The Changing Role of Television in the Museum

Museums are a useful source for access to audiovisual heritage—a heritage that is largely unavailable due to restrictions by corporate archives that tend to insulate their assets from the general public and academics. Yet television or broadcasting museums provide access not only to programs from television’s past but also to historical and contemporary artifacts. The potential for such museums to be places of discourse, education, and the shaping of memory is underlined by the connections between television as a mass medium and everyday life, culture, and history. At the same time, television museums have to struggle with the same problems as audiovisual archives: the obsolescence of tape formats, cost-intensive equipment, and the inevitability of digitization. Although there are overlaps with the tasks of archives and libraries, museums selectively collect and curate for the general public. The primary reason for the formation of television museums—the extensive loss of programming in the broadcasting archives—has met with the additional mission for media literacy education to enhance understanding of the medium’s mechanisms—in retrospect and advance.

In June 2006, the first television museum in Germany opened its doors on the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin as a division of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, a foundation for film and television. This development took twenty long years of wrangling over the character and mission of the institution. The museum’s operations are guaranteed until the end of 2012 by a broad coalition of financiers from the public broadcasters ARD, ZDF, Veolia Water, a division of the media conglomerate Vivendi, State Media Broadcasting Authorities, and finally the German government (which pays the rent). The formation process has
become a symbol for the complicated relations between media and politics, as well as for the television industry’s missing awareness of its own history.

First and foremost this new museum in Europe’s geographical center heralds a new conception for media museums. During its formation, the project passed through various designs and dismissed many attributes that were once foundational to the original mission of the institution, specifically its function as an archive with the intention of building and preserving a collection. This German initiative signals a shift that guides the central thesis of this article: the concept of television museums as primarily archival institutions has failed, which in turn has consequences for accessing our television heritage. Instead, the role of television museums as access providers is changing fundamentally, shifting toward integrating educational programs beyond historical texts and highlighting the convergence of audiovisual media.

Although museums and archives are different types of institutions, decades of television museum evolution suggest that they are becoming even more distinct as the predominance of archival functions is becoming an obsolescent model for museums. A perspective that sees museums as archives is caused by the importance of collections that focus on object culture. The museum-as-repository model comes out of an object culture that gives importance to collections; this traditional way that museums define themselves through the uniqueness of their collections does not work any more. As independent preservers of television heritage, media museums face challenges in developing efficient ways to provide broad access to either programming or technical artifacts, whether due to copyright issues, lost original programs, or the fragmentation of the overwhelming amount of assets sleeping in other archives. Consequentially, the missions of television museums are changing these days from archival repositories to institutions that focus more clearly on education, infotainment, and context for current issues of media society using their collections. This article analyzes the German Television Museum and how its new conceptual strategy fits into a broader process of transformation and reorganization, one which can be recognized in two of the world’s biggest broadcasting museums: the American Museum of Television and Radio (MT&R) and the Canadian Moses Znaimer Television Museum (MZTV Museum).

Giving Alteration a Name: The “Kinemathek” in Berlin and the New Era of Television in the Museum

The German museum was developed under the name “mediatheque” for about fifteen years, until it was integrated into the “Kinemathek.” “Mediatheque,” however, refers to an institution that collects audiovisual media and also loans it, though this latter service was neither intended nor possible, due to rights issues. This inaccurate name was chosen after years of debates to avoid negative, antiquated connotations that were assumed typical for the term “museum” as a bildungsbürgerlich (educated class) place. The International Council of Museums defines the “museum” in a rather traditional if broad way:

A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

This unquestionably general definition encompasses the diversity of museums from Canada to the Congo and points to the conceptual freedom inherent in museums. The Berliner initiative took advantage of this flexibility and learned what to strive for and what to avoid from its predecessors abroad in North America.

In all the proposals for the German museum, the institution was conceived to serve the urgent and essential purpose of preserving cultural identity as communicated in the mass media. Thus, it took a while until the main focus shifted from archival tasks to a more educational understanding of the institution’s responsibility. In a mission statement, the main tasks were formulated very early in the planning process: “The museum for broadcasting history ought to make accessible radio- and...
television-productions for the general public independently from the programming structure of the broadcasters.” The major reason for the German plans to build a museum in the first place was a response to the unavailability of Germany’s audiovisual heritage—both to make up for the broadcast archives’ limited resources and to counter a general “cultural shame” that these materials had become inaccessible.

