHS was decided on the basis of video as an extension of the movie theater."<sup>13</sup> The VCR was not only a recording device, but it doubled the TV as both a television program viewer and a conduit for movies on prerecorded video. Sony could not compete with VHS's selection of prerecorded videos. Wasser argues that it was the changing tastes and preferences of the audience that lead VHS usage over Betamax usage "despite [Betamax's] institutional backing." Viewers were not satisfied with "whatever was on the set when they turned it on. They wanted to be able to choose when...where...and/or which program to see." Wasser states the importance of this shift ultimately had more to do with giving the people of "affluent classes" choices as their abundance of leisure-oriented "toys" grew, and then collectively took up all of their leisure time.<sup>14</sup>

In *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Joshua M. Greenberg illustrates the history of prerecorded video. Andre Blay (of Magnetic Video) was responsible for first making Hollywood films available to consumers on prerecorded video. Blay was first interested in prerecorded Hollywood films because it afforded him the opportunity to have films at home to show to his friends at any given time. Home video seems as if it has always been sought after (not solely, but largely) because of the new opportunities for social interaction it offered.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*. University of Texas Press, 2009: 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 76-7.

<sup>15</sup> Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Kindle edition, loc 617-716.

Greenberg states that the video distributors were responsible for shifting the wider understanding of video software and hardware. Distributors reached out to studios to persuade them to lend their content to the prerecorded video medium, and through distributors' new video stores, VCRs came to be known more as players than recorders. He explains this as a shift from videos as "content rather than technology."<sup>16</sup> Instead of videos being sold as accessories to the hardware in what Greenberg refers to as "brown goods" stores, with video stores, there was a paradigm shift that gave a popular understanding of the hardware as an accessory to videos.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Z. Newman's short book, *Video Revolutions*, is a history of video while also a theoretical argument within that history. More specifically, *Video Revolutions* is a history of the word "video" as a means of discovering mediums that have been named by video. He suggests that the identifiers of a medium, such as video, "have...been shaped by the terms and ideas through which we have named and imagined them." Through charting the word "video," we can further understand associated mediums as "a way of thinking about and using technology, a cluster of conventions practiced within a set of social relations."<sup>18</sup>

Newman states that we can understand a medium in terms of the "everyday, commonsense ideas about its cultural status in a given historical context." For instance, when video was predominantly associated with television, video's "cultural status was television's cultural status."<sup>19</sup> With this understanding, video's cultural status must have

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<sup>16</sup> Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Kindle edition, loc 806.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, loc 595.

<sup>18</sup> Newman, Michael Z. *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium*. Columbia University Press. 2014: VIII.

<sup>19</sup> Newman, *Video Revolutions*, 3.

changed to match that of movies' cultural status when renting from video stores became a normalized leisure. Thus, video's cultural status reflected that of Hollywood's in the mid-80s to early-90s. However, Newman makes it known that there were clear attempts to distinguish video from TV and cinema that were an effect of cinephilic anxiety. In such circles, video was considered “not as the redemption of TV audience but as the temptation, corruption, and possibly the ultimate decline of cinema and its culture.”<sup>20</sup> So, when the video store was developed, it would not have immediately been a place for cinephilic congregation.

Though not the video store pioneer, Greenberg credits a retailer named George Atkinson for initially realizing the financial potential of renting videos. He had been renting 8mm films and projectors to "hotels and pizza parlors as a form of free entertainment for customers,"<sup>21</sup> and realized the same could be done with videos, and predicted an even higher public interest. Greenberg states Atkinson's revolutionary Video Station as a chance for consumers not to buy *things*, but rent experiences.

The consensus idea of the video store industry was to project an image of selling movies, not videotapes, so consumers could replicate a theater in their home. Greenberg states that video stores also tried to adapt some of these movie theater associations into their physical spaces, such as selling instant popcorn and other concessions. Prerecorded video not only changed the common conception of the VCR and the TV, but also continued to change the social spheres of the video store, the home, and the cinema.

Wasser charts the fluctuating price of an early mainstream prerecorded video as the market changed to reflect to meet consumers' expectations and spending rationale.

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<sup>20</sup> Newman, *Video Revolutions*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Kindle edition, loc 832.

Videos were initially priced upwards of \$50 because distributors expected consumers to only buy these if they anticipated multiple viewings, getting their money's worth. His book describes the video rental market as being born as an alternative to paying full price, especially since film audiences were accustomed to only seeing films once. Video selling was so risky that large retailers like Sears and Wal-Mart, who now have dedicated large sections of their stores to home viewing electronics and accessories, were hesitant to start video sections; so they had small sections stocked by third party companies who paid “the stores a percentage of the[ir] tape sales.”<sup>22</sup>

While video retailers and rental stores were trying to figure out the identity of movies outside the theater, Greenberg mentions that some rental stores added small theaters for video exhibition inside their space. The author discerns from the “universal lack of success of these initiatives” that watching prerecorded videos was necessarily tied to being in the home.<sup>23</sup>

### **Subcultural Uses of the VCR**

Greenberg’s video history also details the origins of the videophile and early video culture. Most prominently featured was *The Videophiles Newsletter*, the earliest wide social function related to home video; it was a society based on trading personally recorded videos. Concurrently, there was a similar publication called *Movie Collector’s World*. These worked in ways to inform like-minded enthusiasts about the new technology: what was good or worth their time and money and what was not. The trading circuits can also be considered the predecessor to the video store: a tangible and fixed

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<sup>22</sup> Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Kindle edition, loc 1041.

sphere with which to not only find professional quality videos but find like-minded enthusiasts.

*The Videophiles Newsletter* had information on how to optimize staple devices to get the most out of the technology. By intimately getting to know their recorders, these early videophiles eventually found ways to undermine the advertised uses of the technology. The trade that resulted from such knowledge, such as editing commercials from TV programs, inherently gave videophiles a sense of authorship and power.

Greenberg mentions that the VCR itself was recognized as "part of a larger sociotechnical system"<sup>24</sup> that sometimes was at the behest of other, less skilled, or interested, technicians, such as station technicians. This is one of the ways videophiles asserted a sense of subcultural hierarchy. It was through the enthusiast's zeal for getting the most out of his or her device that hacking came about. Greenberg comments that hacking "points beyond individual actions toward broader social relationships," and that "hacking is a vital element of many enthusiast communities."<sup>25</sup> This was another way of unifying the videophile subculture, and also a way for videophiles to more acutely defining themselves through more knowledge of their devices and practices.

Though not of significant focus in his book, Wasser very briefly notes that "[t]here was an aura of the subversive surrounding the VCR." This subversion was of the "local television fare," which could be undermined by the VCR user. Though subversive uses promised to democratize consumers and empower users, these became practices considered alternative to the dominance of renting prerecorded Hollywood videos from the video store.

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<sup>24</sup> Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Kindle edition, loc 218.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, loc 469-76.

## Domestication of Video

Wasser states the domestication of video was a notion prior to video stores, dating it back to Thomas Edison. Edison's portable projectors gave consumers the option of buying a machine for their home for which they could rent films using the post office to accept and return rentals. These home projectors did not prove to be a home run for viewers or Edison, who sold only 500 machines. Though Wasser asserts that "[c]ost alone seems sufficient to explain the disappointing lack of consumer interest," it is important to note "the additional factors of the skill and energy needed to set up a screen and operate a projector and the lack of films available." Other companies ventured to make home viewing a viable business in the following decade, but Wasser states, "[h]ome viewing as a mass medium stalled until the development of broadcast television and home video."<sup>26</sup>

Though Greenberg does not linger on the technology of the VCR in the home, he makes an important note that "consumers were lured into home video mainly by the promise of movies at home rather than any interest in the technology itself." Basically, the VCR was thought of as just a "technological artifact" that did not move from its position beside the TV.<sup>27</sup> This was juxtaposed with the common conception of the videotape, which transcended its physical form. Prerecorded videotapes came to be thought of more as the program within the software, a movie instead of the magnetic tape that reproduced the movie's images. In turn, varieties of VCR use, such as time-shifting and recording, were discussed less frequently than simple prerecorded video playback.

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<sup>26</sup> Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*, 28-9.

<sup>27</sup> Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Kindle edition, loc 1125.

*Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology*, Ann Gray's 1992

ethnographic examination of women's responses to their personal experience of domestic labor and leisure, focuses specifically on gender politics in relation to VCR usage. One of the key points Gray makes in this discussion of domestic labor is that "[f]or the majority of women the home [was] first and foremost a work place and it is therefore often difficult for them to find the time and space within their domestic environment to pursue leisure or non-work activities." While men, traditionally, want to come home after work to relax in front of the TV, whereas women "consider going out as a more direct route to leisure and relaxation"<sup>28</sup> Gray further portrayed home video as a leisure activity that had been gendered masculine. The women expressed that they relied on their husband's inclination to learn (read the instruction manual) and "rough idea" of how the technology works, and in turn, men predominantly picked out the program. This resulted in propagating a "lack of enthusiasm" among women, rationalized to themselves as "laziness," and domestic territories such as the Man Cave or media room.<sup>29</sup> Gray goes on to argue that "[g]ender is the key determinant in the use of and expertise in...domestic equipment."<sup>30</sup>

Though some of the aforementioned works discuss video in relation to TV, the majority of the literature about the VCR focuses on the device as an outgrowth of film culture. There is little scholarship that focuses specifically on how the VCR was an outgrowth of TV culture and the TV industry.

### **Methodology**

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<sup>28</sup> Gray, Ann. *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology*. Routledge, 2002: 54.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 164-75.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 187.

As mentioned, Peters' work nicely frames new media studies. He posits that the majority of new media go through a particular cycle upon their invention. In order, the cycle is listed as follows: technical invention, cultural innovation, legal regulation, economic distribution, and social mainstream.<sup>31</sup> This cycle can generally be applied to this study, from initial penetration of the consumer market to the ubiquity of the VCR in the home. Specifically, how the VCR was presented, how it was interpreted and adopted by consumers, and what uses and users were associated with its domestication. Peters explains, "new media can be understood as emerging communication and information technologies undergoing a historical process of contestation, negotiation and institutionalization."<sup>32</sup> The negotiations I consider do not simply derive from an industry releasing a product onto the public, a top-down approach, but also how the industry was affected by the consumer's reactions and interpretations, a bottom-up approach.

In the literature review, I mentioned that Newman's *Video Revolutions* studies mediums as "a way of thinking about and using technology, a cluster of conventions practiced within a set of social relations." This approach, studying collective uses practiced within specific contexts, is influential to my project. To study collective practices, my study specifically pulls from social constructivist scholars. For instance, when Greenberg is discussing hacker-dom with the VCR, he declares the following:

"If technological literacy can be defined as the knowledge of how to use a given technology, then it might be said that such tinkerers possess a certain technological fluency—the ability not only to *read* meanings of the technology, but also to *speak* new ones."

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<sup>31</sup> Peters, "And lead us not into thinking the new is new: a bibliographic case for new media history," 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 18.

Here, Greenberg is describing a social constructivist ethos that knowledgeable users interpret their device based on their deeper understanding of it and are able to adopt new uses that are perhaps less pedestrian, thus adding to the lexicon of uses. Simply put, literate users “unpack [the technology] to suit their whims.”<sup>33</sup> As mentioned, this passage is specific to understanding hacker culture, but this idea is suitable for less skilled users as well. Part of my approach is to illustrate how pedestrian users also adopt technology according to their impulses. And, as some of these impulsive uses emerged as common, they influenced the industry’s developments of the VCR, creating a socially constructed device.

Though not a media technology, Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch convey the social construction of the automobile in a manner relevant to this study. Kline and Pinch apprehend the automobile’s innovations in a way that actively foregoes technological determinism, claiming “users of technology acted as agents of technological change.” Specifically, they look at how the aberrant uses of the automobile on American farms –as stable power sources, plows, and tractors - influenced how the industry continued developing the automobile. In doing so, they “seek to extend the recent work in the history of technology that shifts the field’s traditional focus from the “producers” of technology...to the “users” of technology” to suggest that “the use of an artifact or system has not only resulted in unforeseen consequences, but that users have helped to shape the artifact or system itself.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*, Kindle edition, loc 452.

<sup>34</sup> Kline, Ronald, and Trevor Pinch. "Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States." *Technology and Culture*, 1996: 764-5.

Kline and Pinch subscribe to two distinct social constructivist terms to help tell the story of the automobile's social formation. The first being "interpretative flexibility," which merely recognizes that technologies may be associated with different meanings based on distinct social contexts. That is, until what Kline and Pinch refer to as "closure." Better described as "stabilization," closure occurs when technologies "appear to have fewer problems and become increasingly the dominant form of the technology."<sup>35</sup> In my study, I will display how the interpretative flexibility of the VCR produced different iterations of the VCR and technologies to be used in tandem with the VCR until there was a stabilization of the device that reflected its dominant uses.

This study uses historical research to ask particular social questions that both narrow the scope of the study and widen the questions and subjects it examines,<sup>36</sup> magnifying this moment of microhistory without the "elision of the macro."<sup>37</sup> By examining the discourses of the TV industry and popular opinion of TV viewing in relation to the VCR, I reveal an underrepresented history of the VCR that also fits comfortably within a category of scholarship that examines new media.

To examine the TV business, I use industry periodicals to develop how the VCR was perceived within a group interested in existing TV business practices and strategies. Examples of such industry publications include *Broadcasting*, *Advertising Age*, *Business Week*, *Industry Week*, and *Cable Vision*.

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<sup>35</sup> Kline and Pinch. "Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States," 766.

<sup>36</sup> Popp, Richard K. "Cultural History and Media Studies." In *Blackwell's International Companion to Media Studies: Research Methods in Media Studies*, ed. Fabienne Darling-Wolf. Oxford: Blackwell, 2014: 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

My research on popular opinion surrounding TV viewing and VCR usage draws on articles of magazines and newspapers during the time of the burgeoning of the VCR market, which reflect and reveal the consumer discourse. These include *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Christianity Today*, *TV Guide*, *Daytime Stars*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

## **Chapter Preview**

### **Chapter 2: The TV Industry**

This chapter focuses on the VCR's initial penetration of the home video market through the lens of the TV industry, which viewed the emerging technology as having the potential to alter TV viewing and thus be a threat to TV businesses. I will support this by analyzing the discourses held in TV industry periodicals that surround the introduction of the VCR. This chapter will also contain an analysis of piracy discourse found in TV industry periodicals - conversations distinctly referring to the viewers as thieves or as consumers undermining TV business practices. This analysis parses where the TV industry aimed their frustrations, looking specifically for whom they blamed for home-taping and library building, and what solutions the TV industry proposed to illegalize home-taping or how to be compensated for financial losses seen as provoked by piracy. Finally, I will conclude how the industry viewed home-taping at the close of the VCR's first decade in regard to how the aforementioned issues took shape after the device's regulation period. In other words, how did the TV industry adjust to the Supreme Court's copyright ruling in favor of home-taping, emotionally and strategically? Through all of the conversations presented in this chapter, I will analyze how these statements allude to

larger, unspoken ideas about how the TV industry understood itself and its product throughout the VCR's first decade.

