

Missing in Action: Quality TV and Canonization

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First disclosure: I am not a media scholar (thank you for including me anyway!). I am a librarian who has worked with film and television scholars for over a decade. I'm not qualified to debate "quality" or historical significance or most of the other factors that would lead to a TV show being considered "canonical."

I am, however, uniquely qualified to discuss one particular factor of canonization, which is persistence in cultural memory. Cultural objects need to stand the test of time before experts can fully judge canon-worthiness. For thousands of years, librarians have helped cultural objects endure by squirrelling them away and by devising modes of access. We do this work regardless of an object's popularity or perceived quality in the present time, cognizant of the role future experts will play in deciding what is worth studying and what is not. It is part of a librarian's training to build collections not based solely on present-day tastes, but instead to be taste-agnostic, to be suspicious of trends, and to think about the ways scholars *might someday* use things.

Second disclosure: When it comes to television, I'm sorry to report that my colleagues and I are failing in this core mission. To gauge the extent of the problem, I undertook an informal study on collection levels of first-season "essential" TV show DVD sets in libraries worldwide. These shows are on every Intro to TV Studies syllabus. I searched the shows in WorldCat and found some alarming statistics.

There are 1288 circulating copies of *The Sopranos* s1 on DVD. *I Love Lucy* s1: 1109. *Dallas* s1: 739. *All in the Family* s1: 631.

"Not too bad," you might be thinking. Let's contrast those numbers with some holdings data for DVDs from the Hollywood canon: *The Wizard of Oz*: 5087. *Citizen Kane*: 4400. *Toy Story*: 1443.

The most extreme example I found was the show *Julia*, undeniably important from a historical perspective. *Julia* is available on DVD at ONE library in the world. Several of your colleagues (Hills (2007) and McKee (2009)) have rightfully pointed out the problem of some shows never making it onto DVD due to a perceived lack of commercial appeal. *Julia* may be a victim of this calculation. I can't say how many copies of *Julia* are enough, but one is unquestionably insufficient to ensure that future researchers will have reliable access to this work.

Now you're thinking: "What about the Internet? Won't shows be preserved online?" In the case of *Julia*, the answer is "no." At the time of writing, the longest *Julia* clip on YouTube was a ten-minute clip from a Christmas episode. Not only were full episodes unavailable online, but I could not locate a reputable, seemingly legitimate* set of DVDs to purchase.

** most libraries won't buy bootlegs due to uncertain quality and fear of copyright lawsuits.*

To contrast *Julia*, I looked at a contemporary example: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. You may be surprised that, like *Julia*, full seasons of *TDS* are not available to purchase on DVD. In this case, Comedy Central and Viacom are doing a pretty good job of providing [online access](#) to their intellectual property, with only a small portion of MIA content.

But can we trust that this archive will persist decades into the future? I don't need to describe for anyone here how media conglomerates handle and mis-handle their intellectual property; nor do I need to remind anyone about the volatile nature of the media industries. DVD releases are based on business calculations, not on the needs of the scholarly community. When page views and online ad revenues drop, will Viacom maintain the *TDS* archive out of altruism? To fear-monger a bit further, what would happen to the *TDS* archive if some other, more politically conservative conglomerate bought Viacom?

I realize that I am emphasizing the DVD, which is an imperfect technology with a rapidly approaching expiration date. But what are the alternatives? As I just described, the open web is unreliable at best and unhelpful at worst. Streaming services, while great for consumers, are also victims of the media industries' ever-shifting landscape, and therefore, in this librarian's estimation, not suitable as a long-term access solution.

For now, building local DVD collections, a la Stanford University Libraries' [LOCKSS](#) (Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe) approach, seems the best middle range solution. Perhaps someday we will have the TV equivalent of ARTstor, a vast, subscription-based digital image collection populated by cultural institutions worldwide.

What concerns me most is an extension of this panel's central question: what WILL BE missing 20, 40, 100 years from now? If we cannot preserve a show like *Julia*, then what chance is there for future scholars to study "unimportant," "trashy," or web-based shows—all of which, while perhaps not canonical, are worthy of study from some perspective?

Appendix
WorldCat Holdings Data

Films

Title	Copies Held
The Wizard of Oz	5087
Citizen Kane	4400+ copies if looking at all versions <i>630 copies of 2011 70th anniv. DVD</i>
Psycho	3682
The Big Lebowski	2319
Do the Right Thing	2068
Toy Story	1443

TV

Title	Copies Held
The Sopranos	1288
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	1132
I Love Lucy	1109
MASH	911
Dallas	739
All in the Family	631
Julia	1 no full eps on YouTube. longest clip: 10 minutes.

TV: non-Canonical

Title	Copies Held
Duck Dynasty	783
Three's Company	317
Charlie's Angels	286
Diners, Drive-Ins & Dives	84
Real Housewives of Orange County	71
Baywatch	52
Flavor of Love	32
Real Housewives of Atlanta	15

Limitations of this study:

- I only looked at shows that are available on DVD.
- I am not a social scientist and therefore probably did not conduct this study in a 100% methodologically sound manner.
- I looked at US shows and movies only.
- Catalogers are human beings; therefore cataloging of DVDs could introduce a small margin of error.
- Not all libraries contribute holdings info to WorldCat.
- For movies:
 - I only counted US DVD releases.
 - I did not include boxed sets (ex.: "The Spike Lee Joint Collection").

- For TV:
 - I looked at Season 1 DVD box sets only. (Some libraries catalog individual discs of a boxed set. I did not include these.)

Findings:

1. Overall, libraries seem more likely to acquire movies than TV shows, even if the TV show is considered “iconic,” “canonical,” etc.
2. Shows from the DVD era (late 1990s-present) seem more highly collected than shows that pre-date DVD technology.
3. Award-winning shows and “Quality TV” shows are more highly collected than “ordinary” TV.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. How does critical reception affect collection? Are libraries more likely to collect Quality shows—i.e., things that have won awards & accolades? If so, then *Duck Dynasty* appears to be a major outlier.
2. How does race & gender factor in? Are libraries more likely to collect shows about white men than black women? And if so, is this the effect of audiences and programming (i.e., shows about white men are more prevalent on TV)?
3. Public libraries vs. academic libraries.
Publics put greater emphasis on circulation statistics, so carry things people want to check out and de-accession older, less popular materials. Academics put greater emphasis on preserving knowledge for future scholars and providing access to materials that might not be popular now, but might have some scholarly significance in the future. How reliable are these numbers if most of the DVDs are held by public libraries?
4. What can we do about shows not available on DVD, such as web-based series or things never released on DVD?
5. What comes after the DVD?