The need to change the attitude of perceiving itself as an all-embracing—or at least leading—collector of television programming is now enabled by complementary resources such as video, the Internet, and other collecting institutions. Currently, the collection of the new museum is quite lean: whereas, in the original plan, a minimum of 10,000 hours of television programming was considered indispensable, visitors to the museum can only access 500 hours—at nine consoles instead of the envisioned forty stations. The collection will surely grow, but slowly and very selectively as the major complex of problems has not disappeared. The museum struggles with right issues and the related hassle of financial strength. It is often not able to pay the required licensing fees to rights holders of productions that are not completely owned by the major German broadcasters, which have contracts with the museum and supply programming at no cost. For instance, to obtain a copy of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation for the collection, the museum had to pay 1,000 Euros for each minute of the running time. Sport programs, such as popular soccer games of the European Champions League are not available in the program gallery because even short excerpts are not affordable for the small budget. The same problem appeared with popular series like the animated Bee Maja or Pan Tau, both Czech productions. In these cases, the museum curators had to decline paying 1,500 Euros per thirty-minute episode.

The general trend toward a hypostatization of “public understanding” in the museum has also found its way into the German museum. Considerable effort was invested to create a visually attractive exhibition area, including a so-called “time tunnel” which reminds attendees of major news events: the first man on the moon, the catastrophe in the mine of Germany’s Lengede, or 9/11. Another attraction is a “mirror hall” where a fifteen-minute clip-reel shows the televisial history of entertainment from smoking politicians on talk shows to excerpts of popular Saturday night shows. With constructs of monitors and a thirty-six channel screen wall, the former head of the Deutsche Kinemathek, Hans Helmut Prinzler, wanted to “prise open the dryness and appearance of prudity” and to de-stigmatize the museum of any traditional clichés in the hopes of attracting potential visitors who otherwise would be unlikely to be interested in a museum. With this orientation, the museum complies with the model of a so-called “post-museum” that Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has envisioned to integrate the museum into its various communities.

Due to its financial, institutional, and cooperative struggles, its public space shrank.
from an initially planned 50,000 to 12,000 square feet.\footnote{The museum is small, but such limitations can be beneficial. In scholarship on museums, the complexity of some institutions is viewed as a problem for the accessibility and perception of the whole institution: “Growth is a universal problem with a Pandora’s box of consequences. It appears innocuous but in fact presents a deep conceptual crisis which endangers the museum’s mission and its position in contemporary society.”\footnote{The heart of Berlin’s new museum is the conference room, which is used for meetings, press conferences, screenings, and lectures. Children who grow up with television often discover the medium for themselves at an early age. Through cooperation with schools and universities, this form of autodidact self-education can be complemented, adjusted, and channeled by its institutional expertise.}} The museum is small, but such limitations can be beneficial. In scholarship on museums, the complexity of some institutions is viewed as a problem for the accessibility and perception of the whole institution: “Growth is a universal problem with a Pandora’s box of consequences. It appears innocuous but in fact presents a deep conceptual crisis which endangers the museum’s mission and its position in contemporary society.”\footnote{The heart of Berlin’s new museum is the conference room, which is used for meetings, press conferences, screenings, and lectures. Children who grow up with television often discover the medium for themselves at an early age. Through cooperation with schools and universities, this form of autodidact self-education can be complemented, adjusted, and channeled by its institutional expertise.}

Still in its first year, the German Television Museum is scheduled to expand its activities in various directions. Plans are on the table to release DVDs of highly acclaimed television movies in cooperation with the right holders and to organize symposia with foreign journalists who work as correspondents in Berlin. “We see ourselves in part as a forum of media politics,” says Peter Paul Kubitz, the museum’s head of programming.\footnote{Moreover, he characterizes the museum as a relevant source of inspiration for development of current programming by connecting television history to the present. Likewise, the museum strives to develop cooperative international efforts with British and Polish broadcasters and with institutions like the MT&R and the French Institut National de l’Audiovisuel.}

The possibilities seem endless, but the limitations are obvious. Located on the Potsdamer Platz, Berlin’s central entertainment district, the museum strives to reach beyond its boundaries but presents itself mainly as a tourist attraction rather than as an academic facility. Addressing the general public on the surface as a show booth for television history holds crucial problems for a young institution that wants to be a public center for critical media studies and analysis. With its small collection, the museum has to develop its ability to provide guidance for its visitors with interpretation services, educational programs, and the know-how of the Deutsche Kinemathek, which also operates the German Film and Television Academy and the German Filmmuseum. Its decisive advantage over other museums is its integration into the infrastructure of the Kinemathek, which also owns Europe’s biggest photo archive of film and celebrity stills.

The opening of the television museum gave reason to implement a server-based system for the whole building, which allows visitors access to additional database content, such as basic information about specific programs in the collection, reviews, interviews and links to other related assets.