### **Chapter 3: The Home-Tapers**

This chapter will be an analysis of the home-taper discourse surrounding VCR habits in relation to TV. For these discussions, I draw from publications that approached the TV viewer and VCR consumer, such as *TV Guide* and the TV and Video sections of popular newspapers such as *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. Opening with early consumer and journalist reactions to the VCR, I will document the sense of novelty that characterized the consumer reaction to the VCR. By identifying the particular reasons for excitement, this discussion will describe which VCR functions and capabilities were perceived as the most meaningful to TV viewers. In turn, this novelty discourse will highlight different viewer ideas about TV content and TV viewing as an activity. Similar to VCR excitement, I discuss how families saw the device as both a positive and negative addition to their domestic space: how it either helped parents entertain their children and facilitate family schedules, or how it had potential to disrupt family ideals.

In the popular opinion discourse, newspaper columnists covering home video technology and TV content often advised readers how to optimize their VCR in relation to TV content; they would mention what to time-shift and what was worth preserving. This discussion focuses on how the VCR was used as a tool for cultivating tastes according to an existing taste hierarchy. Out of this discussion emerges an analysis of a weekly *Chicago Tribune* column called "Worth Taping." This recurring column offers a multivalent understanding of VCR use discourse as it is related to TV.

Elaborating on concerns about copyright infringement, I will discuss the broader public opinion about proper home video etiquette, including whether home-taping was an ethical practice. Doing so will reveal the popular acknowledgement that the TV business was changing during this era, and to provide juxtaposition to how the TV industry discussed home-taping issues, as given in the previous chapter. I will conclude this chapter by summarizing its most pertinent points, which highlight the public opinion of time-shifting and library building TV programs during the VCR's first decade.

#### **Chapter 4: TV as Ephemera**

This chapter will be the logical conclusion of the previous discourse analyses to flesh out the implications of the dissonance between the TV industry's anxiety over consumer desires to time-shift and cultivate home libraries of TV content via the use of their VCR. I will reproduce the dominant discourses of the TV industry and the home-tapers that are revealed in chapters two and three in order to dive deeper into the tensions that existed between these two factions.

My study then shifts focus to contemporary discourses that exemplify the benefit of home-taping preservations. This discussion covers three cases: Marion Stokes' VHS archive of 35 years worth of broadcast news, the website that constantly streams Nickelodeon content, Nick Reboot, and the found footage VHS art project Everything Is Terrible!. Together, these projects represent the present validation of home-taping efforts in distinctly different ways. Finally, I describe how the habits of home-tapers have influenced the current state of TV watching, and how the tensions between viewer and industry are still present in contemporary TV streaming companies such as Netflix and Hulu Plus.

## THE TV INDUSTRY

### TV Industry Versus the Consumer Electronics Industry

In 1975, Sony's new videocassette recorder was called the product "for the TV viewer who has everything." Although it was named Betamax, the expensive product was referred to as a "time shift machine," and was touted for the capability of recording two concurrent programs for later viewing per the consumer's convenience. The publication cited Sony representatives predicting that though they expected high sales to take time, conceptually, the product "would make the idea of prime-time viewing obsolete." But Sony thought of their product as a "prestige item" for early adopters charmed by its "convenience and design appeal;" they carefully advertised to "an affluent, well-educated, male audience."<sup>38</sup> *Business Week* called the product a comeback for "[d]o-it-yourself TV," referencing the failure of the EVR (Electronic Video Recording system), a home video playback-only device. Former CBS president, Frank Stanton, attributed EVR's failure to not knowing how to market TV products to consumers that they already did not have access to on TV.<sup>39</sup> In other words, TV insiders and businessmen did not see potential in offering TV content outside of their preexisting network schedules. Stanton did not find it lucratively appealing to offer prerecorded tapes of TV programs to consumers, because there was an assumption that TV content was an ephemeral experience, for immediate and singular consumption. It perplexed the industry to think of viewers as wanting to curate their own viewings. Whatever happened to be on the tube at any time viewers desired to watch TV should have been sufficient. But the Betamax offered consumers the opportunity to record TV programs they had access to, which

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<sup>38</sup> "Something for the TV Viewer Who Has Everything." *Broadcasting*. Nov 3, 1975: 49.

<sup>39</sup> "Do-It Yourself TV Tries a Comeback." *Business Week*. May 19, 1975: 48.

allowed for the two dominant uses of TV recording going forward: time-shifting and library building. Both of these recording habits were disharmonious with the idea of TV content as ephemeral and live, as they veered toward the inclination to preserve TV programs. Time-shifting was also, conceptually, starkly disharmonious with TV networks' longstanding business practice of program scheduling. The Betamax promised to disrupt the structure of the TV business.

This chapter will examine how the TV industry tried to avert the perceived dissolution of their business at the hands of home-taping. Though they had qualms with home-tapers' habits, the TV industry's efforts to evade financial injury consisted of targeting VCR manufacturers instead of individual VCR owners. Thus, this industry duel will be the framework for this chapter: how and why the TV industry decided to target manufacturers, what became of these efforts, and what adjustments had to be made by the TV industry as the VCR's first decade came to a close. Further, it discusses how the notion that the VCR, as an agent of anxiety, held the potential to end the TV business reflects how the entertainment industry conceptualized TV content.

### **Fear of Copyright**

If the Betamax was going to be a successful device with consumers, there was another big problem on the horizon for the TV industry. Toward the end of 1975, a *Broadcasting* piece on the Betamax made short mention of the device's copyright implications, which Sony called "a minor problem" (they equated the device to "a Xerox for television"); the publication warned that consumers had the potential to be prosecuted, but to an unknown extent.<sup>40</sup> Serious debates about copyright issues pertinent

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<sup>40</sup> "Something for the TV Viewer Who Has Everything." *Broadcasting*. Nov 3, 1975: 49.

to home-taping arose quite early. Although Sony may have thought it minor, the entertainment industry was much more concerned. President of MCA, Inc.<sup>41</sup>, Sidney J. Sheinberg, was bugged that “thousands of people now own copies of *Gone With the Wind*, as well as other movies and TV programs.” Sony retorted, “for MCA to say that we can’t sell people something to use in their homes is like somebody saying that General Motors can’t sell cars because people will drive them too fast.”<sup>42</sup> Immediately, it was the entertainment industry against the manufacturers, with the former in defense of an existing business model that was threatened by home-taping. The entertainment industry blamed home-tapers, but held the consumer electronics industry accountable for the habits of VCR users. Meanwhile, manufacturers saw their product as a convenient, practical device, not an insidious attack on the TV and film industry.

The entertainment industry’s immediate anxiety can be better understood within the context of the audio recording industry as a precedent. When cassette recorders and recordable tapes proliferated on the consumer market, the music industry thought personal recordings were ruining the music business. Similar to what VCR home-tapers would come to be called, these amateur audio recorders were referred to as pirates.<sup>43</sup> The recording industry swiftly addressed their concerns and anxieties via litigation. In 1972, just a few years prior to the introduction of the Betamax, the music industry won the Sound Recording Act, which prohibited the sale of copyrighted music recorded with a personal taping device. This was the first federal statute aimed at curbing amateur sound

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<sup>41</sup> MCA, Inc., or Music Corporation of America was a company within the film and TV industry as well as its titular music industry.

<sup>42</sup> “Why Sony’s Betamax Has MCA Seething.” *Business Week*. Nov 29, 1976: 29-30.

<sup>43</sup> Hollie, Pamela G. “Piracy Costly Plague In Record Industry.” *New York Times*. Mar 10, 1980: D1.

recordings.<sup>44</sup> However, the Sound Recording Act did not prohibit home use of copied music.<sup>45</sup>

With the concern of the music industry still echoing, it is not surprising that it did not take long for entertainment studios (MCA, Inc. and Walt Disney Productions) to promise litigation against Sony and their Betamax. With an impending lawsuit in 1976, the studios sought “to halt the use of [VCRs] and any advertising which promotes the machines as a means of recording TV programming and replaying videotaped copies of Universal and Disney copyrighted material.” To the studios, the Betamax represented a misleading claim to “the public to believe that videotaping from live TV broadcasts is not a violation of copyright law.” To which, Sony claimed they would fight back “vigorously” because they felt studios had no place proverbially entering consumer’s living rooms to police personal TV sets.<sup>46</sup>

Though the recording industry’s trial served as an antecedent for how the TV industry would approach the Betamax developers as a problem that needed extinguishing, TV business insiders had surely hoped the Supreme Court would rule more favorably when considering the home-taping of TV content. Whereas the Sound Recording Act did not outlaw recording audio for domestic use, the TV industry was immediately in pursuit of a law that policed how Betamax owners used the device in their homes.

It is worth noting that Sony did not see themselves in opposition to TV networks and advertisers. Sony president, Harvey Schein, explicitly stated the company did not condone piracy, and they believed existing copyright laws were not put in place to

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<sup>44</sup> “Protecting Recordings.” *The Washington Post*. Sept. 23, 1971: C13.

<sup>45</sup> “Why Sony’s Betamax Has MCA Seething.” *Business Week*. Nov 29, 1976: 29-30.

<sup>46</sup> “Sony to Fight Suit vs. Right to Copy TV Shows [Betamax].” *Advertising Age*. Nov 22, 1976: 74.

prohibit “members of the public from deciding how and when they see the TV programs which are beamed into their homes.” Further, Sony felt its product would actually be conducive to the growth of audiences for TV programs. Schein stated the Betamax’s time-shifting capability would offer viewers the chance to “see programs that would be otherwise missed,” which would be paramount in a growing enthusiasm for TV content. With this logic, Schein believed Sony’s product did “not hurt any segment of the entertainment industry.”<sup>47</sup> These dissimilar perceptions of the Betamax, and home-taping, derive from contrasting conceptualizations of TV content. Sony thought VCRs were an improvement to TV because they could help preserve programs. The entertainment industry thought of TV programs as ephemeral content that should be viewed according to the networks’ scheduling.

### **Changes to Come**

A couple years into the VCR’s first decade, the initial dust settled and copyright issues seemed to subside in industry publications. In its place, video-recording technology was discussed in regard to how it would (for better or worse) change the landscape of the TV industry and viewing habits. Concurrent with what was self-described as “the most ambitious and comprehensive marketing effort that has been seen in this industry” by developers Sony and RCA, the TV industry (and trade publications) could not help but report and be influenced by the predictions that were byproducts of such campaigns. Many pieces ran similar to this *Barron’s* article: “Play It Again, Sam;

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<sup>47</sup> “Sony to Fight Suit vs. Right to Copy TV Shows [Betamax].” *Advertising Age*. Nov 22, 1976: 74.

Videodiscs, or Tapes, Will Change the Nation's Viewing Habits.”<sup>48</sup> A common forecast likened VCRs to the implementation of color television, stating the video-recorder was set to have an even more impressive immediate popularity than this previous technological improvement. It was projected that half of color-TV homes in America would be equipped with a VCR within 10 years (of 1977).<sup>49</sup> Color television could have been a reference point for the VCR because this former technology was discussed as having a revolutionary potential to change the medium of TV. This is how the VCR was discussed throughout its entire first decade. When media technologies are new, they are unfamiliar to the society at large, and in turn consumers, manufacturers, and industry insiders are making sense of these emerging technologies in a myriad of ways. One way new media is often explained is by a reliance on previous new media. Because the VCR was a TV-related technology, it is unsurprising that the implementation of color TV would have been a common reference point.

The development of the VCR highlighted how consumers perceived technological improvements that were not always viewed as positively by the pertaining industry. Though the VCR was seen as an opportunity for consumers to be more omnivorous viewers, the TV networks, which would be getting increased exposure, did not see their companies prospering from a burgeoning VCR market. *Advertising Age* called VCRs (along with video games) “the two biggest monkey wrenches ever thrown at the television networks.” Citing a then-recent study by Integrated Circuit Engineering Corp. (ICE), the article reported that, at the predicted year of significant home penetration (mid-

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<sup>48</sup> Kagan, P.F. “Play It Again, Sam; Videodiscs, or Tapes, will Change the Nation's Viewing Habits.” *Barron's*. Mar 21, 1977: 5, 25-6.

<sup>49</sup> “Optimistic RCA Unveils its VTR for the Home.” *Broadcasting*. Aug 29, 1977: 50.

1980s), these two emerging technologies would “significantly ‘upset the concept of prime time’ and ‘drastically alter’ TV as we know it today.” The author expounded on why VCRs would disrupt TV as it was considered in 1977, “a frightening note [to broadcasters] is the fact that users of VTRs<sup>50</sup> can manipulate the schedule of network shows at their own pleasure, and at the same time build libraries.” If the TV industry thought time-shifting had the potential to drastically alter TV, then it is evident that the industry’s idea of TV could be better described as an activity rather than an experience shaped by different types of programs.<sup>51</sup>

Given the publication’s theme, the piece goes on to discuss how the nature of TV advertising will change due to the unpredictability of when shows will actually be watched. Further, broadcasters “might be stirred as millions of people begin editing out TV commercials through the use of the unit’s ‘pause’ button.” ICE also predicted that VCRs would eventually be able to automatically edit out commercials with the use of “in-home microcomputers” that would receive information via a phone link that tracked commercials for a subscription fee. Thus, an ICE representative suggested that networks would then have to subliminally write advertisements into their program’s scripts: “You might see Mary Hartman talking about her Brillo soap pads.”<sup>52</sup>

Months later, *Broadcasting* discussed the potential rise of VCRs with a subtler sense of fear that reveals *Advertising Age*’s presumptions about networks. An article opened with the same type of prediction: “If all goes according to the optimists’ plans, consumer video recorders are going to change America’s television-viewing patterns.”

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<sup>50</sup> Before unanimously referred to as VCRs, home-recorders were often called VTRs (videotape recorders).

<sup>51</sup> “Innovations in Video – Nightmare for Networks?” *Advertising Age*. May 30, 1977.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Though that sounds objective, as does the following report, it is worth noting the title of the piece, “VTR’s: Breaking and Entering the Home Market,” which conceptually aligned the VCR with an abrasive home-invader and insinuated the device’s domestic infiltration would be an act of theft. After providing the RCA Consumer Electronics vice president’s idea that “[w]e are...on the threshold of another era of explosive growth, where the viewing is controlled by the viewer, not by a fixed schedule,” the piece later questions, “what is the impact on the conventional television medium likely to be?” This question, from the vantage point of the broadcasting industry as opposed to the manufacturing industry, was not considering the potential optimism of this “explosive growth.” Instead, the broadcasting industry approached the VCR market with caution, in defense of their business practices. And though they saw the VCR market as relatively innocuous in 1977 due to low sales, “network planners say they are watching the industry with interest, and if sales are significant this year, they intend to begin researching the potential repercussions more thoroughly.” *Broadcasting* seemed to suggest that statement, nearing dismissal and disbelief in the VCR industry, was posturing on the part of network representatives. “It appears certain, however, that if 75% of American homes take control of their television sets, viewing patterns will change,” the author refuted. Perhaps the network representatives were trying to perpetuate the idea to the public that their business strategy could not be easily disrupted, but *Broadcasting*’s countering indicates that there was real concern in the TV industry that “the VTR [would become] an alternate source of programming.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “VTR’s: Breaking and Entering the Home Market.” *Broadcasting*. Oct 24, 1977: 28-34.

Ultimately, an alternate source of programming is what manufacturers were interested in. *Industry Week*'s coverage of the 1979 Consumer Electronics Show, titled "Video Recorders Reshape TV Industry," mentions one trend in electronics that are TV cooperative: "a growing realization that TV sets are only the basis for future growth; that the key to success in the future will be products that extend the entertainment value of television." Sony was disappointed in early VCR sales numbers, which they attributed to "a lack of programming on TV that interests the public." This sentiment seems disingenuous, as if to displace any blame that could be aimed at Sony's device onto the TV industry. Their stance did not, however, make way for any failures on account of the manufacturers, such as lackluster marketing or exorbitant pricing. According to Sony (in a sentiment echoed by other manufacturers like RCA), the solution to higher sales was technological additions to the VCR: "The market in 1979 all depends on new features, new developments – whether we can introduce new products that attract new interests."<sup>54</sup> In other words, TV content needed to be fixed by technological developments. In the first half of the VCR's decade, there were two opposing groups that were sure the VCR was going to fracture the current state of TV. While the VCR meant frustration for the TV industry – allowing for consumers to steal their content and make their own TV schedules - for manufacturers the device was a promise to improve upon TV's entertainment possibility.

### **Copyright Resurfaces**

Though it subsided momentarily, the TV and cable industry's concern over copyright infringement endured throughout most of the VCR's first decade. As well as

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<sup>54</sup> Verespej, Michael A. "Video Recorders Reshape TV Industry." *Industry Week*. June 25, 1979: 92-6.

being understood within the aforementioned context of the music industry as a precedent for amateur media recording, these industries' anxiety over home-taping piracy should be understood within the cable industry's other piracy concerns. Cable companies in particular, were trying to figure out how to squelch multiple unauthorized cable practices. In a 1982 article titled "Theft Fight," *Cable Vision* noted the methods of cable access the industry viewed as dishonest thievery worth prosecuting. The author stated that there were four primary forms that "theft of service takes." One is tapping into a cable line for unauthorized use. For instance, in October of 1982, "three people were arrested on charges of attempting to install a line from a cable company pole to [an]...apartment building where one of the defendants lived."<sup>55</sup> Another is similar, but on a smaller level: sharing cable between multiple TV sets in a home without notifying the cable company.

It is worth noting that the cable industry was concurrently burgeoning alongside the VCR industry. Thus, enthusiastic TV viewers were inundated with new choices. And the cable industry was aware their expanding catalog of programs would have been appealing to recent VCR owners interested in building home video libraries. For instance, a channel like HBO would have attracted home-tapers interested in films that were 1) not edited for broadcast TV, and 2) presented free of commercials (that would otherwise need to be edited out). A channel like ESPN would have appealed to sports enthusiasts looking to watch as much sports programming as possible, or simply, the sports fan who would have been unable to watch during a live sports broadcast. To protect their product from pirates, cable boxes were designed to prohibit pirates from simply manipulating the device to home tape cable programs. The last two methods of piracy mentioned in the

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<sup>55</sup> "Theft Fight." *Cable Vision*. Nov 29, 1982: 75.

*Cable Vision* piece involved stealing equipment and the use of manufactured apparatuses meant to help VCR users optimize cable recording in ways that circumvented the cable box's design. Cable subscribers would buy products from third party developers that would enable them to intercept cable channels they were not paying for. Or, some cable subscribers would cancel their service but use a "black market" device to maintain cable programming without the fee.<sup>56</sup>

Because there were a number of such consumer devices the cable industry thought aided piracy, I will refer to this unease as "black box anxiety." These apparatuses are usually referred to as the following: scramblers, tuners, decoders, converters or switchers. Frustrating to the cable TV industry, these black boxes were advertised daily in newspapers,<sup>57</sup> providing a wider exposure to the public. The Long Island Cable Television Council (nine cable companies located on Long Island) proposed "its members to use radio-dispatched crews to make visual inspections of homes," and to train their employees "to detect illegal services, use electronic filters to trap out premium services, scramble all premium services, use newly developed addressable technology and establish a clearing house of information about thefts." These attempts illustrate the persistent struggle between home-tapers and the cable TV industry; cable companies constructed their hardware to obstruct unauthorized access, home-tapers would optimize their cable box via third party black box developers, and cable companies would subsequently patrol cable TV subscribers. Long Island Cable Television Council member Hank Boerner stated, "[t]he theft of service badly hurts the industry," and *Cable Vision*

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<sup>56</sup> Enstad, Robert. "Cable TV Piracy is Raising its Ugly Antennae Here." *Chicago Tribune*. Mar 10, 1982: 15.

<sup>57</sup> "Theft Fight." *Cable Vision*. Nov 29, 1982: 75.

supported him, writing that in some cases of theft, “[h]onest subscribers are forced to subsidize those who obtain the service illegally.”<sup>58</sup> Though *Cable Vision*’s article did not explicitly include home-taping in its description of theft of services, observers and journalists would have likely been aware that some home-tapers were making large profits from TV content.<sup>59</sup>

In 1982, *Broadcasting* published an article covering Hollywood’s perspective on the home-taping controversy. Discourse from the “Hollywood creative community” was reproduced stating that “home taping of prerecorded music, movies and television programs was endangering the motion picture and recording industries.” The article focused on speeches made by Jack Valenti and Clint Eastwood, spokesmen of the Coalition to Preserve the American Copyright. After mentioning how detrimental audio taping was to the recording industry, Valenti stated, “[t]elevision broadcasters face a shrinkage in advertising revenues attributable to... VCR use.” He clarified that VCR users were either not recording commercials during recorded programs, or they were fast-forwarding through them during playback. (A tactic commonly referred to as “zipping” and “zapping.”) Valenti predicted that companies would no longer want to spend money on advertising “their best products” on broadcast television as long as there was no financial restitution imposed for the home-taping problem. Jay Eliasberg, former CBS/Broadcast Group vice president, is also quoted in the article in support of Valenti, “extensive use of VCR’s will have major negative effects on the size of TV audiences, which will eventually cause a decline in advertiser demand and the price the advertiser is

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<sup>58</sup> “Theft Fight.” *Cable Vision*. Nov 29, 1982: 75.

<sup>59</sup> In May of 1981, *Cable Vision* published a short article, “Videocassettes Seized Worth Millions in Lost Revenues,” about a video club that was regularly renting out videos that were recorded with home video equipment.

willing to pay.”<sup>60</sup> These statements could be interpreted as the Hollywood community attempting to provoke the TV industry into taking copyright issues more seriously, or appealing to the TV industry’s concerns (of advertiser’s interests) in order to encourage them to continue trying to solve piracy problems because Hollywood thought they would ultimately benefit from any progress in the matter. Eastwood feared a dip in film production, and thus, a loss of employment for men and women in the film industry at the hand of home-tapers. He concluded, “If [home taping] continues at this rate and investors are turned off by the movie thing, there will be less films produced, less films to be shown, and less films to be taped.”<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, the Hollywood and TV industries are not mutually exclusive, because some studios produced both films and TV programs. So, there is a blurred line between these two industries, and in turn, their interests were often aligned.

The following week, the publication opened a piece with the following:

“Videocassette recorders: (a) are a new distribution medium that will gradually destroy the film industry unless copyright laws are changed to compensate producers for the use and re-use of their works by home-tapers, or (b) are just another innovation in the entertainment industry, if left alone, will result in a marketplace solution to the problem of copyright compensation.”<sup>62</sup>

These two disparate ideas about the VCR’s copyright implications are not put forth to reflect the opinion of *Broadcasting*, rather they reflect the opposing discourse of the copyright issue’s biggest players. These two articles explain the explicit tension between industries on home-taping issues: “producers of program materials generally lined up on

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<sup>60</sup> “Home Taping Controversy Goes Hollywood.” *Broadcasting*. April 19, 1982: 28-30.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> “VCR Copyright Debate Back to Washington.” *Broadcasting*. April 26, 1982: 32-3.

one side and manufacturers and retailers on the other.”<sup>63</sup> The TV industry saw home-taping controversy as a fight against the manufacturers of VCRs and ancillary VCR technology, not as a fight against VCR users. Thus, while Valenti and Eastwood were frustrated by the habits of VCR owners recording films for home libraries, they did not support tapers being prosecuted. Instead, the Coalition to Preserve American Copyright favored manufacturers paying royalty fees as a solution. This proposal, described as a “compulsory license...imposed on the sale of video and audio cassettes and recorders,”<sup>64</sup> would place an additional fee on the sales of VCRs and blank videotapes. The entertainment industry’s proposal was championed by the U.S. register of copyrights, David Ladd, who posited, “[c]opyright owners experience injury from both time shifting and the creation of permanent film libraries.” His mention of time-shifting signifies that the TV industry was at the center of copyright concerns.

Charles D. Ferris, former chairman of the FCC, rebutted the idea of royalty fees, calling the proposal a maneuver to make VCR consumers pay twice for something TV stations have already paid for. In other words, the TV networks pay to broadcast their programs, and VCR users are factored into the networks’ negotiations. Acting on behalf of the Coalition for Home Recording Rights, Ferris insisted that VCR users would actually offer the film industry a “valuable new market.” The market Ferris foresaw was based on the early popularity of prerecorded tape sales that the film industry could continue to take advantage of. In defense of home-tapers, Ferris implied that time-shifting practices were not disruptive to the film industry. Instead, VCR owners were making the prerecorded tape industry possible through their VCR use. Home-tapers were building

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<sup>63</sup> “Home Taping Controversy Goes Hollywood.” *Broadcasting*, 28-30.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

libraries of films on tape to watch at their will. Having a personal catalog of tapes became popular as TV viewers became more selective about what they would watch. Naturally, if they were often watching recorded films broadcasted on TV, they would welcome the choices that the film industry and video stores, together, could offer. In this way, home-tapers were a boon to the entertainment industry. Although the TV and film industries were trying to legalize recording TV programs and films through the television, the time-shifting and library building habits of VCR owners made way for the lucrative prerecorded Hollywood tape market.

Whatever avenue the entertainment industry chose to seek compensation from pirates, the industry's statements exhibited an anxiety about the VCR entering homes. Though Valenti referenced home-tapers' proclivity to build video libraries, an expression of enthusiasm for the medium, his prediction for a decline in TV audiences seems incongruous with how the VCR could increase TV-viewing (i.e. recording one show while watching another) and enthusiasm. Along with Eastwood's vague hypothetical fear of "investors...turned off by the movie thing," the Coalition's fear display how emerging technology's unfamiliarity can cause uneasiness. Here, due to VCR users, there was a shift (or promise of one) in the TV viewing landscape that made the entertainment industry uncomfortable.

Another Home Recording Rights Coalition representative, Nina Cornell (formerly of the FCC), argued that home-taping does not subtract from a prerecorded film industry because "[m]ost VCR use is for time-shifting rather than the creation of film libraries." She elaborated that VCR users would not value broadcast-TV programs enough to save on a recordable tape, and the films shown on broadcast TV "have been edited for length

and taste...and thus are of inferior quality.” Although Cornell was defending of home-tapers, her sentiments about TV content reveal an attitude that was also shared by industry insiders anxious about home-taping. Cornell stated that TV episodes would only be watched once and then recorded over. This idea about TV content neglected to include home-tapers who would have wanted to save some of their favorite programs in order to view them multiple times. She continued on to say home-tapers would not want to “tie up a \$10-\$20 tape with any of the programs on free TV today.”<sup>65</sup> Though it is true that VCR users would often have to weigh whether a TV show was worth the space it would take up on a tape due to the expense of the product, Cornell’s sentiment insisted that nothing on TV during this era was worth saving, and that there was no entertainment on broadcast TV that warranted multiple viewings. This assessment implies an inherent ephemerality of TV programs, that they should be enjoyed passively as insignificant entertainment, and subsequently discarded or taped over TV was not considered worthy of preservation by many in the TV industry.

As mentioned, copyright royalty champion David Ladd took umbrage at the thought of home-tapers creating “permanent” video libraries. Though his statement exhibits an ability to consider some TV programming as worth saving, it reveals that he thought TV content was a series of impermanent products that should be experienced live. Under this consideration of TV, to preserve shows was conceptually undermining the networks’ business practices. Watching a program from a personal library, instead of during its scheduled time, was to extract that TV content from its liveness. In other words, home-tapers were redefining ephemeral content as permanent.

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<sup>65</sup> “VCR Copyright Debate Back to Washington.” *Broadcasting*. April 26, 1982: 32-3.

Of course, the TV industry was also heavily invested in a type of programming that was not live: the rerun. A significant portion of TV networks' schedules revolved around re-airing programs that already had original airdates. For instance, summer programming often involved the rerunning of a program's entire season that aired over the previous fall. Besides primetime summer reruns, there was another type of rerun that was important to the TV industry: syndicated programs that would fill the morning, late night, and weekend time slots. These syndicated reruns, unlike the primetime reruns of summer, were not just dealt between networks and production studios, but were sold to many local TV stations across the country solely from the production studios. Thus, TV networks, TV stations and production studios each relied on either summer reruns or the syndicated market of reruns for significant profit returns, and would try to extract as much from purchased programs as possible, rerunning them at times most attractive to advertisers.

For many networks and stations, buying a TV series to rerun became a profitable business practice. Most noteworthy, the shows *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Three's Company* proved to be spectacular successes during their second airings. In his book, *Rerun Nation*, Derek Kompare states that the "televisual repetition" of daily reruns was significant in cementing TV fandom. Because viewers had a chance to rewatch episodes, they were able to develop a wider knowledge of the programs they loved.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, networks also purchased old films from entertainment studios and subsequently aired at times that would yield the most profit.

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<sup>66</sup> Kompare, Derek. *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television*. Routledge, 2004: 124.

Although reruns and old films were not live television, as Kompare notes, this type of programming still functioned according to a flow<sup>67</sup> that were “carried out completely within industrial bounds.” The typical exchanges between producers, broadcasters and advertisers were in place despite reruns not being live. Home-taping threatened to disrupt film and rerun programming just the same as live TV, because rewatching personal tapes, unlike watching reruns, existed outside these financial exchanges between producers, broadcasters and advertisers. As Kompare states, home-taping habits “destabilize[d] the relationship between advertiser, broadcaster, and viewer, separating the scheduled time from the viewing time.”<sup>68</sup> Although rewatching personally taped programs was a similar activity to watching TV broadcasted reruns, the former was not contingent on the terms of the TV networks.

The “seriousness” of TV and film piracy was tackled in a 1983 *Business Week* piece titled “How Pirates are Plundering the Studios.” Here, piracy is not defined by those using black boxes to obtain unauthorized programming, or home-tapers who are making a profit off their recorded programs, but solely as VCR owners who “tape movies and shows off the air rather than buying or renting prerecorded tapes.” And the concern was that “bootleggers” were going to, like recording industry pirates, cause a monumental dip in studio profits. If consumers were recording TV programs and films, the studios were not getting additional revenue from bought or rented prerecorded tapes. More importantly for the TV industry, broadcast rights to popular films would not have

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<sup>67</sup> “Flow” in the sense that Raymond Williams articulates in *Television*.

<sup>68</sup>Kompare, Derek. *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television*. Routledge, 2004: 202-3.

been as lucrative either. Broadcasting a film would not be the same kind of event that required appointment viewing. With the VCR, home-tapers could time-shift the film.

Eight years after the beginning of the VCR era, the industry discourse was still worried about what the device promised to do in the future. Seeing home-taping as fundamentally problematic, the article states the “solution...remains elusive.” A frustrated MCA, Inc. president, Sidney J. Sheinberg, suggests why the solution is so elusive, “[t]he trouble is, we can’t technologically stop it, and people don’t think it is illegal or immoral.” This insider’s sentiment showcases a disconnect between industry and user thought. Sheinberg was not merely saying that users acknowledged home-taping was iniquitous and would continue recording, but that there were disparate beliefs between industry and user that will prohibit the latter from engaging with technology the way the entertainment industry wishes. Thus, the VCR user’s approach to home-taping continued to be a great source of anxiety for the TV industry. The industry response to these problematically divergent viewpoints was not to target users directly, but to target manufacturers by proposing the royalty fee for initial purchases.

Though Sheinberg said the solution of piracy was elusive because it cannot be technologically stopped, it was similar to the idea of those who proposed and encouraged the implementation of royalty fees on VCRs and videotapes as a solution to piracy. Both were based in technological determinism. By applying an initial fee to VCR and videocassettes that would compensate for future piracy perpetrated by owners, they were assuming everyone who purchases this technology would take part in piracy. In other words, this proposal carried the assumption that ownership of a VCR determined piracy; it was not an option. Such an assumption, on behalf of the entertainment industry, reveals

an attitude of distrust. If every consumer buying a VCR was to pay for (what the industry thought of as) piracy, this implies the industry did not trust any VCR owner to not do what the industry considered immoral. Therefore, the entertainment industry's statements also imply that users have a lack of agency when confronted with their device. The industry did not think it was reasonable to consider that different VCR owners would have a choice about how they would put the device to use in relation to TV content. This attitude also neglected the range of VCR uses that were not related to TV content. It was not uncommon that VCRs were used for making<sup>69</sup> and watching<sup>70</sup> family home movies<sup>71</sup>, and many VCR owners were video artists that used the device's editing functions to construct their art.<sup>72</sup> The development of the VCR, like many technologies before it, exhibits the exaggerative, and often technologically deterministic, reactions new technologies bring forth due to their unpredictability. For the entertainment industry, the VCR was disruptive to their business model, and it caused piracy.

### **The Adjustment Period**

In 1984, *Advertising Age* cited an analyst for cable TV investments: "Network and pay tv services are adjusting their program philosophies and adapting to changing viewing habits."<sup>73</sup> The cable industry was beginning to find ways to view how home-

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<sup>69</sup> Foerstner, Abigail. "Video: With Video, You Won't Need an Invitation to Visit the Queen." *Chicago Tribune*. Feb 22, 1985: F52.

<sup>70</sup> Dunn, D.H. "Rehearsing for a Job Interview on Videotape." *Business Week*. Jan 1983: 109-10.

<sup>71</sup> "Home Videotaping is Here and What Are Our Readers Doing With It?" *Sunset*. Vol. 168. May 1982: 168:116-8.

<sup>72</sup> As one 1978 article about video art opened, "If you think that all there is to videotape is getting all your favorite shows onto a Betamax, look again."

"Artist Explains Role of Video in Art World." *Chicago Tribune*. Oct 1, 1978: W\_A12.

<sup>73</sup> "Home Tapers Tapping Cable Programming." *Advertising Age*. Vol. 55. No. 29. 1984: 40.

taping could be beneficial to their practice. Two cable TV analysts claimed that “[b]y time shifting and customizing the program schedule,” viewers had the potential to “improve the value of the pay tv schedule.” Their logic was that increased VCR owners would “enhance the basic cable outlook.” In support, the article cited a study (presented at the National Cable Television Association’s convention) that showed “VCR use in cabled homes with pay tv service [was] significantly higher than in the average tv household.” The explanation for the correlation between VCR ownership and cable TV subscriptions was “[b]etter reception and more programming to time shift.” The cable TV industry was beginning to understand that home-taping was not a way to replace TV services, but a manifestation of TV viewers’ enthusiasm and desire to watch more programming.

Others within the cable TV industry were still convinced that VCRs and home-tapers were poaching their business. One insider felt that “[t]he growth of home video is a harbinger of technology that will attract some people away from cable.” The stated adjustment to be made for compensation of cable service poaching was to concentrate on “more releases each month to retain viewers.” In other words, some cable companies were adjusting by trying to offer more so they could continue to appeal to people, even if they owned a VCR. The logic here was to adapt to home-tapers by giving them a more expansive buffet to record from. If an enthusiastic home-taper wanted to build a large videotape library, a cable subscription that offered a plentitude of programs would be appealing.

This year, 1984, marked an end to the entertainment industry’s feud with the consumer electronics industry. The Supreme Court’s decision of what is commonly

referred to as “The Betamax Case,” Universal’s ongoing attempts to outlaw home-taping by litigating against Sony, put an end to the entertainment industry’s hopes to render home-taping illegal. At this time, home-taping was legal as long as it was done for domestic purposes (i.e. not for profit). It was now defined in the public consciousness as a new way of watching TV, rather than a for-profit business opportunity (i.e. selling bootleg copies of home-taped programs). Thus, 1984 marked the beginning of an adjustment period for the networks, as they had to confront the idea that home-taping was not going away. This called for a change in attitude and motivations away from targeting manufacturers to financially compensate for home-taping; the TV and cable industry was “becoming more respectful” of the home-taping phenomenon.<sup>74</sup> So, there were emotional adjustments, as well as marketing and business practice adjustments. While a portion of the cable industry started to adjust their attitude toward home-tapers, other factions of the industry felt they needed to adjust their product in order to retain VCR owners.

The following year, the cable company Group W presents a more nuanced representation of the cable industry at the end of the VCR’s first decade. Group W Cable Company, the cable-broadcasting subsidiary of Westinghouse Electric Corporation,<sup>75</sup> offered the following to their 2 million customers: “Let us help you hook up your VCR.” The company acknowledged the prominence of VCRs given as Christmas gifts the preceding year and wanted to show the change in their attitude by offering their subscribers a tutorial on how to tape cable programs with their VCR. A Group W representative stated, “We, as an industry, are going to have to learn to live with them.”

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<sup>74</sup> “Home Tapers Tapping Cable Programming.” *Advertising Age*, 40.

<sup>75</sup> Fabrikant, Geraldine. “Group W Cable Sold to 5 Buyers: Westinghouse Systems Bring \$1.6 Billion.” *New York Times*. Dec 25, 1985: 43.

Though Group W's gesture exhibited a peace offering between two industries, the offering is also another manifestation of home video anxiety. Aware of the Hollywood video rental boom, cable companies feared customers would phase out their cable subscription due to the high volume of video renting. To curb subscription dumping, cable companies like Group W would offer VCR tutorials with the following pitch: "In no time at all you can enjoy endless hours of entertainment at home. All you need is your cable and your VCR."<sup>76</sup>

Though there were still symptoms of home-taping anxiety, this adjustment period can also be seen as a period of relief for the TV and cable industry. As we know from previous literature, the end of the VCR's first decade segued into the beginning of the prerecorded Hollywood video as the mainstream business for the VCR market. Cable companies, such as HBO, were concerned about the "home video revolution" just as they were concerned about home-tapers. The solution to this anxiety was much simpler: to enter the prerecorded home video market with tapes of TV programs. But some cable networks still hesitantly approached this solution. A Showtime/TMC spokeswoman stated as of 1984 they had not constructed any plans for entering the prerecorded videotape market, "but we certainly don't want to close the door. We're not sticking our heads in the sand." However, HBO ("the nation's largest pay tv service" at the time) announced the same year that it would "enter the home video fray." Unlike Showtime, HBO felt the home video cassette market was "a fairly easy business to migrate into."<sup>77</sup> Late in 1984, HBO joined with Thorn EMI Screen Entertainment "to acquire and

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<sup>76</sup> Spillman, S. "Group W Cable Makes Peace with VCRs." *Advertising Age*. Vol. 56. Iss. 15. Feb 25, 1985: 36.

<sup>77</sup> "Home Tapers Tapping Cable Programming." *Advertising Age*, 40.

distribute home-video programming in North America.”<sup>78</sup> Two years later, Showtime was continuing to solve the home video problem. Their answer was pay-per-view TV: “movies to cable system operators, who will in turn offer them to cable homes for about \$4 to \$5 for a single viewing.” The logic was that video store patrons would rather pay a nominally higher fee for the convenience of renting a movie straight from their cable provider.<sup>79</sup> Showtime was still resisting the home video market. Companies like Showtime, which were slow to adjust to the home video market, reveal the entrenched conviction of distrust and disrespect some of the cable industry felt toward the VCR and videocassette industry.

### **Conclusion**

In constructing the story of the TV and cable industry during the VCR’s first decade, the frustrating relationship between the industries and the manufacturers frames the dominant narrative of this era. The entertainment companies and broadcast networks viewed the VCR fearfully, because it promised to put viewers in charge of the TV schedule with the device’s primary use: time-shifting. In order to combat the problematic VCR, the entertainment industry discussed time-shifting as an infringement of their copyright, or piracy, that needed to be illegalized. But, as the aforementioned MCA, Inc. president posited, the TV industry saw the solution to piracy as ultimately elusive due to fundamentally different conceptualizations of the VCR (and home-taping) between the TV industry and the VCR owners. Thus, the entertainment industry’s primary attempts to restrict home-taping targeted the manufacturing industry.

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<sup>78</sup> Cook, David. “HBO Forms Home-Video Program Joint Venture.” *Los Angeles Times*. David Cook. Nov 21, 1984: H16.

<sup>79</sup> Gendel, Morgan. “Showtime to Expand Offerings.” *Los Angeles Times*. Mar 4, 1986: H1.

Applying royalty fees to consumer costs of VCRs and videotapes was discussed as one of the entertainment industry's main solutions to piracy, which was eventually futile. This solution can be seen as a technologically deterministic answer born out of anxiety over the possible disruption of existing business practices. This anxiety was a dramatic reaction that reflected an industry expecting a worst-case scenario for their business: the VCR caused an endemic consumer desire to pirate television programming. This was a technologically deterministic response, because charging a fee to every consumer in order to compensate for piracy assumed that every consumer would commit piracy. In other words, the purchase of a VCR was equated to piracy, and therefore the entertainment industry's sentiments can be reduced to the idea that the VCR caused piracy, an idea that does not make way for the nuanced habits of individual users.

For the TV networks, the VCR era was a slow process of recognizing they were relinquishing control of their product and adapting to the ways viewers were approaching TV differently through VCR use. Part of this loss of control came via the entertainment industry's failure with the Betamax case, which made it clear that they had to more seriously consider the rights and desires of the audience. The entertainment industry did not have a say about how VCR owners used their personal home video technology. By the time the Supreme Court ruled against the entertainment industry's wish in 1984, there had already been a significant shift in power between the TV industry and home-tapers. People recording TV content had begun to be empowered through the use of their VCR because it gave them new control of how they experienced network programming. During the VCR era, home-tapers were able to rearrange TV programming to meet personal needs and desires as well as preserve content that they wanted to view multiple

times. Before this, viewers were subjected to TV in a way that was controlled by the networks' decisions about how and when TV should be viewed. This shift in power revealed two opposing positions in relation to TV content: the TV industry saw their product as a series of ephemeral experiences to be viewed live, while home-tapers thought of TV as a menu of content that merited selecting and preserving based on personal preference. More simply, the TV industry conceptualized TV viewing as a one-time activity, whereas viewers considered TV content as a multitude of varying experiences shaped by different types of programs. Different types of viewing also shaped home-tapers' conceptualization of TV; viewing live, later, or for a second time were distinctly different ways to enjoy TV.

## THE HOME-TAPERS

### Novelty of the VCR

“Was it possible for a man to fall in love with a VHS recorder?” asked *Los Angeles Times* writer, Howard Rosenberg, in the summer of 1982. He continued, “I’ll never forget the exhilaration I felt the day I brought it home for the first time. Removing it from its carton, I set it on the floor and just gawked at its components.” People were excited about the VCR. Rosenberg exhibited the epitome of how novel the VCR was for TV viewers. He goes so far as to exclaim, “Oh, my machine.” What was it about the VCR that people like Rosenberg were so excited about? He answered this question with one concise sentiment: “No more being a slave to TV schedules.” To celebrate his newfound freedom, the *Los Angeles Times* journalist claimed he began to record every program he could. “What a kick it was to play with my new toy,” Rosenberg stated. “Happiness is taping a program you are dying to see. Misery is discovering that a member of your family has inadvertently taped another program over it.”<sup>80</sup> Though hyperbolic, his desire for a device that allowed TV viewers to record programs off the air was widely shared. Some owners were so enthusiastic that adjusting to life with a VCR proved to be taxing on their relationships. One New York resident, Donna Garret,

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<sup>80</sup> Rosenberg, Howard. “The Video Explosion: Me and My Machine: A Stormy Relationship.” *Los Angeles Times*. May 30, 1982: N20.

claimed to break-up with her boyfriend “because their tastes in videocassette films were incompatible.” Another said, “My boyfriend does nothing else but tape and watch...I scream at him. I told him I did not move to Manhattan to sit at home and watch television...I think one of us has got to go, me or the VCR.”<sup>81</sup> In this chapter, I will discuss what made the VCR such an exciting consumer technology that it was able to cause such powerful reactions. Through the discourse of the public opinions present in popular publications, I will also discuss how the VCR fit into existing notions of the family and taste hierarchies.

In 1980, *Los Angeles Times* published a piece titled “VCR Solves Television Viewing Problems.” It was a detailed account of what the VCR could do, and how those functions would make consumers’ lives easier; as the title states, it was to solve problems. Describing basic time-shifting the author stated, “If you want to watch *Saturday Night Live* on Sunday afternoon, do it. If you like Monday night football but hate to miss *M\*A\*S\*H*, you can watch both, with a VCR.” This description imparts two distinct reasons to time-shift: to watch a particular program at a time more fitting to one’s schedule, and to make it possible to watch more programs.

Time-shifting in the piece is said to give “relief” for the “all-too-common” problems of TV schedule conflicts; the author continues, “[the VCR] lets you arrange your television viewing schedule the way you like it, with no fear of conflict or loss.”<sup>82</sup> The language used implied that TV was something important that viewers had wanted to harness to be more applicable to their lives. Whether viewers had been cognizant

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<sup>81</sup> Geist, William E. “About New York: The Invasion of the VCR Owners.” *New York Times*. Jan 9, 1985: B3.

<sup>82</sup> Ciccolella, Cathy. “VCR Solves Television Viewing Problems.” *Los Angeles Times*. Mar 26, 1980: J12.

previously that the VCR would be so helpful, the essence of the VCR's novelty is that relief was now realized. Not only did the VCR signify a welcome shift in power between viewers and the TV industry, it made a previous power imbalance known to TV viewers. The author simply states the time-shifting operation was "letting you decide when you'll watch the shows you like."<sup>83</sup> TV programming was only thought of previously as a rigid, fixed schedule that called for appointment viewing in order to be selective about personal viewing. Now, the VCR technology allowed for TV schedules to be a malleable concept. The VCR was exciting because it permitted viewers to make programming pliable to their lives. With program scheduling decisions now in viewers' hands, they could take control away from the TV networks. And by making their own viewing decisions, watching programs could become a more personal experience for viewers.

While the VCR opened up the possibility for viewers to design their own program schedules, it also helped consumers with personal schedules. One of the problems the *Los Angeles Times* article referred to was a personal schedule conflicting with a viewer's favorite show: "there's no more need to miss a special you want to see just because you're going out for the evening or want to go to bed early." The VCR's recording timer was novel for how it let consumers avoid such conflicts by recording the show to be watched at a more convenient time.

By saying VCR owners can tape programs they are missing while going out for the evening, going to sleep, or while others are using the TV, the *Los Angeles Times* piece recognized that many viewers thought of TV viewing as a product of a selective process, an experience they curated. They did not view the TV as something to simply

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<sup>83</sup> Ciccolella, Cathy. "VCR Solves Television Viewing Problems." *Los Angeles Times*, J12.

turn on and be content with what the networks had chosen to schedule. Particular types of programming shaped TV viewing, and with a VCR, they could preserve those programs and redefine TV content as something lasting—not ephemeral: “save the tape so you can watch your favorite [shows] again and again.”<sup>84</sup>

Not only was TV viewing becoming a more selective process for home-tapers, the VCR exposed that TV networks’ primetime scheduling (a format that assumed the best and most desired programs should revolve around a traditional 9am-5pm work schedule) was seen as inhibiting to some. *Chicago Tribune* TV writer, Marilyn Preston, detailed the habits of a non-9am-5pm worker:

“One newspaper fellow I know, who used to work nights, got a VCR so he could tape all the night baseball games and play them back when he got home at 2 a.m. He knew it wouldn’t be as much fun if he knew the final score ahead of time so he had a friend on the copy desk neatly remove all the sports sections from the newspapers he worked with. Then he would take one sports section home in a plain brown sealed wrapper and, when the game was over, he’d rip it open and read the instant commentary. That was his idea of a good time. . . .”<sup>85</sup>

Without the VCR, TV viewers like the one Preston mentioned would not have had an opportunity to see the desired game. With the VCR, people made TV viewing a more democratic process; people with schedules outside of those the networks catered to were able to take part in the programs they would otherwise miss.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ciccolella, Cathy. “VCR Solves Television Viewing Problems.” *Los Angeles Times*, J12.

<sup>85</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Tempo: Video Cassettes Can Rechanel Your Life.” *Chicago Tribune*. Apr 17, 1980: A1.

<sup>86</sup> Although not a detailed account, *Working Woman* also spoke of the VCR in a similar way: “Many working women say that having a VCR gives them extra freedom. They can work late, have a social life and still get a chance to see the programs they want to watch.” Post, Christopher. “Home Video Equipment.” *Working Woman*. Vol 8. Jan 1983: 44-6.

Remarking on how beneficial the VCR would be, in 1980 Preston (perhaps jokingly exaggerative) referred to the time before the VCR as “B.C. (Before Cassettes).”<sup>87</sup> She was insinuating that this new consumer technology was so life changing that it would or had ushered in a new era that would eclipse its prior time. Less hyperbolically, she went on to claim, “It’s not just a toy: It’s our kind of magic.” Preston did not think the VCR should not be considered merely a consumer tech toy for early adopters, but should be seen as a way for everyone to transform how they watch TV. She mentioned a couple that spoke about one precise function that had changed how they watch some TV programs. The couple taped several shows about magicians performing tricks, and they would subsequently watch the tapes, rewinding and fast-forwarding in order to “concentrate on figuring out how the trick is done.” They stated the VCR was a useful tool for this because magician’s tricks are done with misdirection, which could be exposed through slowly perusing programs with the device’s rewind and fast-forward functions. Preston then remarked, “So far, the secret of network success has been misdirection, too – they made us look where they wanted us to look and we had no choice. Now that we have the choice, I wonder what will happen to the magic?”<sup>88</sup> Here, she made a poetically astute statement about the shift in common thought about TV viewing.

Preston echoed statements that appeared two years earlier, in 1978, in a *Los Angeles Times* piece titled, “VCR Brings Important Change to TV Viewing.” The article’s tone was defined by the novel idea of a consumer device that was “giving

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<sup>87</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Tempo: Video Cassettes Can Rechannel Your Life.” *Chicago Tribune*, A1.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

American TV viewers the final say on what they'll watch, when." It described the basic functions of time-shifting and library building (and automatic timing to do so) and how practical these uses could have been for the viewer's personal agenda (i.e. pause if the phone rings, record a show past your bedtime). Such descriptions were expressed with an emphasis on "controlling your own TV scheduling."<sup>89</sup>

*Chicago Tribune* journalist David Prescott suggested users were able to engage their enthusiasm for TV and home video programs with the VCR. *Video Magazine* editor-in-chief Doug Garr is cited to support how comprehensively time-shifting could have restructured the video enthusiast's schedule:

"Americans are staying at home like they never used to. We can now wake up in the morning to a work-out tape, watch a 'How to Cook Sushi' tape for lunch followed by 'How to Bass Fish' in the afternoon followed by 'How to Get a Divorce by Marvin Mitchelson' in the evening, and then go to bed watching a classic movie."<sup>90</sup>

Though Garr did not specify whether he was referencing prerecorded videos or not, this schedule restructuring could have also been done by time-shifting. Either way, this approach to daily life reflected a new understanding of TV content: schedules were flexible. It was strange for viewers to realize they could now watch what they wanted, when they wanted. TV viewing was no longer about being relegated to what the TV networks had prescribed for a particular time of day. A VCR-owning couple stated how dependent on home-taping they had become: "ours broke two days ago and I've been calling neighbors to record shows I want to see while it's in the shop."<sup>91</sup> Having a

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<sup>89</sup> "VCR Brings Important Change to TV Viewing." *Los Angeles Times*. Nov 26, 1978: G9.

<sup>90</sup> Prescott, David. "The Living Room Revolution: Entertainment Tonight – or Whenever." *Chicago Tribune*. Nov. 3, 1985: 14.

<sup>91</sup> "Ibid.

newfound control over their TV viewing via the VCR, it was hard to get back to watching TV under the control of the networks.

“The video revolution has begun,” opened one *Chicago Tribune* article in the fall of 1980. The revolution was promised by an onslaught of new consumer electronics that “experts say” would make your TV set “mean more than a box with images.” As the clever headline, “Record ‘Tonight,’ Watch Tomorrow,” inferred, the piece was most interested in the VCR and its ability to time-shift programs. Amongst other new video-related consumer products at the time, the author stated the VCR was “more mature and fairly well-defined” than the others. And importantly, in 1980, it was considered “no longer a toy for the rich;”<sup>92</sup> the VCR was being considered a useful device for the middle-class. The article started with a hyperbolic tone about the video revolution, but what followed was more of a practical buyer’s guide so consumers could navigate the saturated home video equipment market. It primarily instructed consumers about the difference between the Betamax and VHS formats. The author’s advice was based on available options, such as fast-forward and rewind, an automatic taping timer, and the quality and price differences respective of Sony’s Betamax and VHS brands. The possibility of a price war between companies was also mentioned. The main point of the article was that although the VCR was not an inexpensive device, its time-shifting capability was worth an early purchase.

Discourse regarding home-taping as revolutionary seemed to persist throughout the decade. As late as 1985, there were columns announcing the VCR and its functions as revolutionary. A piece appearing in *Chicago Tribune* titled “The Living Room

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<sup>92</sup> Potts, Mark. “The Video Cassette: Record ‘Tonight,’ Watch Tomorrow.” *Chicago Tribune*. Aug 19, 1980: C3.

Revolution: Entertainment Tonight – or Whenever” was describing the beginning of a new era when “television could be manipulated” and “viewers can control and play with the information we receive.” It goes on to call time-shifting “the result of two decades of technological innovation.” The thrust of the piece was not that watching TV at a more convenient time is a revolutionary development, but that the VCR’s importance was continually framed as offering citizens the ability “to control what information we receive, and how, when and where we receive it, to a degree never known before.”<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, in 1986 Charles Champlin of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote an article declaring “The VCR-ing of America.” Champlin argued that “[t]he rise of the VCR has to be interpreted in part as a rising impatience with commercial television, and an increasing selectivity toward what it offers.” It is important to note that he attributed the popularity of VCRs primarily to “carefully picked and taped TV shows,” or selection, a habit that was central to the device’s earliest consumer enthusiasm.<sup>94</sup>

### **The VCR & the Family**

The VCR was not only novel for how people used it to make TV viewing a more selective, personal experience, but when it penetrated the domestic market, families had to make decisions surrounding the device that reflected their idea of family. Some consumer decisions included: whether they would buy one, where they would put it, how often they would use it, who could use it and when, how much children could be exposed to it, and what types of programs children could be exposed to via the VCR.

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<sup>93</sup> Prescott, David. “The Living Room Revolution: Entertainment Tonight – or Whenever.” *Chicago Tribune*. Nov. 3, 1985: 14.

<sup>94</sup> Champlin, Charles. “The VCR-ing of America: Videocassettes Have Fast-Forwarded Into Our Lives.” *Los Angeles Times*. Dec 28, 1986: U2.

As will become evident throughout this chapter, many VCR users appreciated the device because it supported their omnivorous appetite for TV content. However, some users, like pastor and *Christianity Today* contributor Dennis Tegtmeier, treasured the VCR because it helped him limit options. As the title claims, he found solace in the VCR as a “Key to Taming the TV Monster.” Tegtmeier said it was time for his family “to stop talking about television’s potential for harm and do something about it.”

The pastor said his family had considered three options that would help them avoid the TV in favor of approaching their familial ideal. The first was “selling or destroying” the TV set, but he worried their children would still be exposed to TV content at friends’ house. The second was “being selective,” but during “prime-time evening hours often this only gives you a choice of various suggestive, violent, and sexually explicit shows.” In other words, the only time the family would have wanted to sit down, none of the available programs appealed to their family desires. Tegtmeier’s third option was “[d]oing family things together.” He defined “family things” as playing games together, reading books, or going on adventures outside the home. However, he stated that the weather and varying moods of family members would often obstruct the possibility of these activities. These “family things” were discussed in opposition to TV watching. Thus, Tegtmeier considered the TV to conceptually be inappropriate for families.

But, on the verge of “[s]elling or destroying” their family TV set because of “various suggestive, violent, and sexually explicit shows,” Tegtmeier found a way to make the TV work in his favor: by taming it with a VCR. It offered him the opportunity to “choose what moral impressions we will allow the tube to put out.” Basically, with the

new device he was able to judge what they planned to show to their children, and also to replay programs for their children that he deemed safe. “As a result of our new control over TV we can watch it less and we watch it constructively,” Tegtmeier stated.<sup>95</sup> Though his approach to the VCR was opposite TV omnivores who cherished the device as a way to watch more than they could have previously, Tegtmeier was similarly in favor of the VCR because it offered owners more control and allowed them to understand TV viewing as a selective process. His selection, however, came from his familial ideals; the VCR was used to uphold the proper moral habits for a family.

The VCR also worked for Tegtmeier because of the family’s scheduling conflicts: “Our family enjoys religious drama, but we aren’t awake in the wee morning hours when...*This Is the Life* is broadcast in our area,” but the device’s automatic timer could record it for them. Presumably, they could now watch these religious dramas in place of the prime-time programs thought of as inappropriate for family viewing. Further, “[c]onflicts between homework and TV have ceased. If something worthwhile is on, the children gladly do their homework, because we tape the show [to replay later].” If the parents wanted their children to finish any homework before watching quality programming, they did not have to make a decision between watching family-friendly content while it was on and doing homework. Now, they can save a taping of *Sound of Music* to replace “Saturday morning cartoons, often called TV’s most violent hours.”<sup>96</sup>

Tegtmeier’s sentiments were not uncommon. The VCR was often thought of as a stress reliever for how it could be used to facilitate family schedules, making parenting

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<sup>95</sup> Tegtmeier, Dennis. “VCR’s: Key to Taming the TV Monster.” *Christianity Today*. Vol. 25. Jan. 1981: 26-7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

easier. One mother echoed these VCR's advantage, but according to their children's viewing preferences: "if a news program you want to see conflicts with your children's favorite situation comedy, there's now an easy compromise."<sup>97</sup> This spoke to how the VCR was or should be used to ease domestic familial relations, to make everyone happy.

Marilynn Preston wrote about the VCR and home-taping distinctly and as a parenting tool:

"[S]ome parents like to use their VCR-TV units as a kind of Supersitter, and then make a point of keeping it as far away from the closed bedroom door as possible. These parents might build up a tape library of good shows for the kids, like next week's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* based on *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or the new PBS series called *3-2-1- Contact!* Or any of the *Charlie Brown* specials. Then, some cozy Saturday night, if the old folks feel like lounging around on the chenille spread and there's nothing decent on the air for young folks, they can easily (and without guilt) set the kids up with a videotaped replay of something worthwhile and wonderful. A whole tape of old *Muppet Shows* works well for one woman."<sup>98</sup>

Here, Preston discussed two VCR uses that were beneficial to parenting. First, the VCR was a "Supersitter," or automated babysitter (which would not require an hourly wage). If parents needed some free time or needed to distribute their energy away from their children but still wanted their kids to be entertained, the VCR was a valuable tool to have around the house. Elsewhere, Preston advised readers to time-shift for "rainy days," or when "a crabby kid who insists on watching TV when there's nothing worth watching on."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ciccolella, Cathy. "VCR Solves Television Viewing Problems." *Los Angeles Times*, J12.

<sup>98</sup> Preston, Marilynn. "Tempo: Video Cassettes Can Rechannel Your Life." *Chicago Tribune*, A1.

<sup>99</sup> Preston, Marilynn. "'Jeopardy!,' 'Magic' Highlights of Week: Worth Taping." *Chicago Tribune*. Sep 21, 1984: N58.

Second, Preston used adjectives like “good,” “decent,” and “worthwhile and wonderful,” to qualify types of TV content. She suggested that the VCR could also be used to build libraries of programs that simultaneously fit the standards of parents and the taste of children.

Toward the end of the VCR era, Preston again discussed the VCR in relation to the family, but in a different manner. In a 1984 article aimed at parents, she expressed an idea described as revolutionary, astonishing, and creepy all at once: “You can, if you want, use your VCR to reprogram your television set so that your child grows up on exactly the same TV shows you grew up on as a child.” She went on to suggest specific programs: “*Lassie* instead of *Hunter*; *Burns and Allen* instead of *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*; *The Lone Ranger* instead of *The A Team*.” The rest of the article is a thorough guide on how to “re-create your own Golden Age of TV” that covered each day of the week. This idea is an elaboration of how the VCR was used to curate personal programming schedules. Her instructions were based on the idea of a sharing between family members. This was a family activity wherein parents could share their childhood memories and experiences with their progeny through the cultural institution of TV. “It’s all up to you, the TV reality you create, the choices you make;”<sup>100</sup> Preston was encouraging people to use the VCR as a tool to help access and discover TV in different ways. With its time-shifting function, the VCR could have been the center of a family activity that uncovered cultural texts across decades for children and allowed parents to rediscover them.

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<sup>100</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Video: Now, Show Your Kids the Programs You Cut Your Teeth On.” *Chicago Tribune*. Dec 28, 1984: N\_A45.

The aforementioned 1985 piece by David Prescott also connected family and time-shifting.<sup>101</sup> Details about the VCR were accompanied by a large illustration of a family (mother, father, son, and daughter) huddled around a large television set with a VCR and a stack of videotapes on top. The illustration's caption reads: "The world of video: The impact of VCRs and related technology on the American family is only beginning to be understood."<sup>102</sup> The article was an eclectic compilation of consumer thoughts about how the new VCR boom was playing out in the family sphere.

First, there was the question of where in the home a family should place their TV and VCR. Prescott cited Alan Strez, a Chicago interior designer, to support how the VCR is significant for engaging deeper thought about media in the home: "People used to just throw the television in the living room or bedroom, without much thought...But the thing now is to have a room where you have the television, stereo, [VCR], cassette decks, all that, in one special area that is assuming a much more important place in the home." Based on the numbers Strez provided, designating a room in the house for media was not a pervasive practice in 1985, but he implied it was triggered by the popularity of VCRs.<sup>103</sup> Media rooms (in relation to the VCR and the video boom) had been referenced for years prior. In 1981, the publication *The Family Handyman* featured a "Buyer's Guide to Home Equipment" that gave its readers detailed consumer choices for how to furnish the family's media room with new video equipment. Among the advised video

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<sup>101</sup> Prescott, David. "The Living Room Revolution: Entertainment Tonight – or Whenever." *Chicago Tribune*. Nov. 3, 1985: 14.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

equipment was the VCR: “new models can be programmed to record favorite shows while you are away from home.”<sup>104</sup>

As Strez claimed, home video was becoming significant enough in the house for some families to elect an entire room for watching TV. If building media rooms was new during the VCR era, and the VCR was being used to make TV viewing a more personal and intense hobby (due to choice and control), it makes sense that some families would have thought it appropriate to have a room defined by the TV and VCR. The development of media rooms, where the TV and VCR acted as the centerpiece, punctuates how viewers’ thoughts toward TV were changing. The activity of watching TV programs became less about passive enjoyment of what happened to be scheduled, and more about personally curated schedules made possible by the VCR. So, a media room could have been seen as a byproduct of the growing enthusiasm of TV viewing that time-shifting and library building ushered in. By the same logic, it also makes sense that one single mother told Marilyn Preston she “prefers her VCR in the bedroom,” or as the author called it, “her private quarters.”<sup>105</sup> As some VCR owners’ fervor for TV watching grew, it became an activity that was less associated with social spaces like the living room and more with personal spaces such as bedrooms or rooms designated specifically for TV viewing.

One of the voices included in Prescott’s piece was University of Illinois professor, Ellen Wartella, who spoke about the VCR as a device that should worry the family. She was particularly worried about the VCR’s potential harm to children, saying she was

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<sup>104</sup> “Buyer’s Guide to Home Video Equipment.” *The Family Handyman*. Dec 1981: 77-9.

<sup>105</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Tempo: Video Cassettes Can Rechannell Your Life.” *Chicago Tribune*, A1.

“concerned about children seeing a lot of violence.” Another professor (of University of Maryland, this time) thought the device gave stay-at-home mothers a much needed opportunity to work outside of the house without missing her favorite shows, but was troubled by the possibility that the VCR would give teenagers more access to content deemed unsavory: “while mom and dad are at work the teenage son comes home with a group of friends and they bring with them a pornographic or violent videotape their parents don’t approve of.”<sup>106</sup> Fear surrounding the VCR as a conduit for unsavory content in the home was a widely shared sentiment. And though Wartella saw reason for concern surrounding the VCR (as related to children), she also saw an importance of the VCR’s interactivity, which allowed children to “stop, go back or fast forward what they are watching.” With the VCR, Wartella believed children “[had] control in much the same way they do when reading.”<sup>107</sup> Along with this interactive control over visual texts (i.e. being able to rewind if something was missed or fast-forward to skip something), these professors also recognized that work-at-home mothers gained greater control through the VCR by not having to sacrifice the enjoyment of her favorite programs in order to leave the house. But they also cautioned that VCR owners would have potentially relinquished some of their control. Researchers were concerned that a VCR would have offered children easier access to both violent and pornographic programming. Under this consideration, some parents would have seen the VCR as a device used to subvert family ideals. Therefore, it was discussed as a technology that had potential to both offer control and detract from owners’ control in the home.

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<sup>106</sup> Prescott, David. “The Living Room Revolution: Entertainment Tonight – or Whenever.” *Chicago Tribune*, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

### **Cultural Hierarchy**

Many of the journalists voicing public opinions about TV viewing and VCR usage often expressed ideas about TV content that reflected a cultural hierarchy. In other words, preferences and advice were given to programs that ascribed to existing notions of taste, while other types of shows were dismissed, or not labeled worthy of preserving. As Max Dawson states in “Home Video and the ‘TV Problem,’” these popular journalists held a “mediating function” that “connected manufacturers and marketers of home video technologies with a niche of upscale consumers.” The logic was: in order to get the most out of your VCR (and its accessories), you must tape the proper programs that would aid in the “transformation of the barren landscape of television’s vast ‘wasteland.’” And after taping, you must know which programs to save and which to record over. Dawson claims that these cultural discourses ushered in new video devices such as the VCR “within taste hierarchies shaped by cultural critics’ intensely ambivalent feelings toward American network television.”

Most of these critics, such as *New York Times* editor L.R. Shannon, operated under a self-invoked authority based on their professional status that allowed them to interpret video and television’s meaning for readers.<sup>108</sup> For instance, in a 1983 article titled “Play It Again, Sam, And Again And Again,” Shannon acclimated readers to the VCR. Covering the basics of the VCR’s functionality (time-shifting and timer settings) and its logistical dos and don’ts (tape compatibility and pricing, cleaning protocol), Shannon expressed the extent to which he found the VCR useful. Though the piece’s

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<sup>108</sup> Dawson, Max. "Home Video and the "TV Problem": Cultural Critics and Technological Change." *Technology and Culture* 48.3. 2007: 525-7.

clever title suggests an omnivorous appetite for the re-consumption of TV programs, Shannon seems conflicted on how much he wants to commit to speaking about TV content as something worth serious consideration. He begins by framing the technology as a toy for males, and there is a corresponding illustration of a pile of toys with a Jack-in-the-box taking center stage, but an animate TV and VCR act as the head of the titular Jack, popping out of the box like the toy's novel trick. Thus, the TV and VCR were given the properties of a trivial amusement. It is not surprising, then, that Shannon states the greatest use of the VCR is time-shifting, which refers to recording a program you were not able to watch during its scheduled broadcasting in case "[y]ou want to spend Friday night abusing your waistline at a new restaurant."<sup>109</sup> Though Shannon enjoyed time-shifting because it offered a liberation from TV networks' schedules, he had a limited view of the VCR's usefulness that only consisted of using the same tape over-and-over again. Shannon mentioned this partially out of frugality due to expensive tape prices, but his language suggests he did not think of TV viewing as much more than a trivial activity: "[r]ecord a bunch of soaps during the week and have your own mindless weekend anthology." When the VCR and videotapes were used to watch soap operas, the technology was not of import.

However, Shannon did hint at the importance of preserving TV content but subsequently undercut that idea with drawbacks. He suggested that by paying close attention to the TV schedule, "you can accumulate an impressive collection," but it is important to note that "impressive" is defined by recording *Casablanca* (a Hollywood film commonly called a classic) or the BBC serial *Brideshead Revisited* (an adaptation of

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<sup>109</sup> Shannon, L.R. "Play It Again, And Again And Again." *New York Times*. 1983

Evelyn Waugh's literary classic). Recording over such "impressive" material is compared to book burning, and called "sacrilege." Ultimately, Shannon does not advise building libraries of "these masterworks" because they are "cluttered with commercials." Driving home his point, the author asks rhetorically, "Would you treasure *Walden* if it were interrupted every few epigrams by offers for knives that never need sharpening?" So, Shannon was making an interesting comparison between a piece of American literature prized for its intellectual thought and content found on TV, but only programs that fit comfortably within a profile of high culture should be considered worth preserving. He prized a TV show like *Brideshead Revisited* because of its relation to literature, which is historically associated with high culture. But soap opera, a genre of TV that has been historically denigrated as low culture, were only deemed fitting for "mindless" weekend fun, and presumably worth taping over (not preserving) subsequently.<sup>110</sup> It is important to also consider the gendered connotations present in these programs' respective placement within cultural distinctions of taste. Whereas literary classics like *Walden* and Hollywood classics like *Casablanca* were widely considered serious works of art, soap operas were largely dismissed as a TV genre that only women take seriously. The gendered coding of the TV programming schedule is reflected in the networks' schedule that aired soap operas during the day for stay-at-home mothers, while programs considered high culture were reserved for primetime hours, when men would be home from work.

However, there were plenty of voices in the popular opinion that expressed their soap opera fervor as something more than mindless weekend fun. In 1985, Monica Langley of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote about *The Young and the Restless* as a soap on

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<sup>110</sup> Shannon, L.R. "Play It Again, And Again And Again." *New York Times*. 1983.

the rise for “yuppies” (young urban professionals): “What has freed Yuppies to become soap fans is the videocassette recorder.” Langley stated she was only a passing fan previously because she was always at work or school while soap operas aired – during the daytime. “Then recently I bought a VCR. Now I rush home after work to play back the latest dilemmas and desires,” Langley enthused.<sup>111</sup>

Similarly, in 1981 a piece appeared in the publication *Daytime Stars* titled “The Agony of the Missed Soap Episode - - Here’s How to Prevent It!” The writer claimed that any “*One Life to Live* fans who missed Karen’s courtroom scene still regret it two years later.” The term “agony” and the writer’s subsequent enthusiasm display an attitude opposite of “mindless” toward the soap opera genre on behalf of “the soap opera fan.”

These soap fans’ previous dilemma, of not being able to access these programs of low cultural status, highlights that the networks’ schedules reflected and perpetuated a normative and gendered taste hierarchy wherein programs that aired during primetime were assumed to be shows of legitimate quality, while those that aired during the daytime (while men were at work) were not to be considered culturally significant: “From people who miss their soap occasionally, to schoolchildren who miss the soaps ten months a year, to mothers reentering the work force after twenty years of soap watching, there is a vast daytime audience that is effectively shut from the action.”<sup>112</sup>

It was common that TV writers discussing home-taping would find programs and films of a high cultural status worth preserving in personal video libraries. For instance, one TV writer recommended Roberto Rossellini’s *Open City* “for those...building a home

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<sup>111</sup> Langley, Monica. “TV: The Soap for the Yup-and-Coming.” *Wall Street Journal*. Sep 18, 1985: 28.

<sup>112</sup> Pavlovich, Mary. “The Agony of the Missed Soap Episode - - Here’s How to Prevent It!” *Daytime Stars*. Nov 1981: 38-9.

library of neo-realist Italian dramas.”<sup>113</sup> Meanwhile, many TV writers (not specific to soap opera publications), such as Shannon, spoke of taping soap operas in order to watch a tape’s worth at once to catch up over the weekend or during free time. The difference between how these writers talk about different programs to tape can reveal taste distinctions: soap operas may have been worth recording so you can watch later, but a classic foreign film of Rossellini’s ilk was worth *preserving*. This kind of advice suggested that viewers should not have a need to watch soap operas over-and-over again, but that *Open City* could be savored over multiple viewings. The *Daytime Stars* piece mentioned the value in taping soap operas in order to catch up later, but also saw these recordings as more worthwhile: “Does your favorite character have a really super scene? Watch it twice.” Here, the author overtly exhibits a desire for soap opera programming that understood it as something more than ephemeral. “Even better, play the tape at night with the whole family watching; once they’re hooked, the traditional criticism leveled at soap fans will disappear.”<sup>114</sup> This sentiment acknowledged the cultural denigration of the genre, and also interrogated such notion as arbitrary; if others would have viewed soap operas outside of the networks’ schedule, there was greater potential for them to appreciate the programming.

Two aforementioned *Chicago Tribune* TV writers, Marilyn Preston and David Prescott were also dedicated to the idea that TV was not a trivial activity, and wanted to help their readers discover programs they could feel the same way about. Toward the end of the VCR’s first decade, *Chicago Tribune* had a recurring entertainment column called

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<sup>113</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Presidential Debates and World Series Highlight Week: Worth Taping.” *Chicago Tribune*. Oct 5, 1984: SW\_A50.

<sup>114</sup> Pavlovich, Mary. “The Agony of the Missed Soap Episode - - Here’s How to Prevent It!” *Daytime Stars*, 38-9.

“Worth Taping,” in which journalists Preston (primarily) and Prescott (occasionally) wrote advice about home video, and informed readers of programs airing on TV that week that they felt were worth taping. Considering videocassettes were fairly expensive during the VCR’s first decade, home-tapers had to be thoughtful about what programs they would use costly cassette tapes on. Also, it was a new idea to be able to curate a personal TV schedule. Thus, readers may have looked forward to recurring columns such as “Worth Taping” to help make home-taping decisions, and Preston and Prescott assumed the positions of TV content experts.

These pieces usually followed a list format of short and persuasive descriptions of programs. Prescott and Preston’s advice was not especially particular to one type of TV programming; they would suggest programs such as old films, sitcoms, soap operas, game shows, cooking shows and nonfictional educational programs. Preston described their focus was “on the offbeat and the underpublicized.”<sup>115</sup> They did not make taping suggestions based on existing notions of high and low class taste, but from a “personal bias”<sup>116</sup> and a thought that worthy programs could be found across genres and show types.<sup>117</sup> In other words, they exhibited and advocated for omnivorous tastes. “I’m weary of people telling me there’s nothing on TV worth watching. It’s such a silly thing to say.

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<sup>115</sup> Preston, Marilynn. “A Weekly Tip-Sheet For You and Your VCR: Worth Taping.” *Chicago Tribune*. Sep 14, 1984: N58.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> In Preston’s September 28<sup>th</sup> “Worth Taping” column, her offering, “People who love trash can work up a sweat over *Muscle Beach Party*,” is another example of renouncing ideas of high and low taste. Though calling the program “trash,” Preston is acknowledging that people might like a program that is largely considered insignificant. And by including it a column titled “Worth Taping,” she distanced herself from social distinction that a program like *Muscle Beach Party* is not worth viewers’ time.

It's such an old-fashioned thing to say," started one week's column.<sup>118</sup> Sometimes, Preston would overtly make suggestions despite perceived conventions of snobbery: "You may want to turn your nose at the thought of it, but *Sexual Encounters of the Floral Kind* might just be worth saving."<sup>119</sup> Although at other times, Preston would advise one show worth taping over another for snobbish reasons. For instance, she championed *Jeopardy!* Because "[t]his update of TV's original *Trivial Pursuit* game deals in *real* information, not phony nonsense questions. Tape it mid-day and play it back after dinner instead of that idiotic *Family Feud* stuff."<sup>120</sup> And sometimes, she towed the line of championing a programing while also deeming it of low cultural significance: "Just for fun, you might want to strike up an acquaintance with the always tasteless, seldom terrific *Gong Show*."<sup>121</sup>

In a "Worth Taping" article from late 1984, Preston gave her readers a menu of old films available that week. She also mentioned an old TV show being revived, *Make Room for Daddy*, and reminded readers "[i]t's never too late to start your *Star Trek* collection."<sup>122</sup> It was very common for Preston or Prescott to mention collection building. Their inaugural "Worth Taping" column suggested taping a workout program for habitual

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<sup>118</sup> Preston, Marilyn. "Timeshifting Treats via VCR: Worth Taping." *Chicago Tribune*. Sep 28, 1984: N\_A60.

<sup>119</sup> Preston, Marilyn. "Sign Up for a Brain Brawl with 'National Science Test': Worth Taping." *Chicago Tribune*. Oct 12, 1984: N58.

<sup>120</sup> Preston, Marilyn. "'Jeopardy!,' 'Magic' Highlights of Week: Worth Taping." *Chicago Tribune*, N58.

<sup>121</sup> Preston, Marilyn. "Gable is Pick of the Week: Worth Taping." *Chicago Tribune*. Nov 9, 1984: N\_A58.

<sup>122</sup> Preston, Marilyn. "Worth Taping: Hepburn Classic Week." *Chicago Tribune*. Dec 7, 1984: N\_A64.

exercise use, and saving the *M\*A\*S\*H* finale while readers had the chance.<sup>123</sup> In other editions, Preston specifically recommended saving a presidential and vice-presidential debate (“at least until the election”), a nonfiction program called *Castles* (to rerun “[n]ext time you visit a castle”),<sup>124</sup> programs on nutrition information, and *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* alongside *Muscle Beach Party*<sup>125</sup> and Roberto Rossellini’s *Open City*.<sup>126</sup> These suggestions imply that some home-tapers’ libraries could have been thought of as a sort of encyclopedia; a resource for knowledge as well as a library of entertainment options.

Further, Preston and Prescott’s advice often inferred that the VCR could be of utilitarian use just as often as emotional use. Besides the aforementioned utility of entertaining children, home-tapers could “[l]earn how to doodle like a professional” by taping instructional sketching programs,<sup>127</sup> “seize the opportunity on sex education and set up your own storehouse of pertinent information,”<sup>128</sup>

“Feel like scaring yourself?” Preston asked to suggest taping *Psycho*, or “indulge in your dark side with *Lord of the Flies*.” “Looking for violence, you might want to sift out *Straw Dogs*.”<sup>129</sup> Through the “Worth Taping” column, Preston suggested a fairly even balance of programs that constructed the VCR as an entertainment provider and an

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<sup>123</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “A Weekly Tip-Sheet For You and Your VCR: Worth Taping.” *Chicago Tribune*. Sep 14, 1984:N58.

<sup>124</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Presidential Debates and World Series Highlight Week: Worth Taping.” *Chicago Tribune*. Oct 5, 1984: SW\_A50.

<sup>125</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Timeshifting Treats via VCR: Worth Taping.” *Chicago Tribune*. Sep 28, 1984: N\_A60.

<sup>126</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Presidential Debates and World Series Highlight Week: Worth Taping.” SW\_A50.

<sup>127</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “‘Bonzo’ May Be Precious 1984 Souvenir: Worth Taping.” *Chicago Tribune*. Nov 2, 1984: N64.

<sup>128</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Gable is Pick of the Week: Worth Taping,” N\_A58.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

instructional device. She also regularly suggested travel shows in a way that was using the VCR as a travelogue: “When you’re out of cash and still want to travel somewhere wonderful, try *Yellowstone in Winter*.”<sup>130</sup>

In a “Worth Taping” piece appearing towards the end of 1985, Prescott offered his readers a “[c]ornucopia of TV programs to fill up” videotapes. Prescott prefaces his program advice by telling readers that they do not have to rely on “pull[ing] out your bootleg copy of ‘Dirty Harry’” this year, because of the surplus of Christmas-themed TV content he recommended. The article further exhibited the desire for home-taping by the way Prescott delivered his advice as “a special gift,” consistent with the holiday parlance. Before delving in to describe each program and its scheduled broadcasting, he mentioned that some of the following are new programs and some are old, but both “guaranteed to get you in the spirit of holiday viewing.” By mentioning that some of the programs worth taping are from years past, Prescott conveyed that not only will the home-taper want to record them because of conflicting time-slots (or time-shifting to their convenience), but taping them will in turn cultivate a (small) library of Christmas material that can be perennially rewatched to “get you in the spirit.” In general, Preston and Prescott’s favorite holiday programming was often referred to as worth saving indefinitely. Similarly to Preston’s recommendation to saving the finale of *M\*A\*S\*H*, their suggestions for stowing away favorite holiday programs were contingent on emotions tied to particular times. In this way, the VCR could record tapes that acted as time capsules available for access every so often.

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<sup>130</sup> Preston, Marilyn. “Gable is Pick of the Week: Worth Taping,” N\_A58.

Besides specific programming, Preston and Prescott did not offer many logistical home-taping concerns or habits. Although, Preston briefly mentioned that sometimes networks have “ruined” films by making “big edits.”<sup>131</sup> Their central aim in writing these weekly “Worth Taping” columns was to aid VCR owners and TV viewers in the VCR-fueled shift in TV content conceptualization. After calling the popular claim that “nothing good is on TV” an antiquated notion, Preston stated, “There’s plenty of good stuff all around the dial, but it may not be on the air when you decide to settle on the couch. That’s why timeshifting...is such a treat. It lets you watch what you want when you want.”<sup>132</sup> For some people, the TV was something to turn on when you had time to sit in front of it. But Preston implied that this approach to TV influenced an old fashioned way of thinking about the medium. Instead, she encouraged appointment viewing, time-shifting, and library building. These approaches to TV were contingent on selection and control. The “Worth Taping” columns advocated for a new conceptualization of the medium that was achievable with the VCR.

Also a recurring section aimed at TV viewers and VCR owners, David Lachenbruch’s “TV Q&A” was a monthly column in *TV Guide* during the VCR’s first decade. Much like Preston and Prescott’s “Worth Taping,” Lachenbruch’s reader responses were meant to provide advice and answers for the avid TV viewer from the perspective of a TV and video enthusiast. In a “TV Q&A” from March of 1980, one reader asked if TV networks were planning on releasing some of their programs on prerecorded videocassette. Lachenbruch responded that ABC was considering a release

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<sup>131</sup> Preston, Marilynn. “A Weekly Tip-Sheet For You and Your VCR: Worth Taping,” N58.

<sup>132</sup> Preston, Marilynn. “Timeshifting Treats via VCR: Worth Taping,” N\_A60.

of classic soap operas, and that “[m]any TV-program owners see their products as potential goldmines” but have not made any significant releases.<sup>133</sup> The readers’ question was interesting because it exhibited a viewer desire for a product that would have served TV-industry interest but was not available. As stated in the previous chapter, the TV industry was anxious about home-tapers stealing programs off the air. A market for prerecorded TV content was something that would have served both the public industry interests, yet was not capitalized on during the VCR’s first decade.

### **Public’s Reaction to Copyright Infringement Concerns**

Before the Supreme Court decision was announced in 1984, many popular columnists offered their opinions surrounding the legality of preserving home-taped content. This involved predictions or personal ideas about what the Supreme Court should decide, and how the public should act in the meantime. Journalists also included answers to new viewer questions, whether they were specifically about home-taping issues or other questions that revealed larger uncertainties about TV at this time. Often, these questions represent the changing nature of TV and TV technologies during the video boom. Due to voices that echoed TV industry claims and an impending lawsuit, there was an uncertainty about what were legal and illegal home video practices.<sup>134</sup> Along with wanting to know what was legal, viewers were also interested in proper video etiquette, or which home video and TV practices were understood to be morally appropriate according to popular opinion.

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<sup>133</sup> Lachenbruch, David. “TV Q&A.” *TV Guide*. Mar 8, 1980: 1.

<sup>134</sup> Sometimes, there were questions as simple as “Is it legal to tape TV shows at home for my own use?” Lachenbruch, David. “TV Q&A.” *TV Guide*. Vol 30. Iss 6. Feb 1982: 48.

In a *Chicago Tribune* piece, “Record ‘Tonight,’ Watch Tomorrow,” author Mark Potts ended his advice by addressing the following “thorny” question: “Does the copying of material onto video cassettes without the permission of the producer of the material violate copyright laws?” Potts advised to record as long as the Supreme Court did not rule it illegal, but was fearful that producers (unsatisfied with the verdict) would place “an electronic code on television and cable broadcasts that would render recording devices inoperative.”<sup>135</sup>

In the aforementioned *New York Times* piece, “Play It Again, Sam, And Again And Again,” L.R. Shannon implies consumers should not fear any legal warning: “there is no chance that the gangbusters will break into your apartment and seize your *Leave It to Beaver* hoard.”<sup>136</sup> Whereas other popular journalists, like Potts, advised to home-tape according to whatever the Supreme Court had decided, Shannon thought it was unnecessary for viewers to feel a pressure to abstain from recording TV programs.

In 1980, *TV Guide* made their stance known in a lengthy piece called “Bootleggers: The Illegal Videocassette Racket.” It stated that [b]ootleggers who sell illegal videocassettes are becoming the scourge of the movie business,” and detailed how bootlegging happened, how they got caught, and why it was a bad thing. Here, *TV Guide*’s definition of video piracy is much different from how the TV industry often defined pirates. In this publication, it was deemed wrong to make a profit off of amateur tapes, but the TV industry frequently considered piracy the simple action of recording a program for domestic purposes. Putting their readers’ minds at ease, *TV Guide* made the

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<sup>135</sup> Potts, Mark. “The Video Cassette: Record ‘Tonight,’ Watch Tomorrow,” C3.

<sup>136</sup> Shannon, L.R. “Play It Again, And Again And Again.” *New York Times*. 1983.

distinction clear: “Many...Americans, of course, regularly record TV programs off the air—including movies—for later viewing. Are they breaking the law? No.”<sup>137</sup>

In an issue of “TV Q&A,” *TV Guide* writer David Lachenbruch was even more direct when discussing how differently he felt about piracy issues when compared to the TV industry’s feelings. A reader wrote in, describing how “appalled” they were when Lachenbruch gave advice to someone who happened to be receiving unauthorized HBO programming to “keep [their] mouth shut and enjoy it.”<sup>138</sup> The reader asked him if he was “advocating theft of service,” to which the *TV Guide* writer replied, “No. Just advocating gracefully accepting a gift.” Further, he placed the onus on the cable company “to see that pay programs don’t get put into free circulation;” he did not see it as the viewer’s responsibility to help the cable company, or to deprive themselves of additional programs. The divide between viewer and TV industry developing during this era characterizes Lachenbruch’s attitude toward receiving this particular type of unauthorized content. He suggested viewers take advantage of a cable company’s mistakes. Overall, Lachenbruch’s advice about unauthorized cable spoke to a larger outlook toward TV viewing that was a product of the home-taping era. There was an antagonism between TV viewers and the TV industry that arose from VCR habits like time-shifting. Viewers felt they did not need to do what was in the best wishes of the TV industry anymore, because the networks clearly did not serve the best wishes of the TV-viewing audience.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>137</sup> Hickey, Neil. “Bootleggers: The Illegal Videocassette Racket.” *TV Guide*. June 21, 1980: 2-6.

<sup>138</sup> Lachenbruch, David. “TV Q&A.” *TV Guide*. Vol 29. No 32. Aug 1981: 46.

In a UPI blurb appearing in a 1977 *Los Angeles Times* article, time-shifting was predicted to have a more significant impact on home entertainment than the introduction of color television,<sup>139</sup> a sentiment shared by the TV industry. In 1979, a *Chicago Tribune* piece ambiguously claimed, “Freedom is at hand.”<sup>140</sup> It is hard to make complete sense of the early sentiments, such as these, surrounding the early years of the VCR. Their vagueness exhibited unfamiliarity with the new media technology. But what is obvious is that the device was exciting to consumers. When the VCR was becoming a popular consumer technology, making itself comfortable alongside the TV, there was an excitement brought on by the device’s potential to release consumers from the TV networks’ stranglehold. With the popularity of the VCR, TV viewers became newly aware of their previous lack of control. Thus, this new technology was understood as empowering. VCR owners could now curate TV programming according to their personal taste and schedule.

The proliferation of the VCR also produced interesting discourse about the family unit. While some feared that it would open access to more unsavory content, others found solace in the VCR as a way to limit access to programming that was deemed appropriate for their household. In this way, the VCR was a tool for preserving a family ideal. Most significantly, families also talked about the device as a familial facilitator. Families expressed how much of an asset the VCR was to making everyone in the house happy. It was also a boon to parents who could use it to entertain their children, or to record a program while the family was out for the night or on vacation.

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<sup>139</sup> “TV Recording Boom Seen.” *Los Angeles Times*. Dec 9, 1977: J31.

<sup>140</sup> Popson, Tom. “Video: Video Today: The Revolution is Beginning.” *Chicago Tribune*. Mar 25, 1984: K33.

The VCR era ushered in a shift in TV viewing habits. Most often, it did not change how people thought about TV, but allowed viewers to harness TV content in a way that corresponded to how they already felt about TV. Powerfully, viewing became a more selective and personal experience that offered viewers a way to consume based on their own taste (instead of subscribing to a network schedule that reflected a biased cultural hierarchy) and to save programming according to viewer choices. In this way, time-shifting and library building were manners of TV enjoyment that rejected the TV industry's assumption that TV content was ephemeral. During the VCR's first decade, TV viewing started to be discussed as a more democratic experience; home-tapers felt that a more expansive program availability and personal choice were achieved through time-shifting and library building.

## THE END OF EPHEMERA

### Contemporary Benefits of TV Preservation

Through contemporary examples, we can see the benefit of home-taping and video preservation practices that arose from the VCR's first decade. Former Philadelphian Marion Stokes recorded TV programs onto VHS tapes from 1977 to 2012. Her efforts resulted in a collection of approximately 40,000 tapes of "network, local, and cable news" programs. Until her passing in 2012, she recorded "every major (and trivial) new event." This 35-year project was a persistent part of her every day schedule. She would put in a six-hour tape before bed, switching it out in the morning, and would "cut short meals at restaurants to rush home before tapes ended." "Pretty much everything else took a back seat," she claimed. Her apartments were reportedly overrun with boxes of VHS tapes. As a former librarian, archiving was always her goal with these tapes. When visitors would ask why these boxes and electronic devices cluttered her apartment, she would respond, "I'm archiving, that's all."<sup>141</sup>

What makes Marion Stokes' VHS library especially significant was the content she archived. Though she started out recording a variety of TV programs, Stokes quickly felt that news programs were most important. When cable channels created a 24-hour news cycle, she would be recording up to eight news programs simultaneously. She stated she had "a certain amount of deep, deep conviction that this stuff was going to be useful. That somehow, someone would find a way to index it, archive it, store it – that it would be useful." Stokes was not sure how or why it would be useful to collect all of

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<sup>141</sup>Kessler, Sarah. "The Incredible Story of Marion Stokes, Who Single-Handedly Taped 35 Years of TV News." *Fast Company*. Nov 21, 2013. <http://www.fastcompany.com/3022022/the-incredible-story-of-marion-stokes-who-single-handedly-taped-35-years-of-tv-news>

these hours of news programs. Perhaps it would have been strange to preserve news programs because of their immediacy. The premise of news is information about current events; news is contingent on being delivered as close to the time of the events being covered. Singular news episodes have also not been discussed as a type of show that is regularly re-watched in the way TV sitcoms are during syndication; news programs are most often watched for their immediacy. So, it would make sense that Stokes was unsure of exactly how preserved news programs would have any historical significance.

However, the Internet Archive (“a non-profit organization dedicated to building a free Internet library”), and Vanderbilt Television News Archive were two of the TV libraries that showed an enthusiastic interest. Roger Macdonald, of the Internet Archive, found Stokes’ VHS collection to be an important intellectual effort, “Television has been our most pervasive and persuasive medium...but we’ve never really had much of a pause and rewind button on our experience of it to reflect back on television news, to compare and contrast and mine it for knowledge.” Her collection now resides in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.<sup>142</sup>

Another example of how VCR users’ past recordings are being used in meaningful ways, contemporarily, is the website Nick Reboot ([nickreboot.com](http://nickreboot.com)), which is a constant “live stream of classic Nickelodeon shows from the 90s and early 2000s”<sup>143</sup> that often relies on donations via home-taping efforts. The site is self described as a project “solely to provide a medium for commentary, criticism, educational review, and research of Nickelodeon as it was during that time period.” In order to preserve

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<sup>142</sup> Kessler, Sarah. “The Incredible Story of Marion Stokes, Who Single-Handedly Taped 35 Years of TV News.” *Fast Company*. Nov 21, 2013.

<sup>143</sup> They also show a limited amount of Nickelodeon content from the 1980s.

programming “as it was,” Nick Reboot includes “station IDs, bumpers, and commercials.” Supplemental to the live stream, the site offers “an interactive chat system” that encourages discussions about programs being streamed. There is also a forum for Nick Reboot site members for further discourse about the Nickelodeon content. Often, the streaming material comes from personal VHS recordings that have been donated.<sup>144</sup>

Though not mentioned as part of their social and educational contributions, Nick Reboot offers an opportunity to view once-popular programs for entertainment purposes that are otherwise hard to find. And though the site states it is an educational and research resource for Nickelodeon, the commercials that can be found on the streams also make Nick Reboot an important archive of advertisements that would have been lost had it not been for home-tapers. With the aforementioned forum and chat system, Nick Reboot also hosts an online community that offers a place for Nickelodeon fans to engage in meaningful discourse with others over this preserved TV content.

Similar to Nick Reboot, YouTube is host to a large amount TV content of yesteryear that is transferred from home-tapers’ VHS tapes. YouTube also offers a platform for discussion via comments, but it is not a formally organized website solely devoted to TV content such as Nick Reboot.

The website Everything Is Terrible! is a significantly different example of the contemporary benefits of the hobby of home-taping. Everything Is Terrible! is a video blog that resurfaces VHS content that had been previously lost or largely unseen. Its source materials are entirely VHS tapes, both prerecorded and home video recordings

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<sup>144</sup> <http://nickreboot.com/about/>

from TV programming, that they edit into a new form to highlight the amount of absurdity that came out of the video boom. The founders started as “just a way for a small collective of VHS fans to share unintentionally hilarious discoveries.” The magazine *Wired* described them as “video scavengers” who “harvest excerpts from old workout tapes, B-movies, late-night TV commercials, and the like, cutting them together for maximum absurdity,”<sup>145</sup> while *Paste* magazine called the founders hard-working “cultural historians.”<sup>146</sup> The group is self-described as “this world’s only psychedelic found footage comedy website that tours the earth with face-melting live shows.”<sup>147</sup> Ultimately, Everything Is Terrible! is an ongoing collage-art project that exists in a video blog, live shows, and found footage festivals to highlight forgotten moments of the VHS era.

These three projects, a VHS-news archive, a TV-program live stream, and a video collage-art project offer significantly different ways that our contemporary society is benefitting from VCR owners of the last three decades who considered TV content worth preserving. With Marion Stokes’ rare news footage, Nick Reboot’s Nickelodeon programming and commercial content, and Everything Is Terrible!’s rare footage scavenging, each project offers the public previous TV content preserved by home-tapers that would otherwise be lost to the past, surrendering to the ephemeral nature of unpreserved TV content.

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<sup>145</sup> Watercutter, Angela. “Screen: Video Scavengers Spin Cultural Slag Into Comedy Gold.” *Wired*. Apr 19, 2010. [http://www.wired.com/2010/04/pl\\_screen\\_videoscavengers/](http://www.wired.com/2010/04/pl_screen_videoscavengers/)

<sup>146</sup> Chapman, Gary. “Everything Is Terrible: The Movie to Feature the Best of the Worst of Video Mash-Ups.” *Paste Magazine*. Jun 4, 2009.

<http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2009/06/everythingisterriblecom-to-release-everything-is-t.html>

<sup>147</sup> <http://everythingisterrible.blogspot.com/p/about.html>

## **Conclusion**

This study has been an exploration of VCR technology as it emerged during the years 1975 to 1985. Specifically, it has looked at discourse surrounding the VCR in relation to home-taping TV content in the years before the VCR became mainly associated with the prerecorded Hollywood videotape market. The provided details of VCR history as it relates to TV during this aforementioned period are significant because the existing literature on the VCR have foregone this important moment in TV and video history. This account of the VCR's first decade fill that gap, offering TV and video scholars a clearer report of not only the past, but a moment that has led us to the present moment of TV and video.

The story of the TV and VCR during this period was framed by the two opposing conceptualizations of TV content held by the TV industry and TV viewers. While TV networks and cable companies thought of their content as a stream meant to be viewed live, according to their scheduled time, TV viewing habits dismissed the idea that TV was an ephemeral experience; they wanted to watch programs according to their own schedules and also build libraries of programs for multiple viewings. From the tumultuous relationship between the TV industry and TV viewers, we have gained a more detailed understanding of the VCR's history and how the device was used to redefine TV content as worth preserving; viewing TV was no longer an impermanent activity that was structured according to the networks' will.

The TV industry considered its product to be a series of ephemeral programs that should be viewed during the time the networks scheduled. Thus, they thought of TV viewing as a participation in liveness. To the industry, it was an activity based on one-

time experiences of programs. Simply, the re-consumption of TV programs was marginal to the business model that networks had cultivated over the previous three decades. Those beliefs were revealed through the TV industry's actions and discourse during the rise of home-taping. The VCR gave TV viewers a new opportunity to time-shift programs and build video libraries of content they thought were worth preserving. TV networks thought these home-taping practices were in direct opposition to their business model. Time-shifting and preserving TV shows were the antithesis to liveness, both were contingent on a personally curated TV schedule that was pliable to viewers' desires and convenience. This was a drastic change from viewers having to form their personal schedules according to the networks' choices.

Confronted with the troubling practices of VCR owners, the TV industry made attempts to prohibit what they viewed as copyright infringement. These attempts are best characterized as a technologically deterministic concept of the VCR. Along with outlawing home-taping altogether, the TV (and film) industry wanted to implement a royalty fee to prices of VCR's and videotapes. This would compensate for what revenue the industry felt they were losing at the hands of home-tapers. Based on the premise that every VCR consumer should pay a royalty fee for recording TV programs, this solution assumed that every VCR owner would use the device for piracy. In other words, it did not allow for other interpretations of the VCR (i.e. video artists and home movie editing). While revealing a central distrust of VCR owners, this viewpoint also highlighted the differences between the TV industry and the TV viewers. While the former thought the VCR made its owners record TV programs in ways that were disruptive to networks'

business strategies, TV viewers saw the VCR as a device that allowed them to watch TV in a way that met their desires and conveniences.

Just as the home-taping habits revealed how the TV industry thought of their product, it also revealed the desired experiences of TV viewers. They wanted to enjoy TV programming in ways that were not always aligned with the networks' structured schedule. Home-tapers saw TV viewing as an activity that was shaped according to different types of programs and different ways to view programs. In addition to watching programs according to the networks' schedule, the VCR allowed viewers to watch programs as many times as they wanted, and at times that best fit personal convenience and preference. With the VCR, home-tapers were also able to watch more of the programs they wanted. In other words, viewers' choice was now a significant part of TV viewing.

The VCR's first decade is also noteworthy for how the home-tapers presaged the prerecorded Hollywood videotape market through the pervasive new time-shifting and library building habits. Though the film business was interested in prohibiting VCR owners from home-taping, the TV-viewer discourse displays that these home video habits can be seen as eventually fortuitous for the film industry. TV viewing changed through the use of the VCR. It became a more personal experience that invited viewers to make selective choices about what would be watched, who would watch, and when to watch. These habits may have helped acclimate viewers to watching non-live programming in a way that became beneficial to both Hollywood and the video store industry. It was also common knowledge that many home-tapers found commercials unappealing. VCR owners often edited commercials out of recorded TV programs and films (black boxes

were even manufactured to help make this editing easier<sup>148</sup>). The film industry knew that prerecorded Hollywood films that were well edited would have attracted this newly selective TV audience.

Surprisingly, in my research, there was no significant discourse revealing plans for a prerecorded videocassette market of TV content as a solution to the “problem” of home-taping, although it was brought up as an asset to the burgeoning Hollywood video market. I have mentioned some entertainment industry insiders who vaguely refer to pirates as VCR owners who record TV programs instead of paying for them, but there is no mention of which TV programs would have been available for purchase or which programs the TV industry would have had in mind for a prerecorded market. One could propose that the TV industry could have conceded to the home-tapers, seeing a prerecorded TV tape market a futile venture against time-shifting and library building. Perhaps, but this attitude would have seemed more appropriate towards the middle-to-end of the VCR’s first decade, as home-taping became more prevalent. For instance, Group W’s<sup>149</sup> offer to help subscribers hook up their VCRs in 1985 can be seen as a peace offering; cable companies conceding to home-tapers as part of their adjustment to the VCR era. Another answer to this missing discourse could be that the TV industry had difficulty imagining their content as a permanent cultural product for re-consumption. Even with the development of home-tapers, prerecorded TV programs for sale could have seemed antithetical to their business, though networks would not have had a large stake

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<sup>148</sup> Keppler, Herbert. “No More TV Commercials?” *High Fidelity*. Vol 31. Jun, 1981: A10-11.

<sup>149</sup> The aforementioned cable company better known as a subsidiary of Westinghouse Electric Corporation.

in ancillary markets such as the prerecorded tape industry because they did not own primetime programs.

However, the VCR era made the TV industry confront their product in new ways. And the TV industry's response to viewing habits produced discourse that was in stark contrast to how home-tapers conceptualized TV content. For instance, the prerecorded video market was cultivated as a response to TV viewing habits. Further, the Supreme Court's decision to respect these habits made way for the TV industry to adjust to viewer's rights and desires. This adjustment, from the industry's wishes to viewing behaviors, was a major development of the VCR's first decade. By relinquishing complete control over its product, the TV industry had to recognize that viewers were going to interpret TV content and home video technology, such as the VCR, in separate ways. TV was no longer a product to be enjoyed in the way networks meant it to be. With VCRs, viewers were able to translate TV programs and schedules in ways that made sense to their personal lives.

The history that I have presented gives us context for the present moment in TV watching. The a la cart viewing of present, where we chose what to watch from the offerings presented by subscription based companies like Netflix and Hulu Plus, is rooted in the habits of home-tapers. Time-shifting and library building as the origins of schedule-less TV viewing has influenced similar technology from the DVR to these subscription based companies that are designed to offer TV viewers a choice of programming and viewing time.

While this may seem to be a purely positive manifestation of home-taping influence, the TV industry has been savvy in resituating this schedule-less programming

in terms that ultimately satisfy their interests over the viewers'. The home-taping moment provided in this history was powerful for the audience because their habits prevailed over the preexisting industry standards. It was also powerful for purely tangible reasons: VCR owners could finally collect physical copies of the programs that they loved, and were then able to enjoy them whenever they wanted to. In the present moment of a la cart programming via Netflix and Hulu Plus, there is a buffet of programming that appears to be available to the subscriber in the same way a home-taper's library would have been. However, subscribers to streaming companies like Netflix and Hulu Plus are at the behest of the company. Unlike home-tapers who had ownership and complete control of their taped programs, there is a fallacy of ownership that streaming subscribers are given. Ultimately, streaming companies add and subtract content based on exchanges between producers and TV networks that are contingent on profit potential instead of viewer desire. Deals are struck between streaming companies and content owners that allow for streaming rights based on an agreed upon length of time. For instance, any given television program that is currently streaming may expire at the end of the next month, depending on the contract between the streaming company and content owners. This leaves streaming subscribers in an unfortunate position whereby they are dependent on the streaming service to have a program the viewer might be in the midst of watching, or intend on watching, but the streaming service has not promised the subscriber that any program will be available indefinitely. In other words, programs that viewers may depend on being available on Netflix have the potential to disappear based on contracts between the streaming service and the content owners.

Although there is this appearance of abundant content, physically collecting content is much harder presently than during the home-taping era. Instead of merely being proficient in VCR use, to record streaming content for a physical collection, subscribers must have specialized knowledge of recording technology. More importantly, streaming services are designed in a way that disinclines subscribers from wanting to, or thinking they should, physically collect programming in a way that home-tapers originally made appealing. The assumption of abundance may curb subscribers from wanting to collect. There is a built-in logic to streaming subscriptions that if content subscribers want to watch is not available there will be something else available they will want to watch. The appearance of abundance gives the subscriber a feeling of rich ownership, but this fallacy is profitable for streaming services who want viewers to watch not according to personal wishes, but based on the selection that the companies have curated based on business exchanges with producers, TV networks and advertisers.

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