Desperate to Change: The Dilemma of the Museum of Television & Radio

As the first broadcasting museum in the United States, the Museum of Television and Radio, which opened in 1976 in New York, was founded to “put together the finest collection of radio and television programs and make them available to the general public and also to interpret the collection with seminars, festivals, trying to understand both the aesthetics and historical importance of television and radio in our lives.”\footnote{In 1996 a second site opened in Beverly Hills, California. Founded by CBS head and television titan William S. Paley, the tie to the commercial networks has always been strong, even stronger than the ties to the general public. Naturally the good relations with the networks were a blessing on the surface, due to the consequential contracts with the broadcasting industry to deliver programming. As a result of the constant stream of programs flowing into the collection every year, it became the biggest of its kind—at least among independent museums. It houses more than 144,000 assets of programming, which includes to more than 100,000 hours of television and radio programs: television programs account for sixty percent, radio programs for twenty-four percent and advertising for sixteen percent. With even 7,000 programs from foreign countries, the MT&R has a rich variety of popular and niche programs that can be viewed for non-professional or academic purposes. However, the MT&R’s strong collection bias has impeded the formation of a confident museum identity. The collection itself became more important than its usage or its practical value for scholars and the general public, who have both}

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been left to their own devices in terms of learning from the program pool. This freedom benefits the diversity of intentions that characterizes the visitors, but it also shows that the task of assisting with the interpretation of the content is not coherently fulfilled. There has always been a fundamental lack of exhibitions. The small space behind the New York location’s foyer, called the Steven Spielberg Gallery, houses changing displays that attest to a scarcely innovative notion of media exhibitions.

Although education grew to the second main pillar of the museum and is successful mainly in terms of school tours, the low visitation numbers indicate that the general public is primarily only drawn to the education programs. The main reason for opening the California branch—engaging the creative community on the West-Coast—has fallen short in many aspects and only shows sporadic success through participation in the William S. Paley Television Festival and special invitation-only industry galas. Instead of allowing a local curatorial vision, museum administration decided to develop all museum activities in New York and import them to the Los Angeles area. In addition to the lack of original programs, the West Coast museum’s location far from tourist hotspots and scarce parking further discourage visitors.

Facing the fundamental changes in the media landscape, a seminal reorganization process to rethink its mission started in late 2006. The museum focuses more and more on the launching of business-to-business events. This reorientation is a critical shift in the new identity of the museum, which might soon result in a kind of a media center and endanger its public mission. The MT&R strives to position itself as an active player in the media industry. These non-public meetings for high-level executives of the media industry are seen as an effective revenue source, but the museum is already gradually distancing itself from its public audience. Thus, it might be on its way to becoming a place where only a small, narrow, and self-selected audience is invited, as was a general characteristic of museums decades ago.\[20\]
The new president Pat Mitchell, who came to the museum in March 2006 from PBS, faces the crucial task of fundraising for the next stage of the museum’s evolution, along with a broader set of restructuring plans. Her reorganization initiative comes along with a broader rethinking process of the American museum in general, similar to the early days of their formation.\textsuperscript{21} The increasing availability of television programming on the retail DVD market and the trend that more cultural institutions are incorporating popular culture—especially television—into their activities make it imperative to adjust the museum’s philosophy. The Internet and the growing significance of homegrown media portals like YouTube and MySpace will also change the museum’s vision and what it collects.

Even the place of artifacts is being reconsidered, though only for illustrative exhibitions. An example would be the rebuilding of a living room of the 1950s or ’60s to situate the audiovisual content. There is also a modest library of a few thousand books, encyclopedias, directories, biographies, and episode-guides, as well as a large collection of reviews, clippings and press releases (the latter from NBC and CBS) on microfiche. Additionally, the museum subscribes to about 60 newspapers, magazines, journals, and indices that further make the collection rich enough to be of interest to scholars. Yet, the academic acceptance is not one of the museum’s main problems. Again it finds itself torn between a variety of target groups that should be addressed with equal intensity.

The museum’s main problem emerges from its lack of interpretation services. The negative effect of the museum’s reorientation is expressed by cutbacks in the educational programs and decreasing scholarly seminars. Even if the MT&R’s redevelopment results in a more holistic view of media history and the current cultural landscape, the crisis of fundraising taking command over public outreach and programs utilizing the museum’s unique collection must be rethought critically. In addition, the question has to be raised of what is more valuable, the collection or the educational framework and support staff to make sense of it for visitors.

Two Worlds, One Medium: The Museum’s Division between Objects and Programming

An interesting alternative to the widely adopted programming-content model for broadcasting museums is the MZTV Museum in Toronto, Canada. In contrast to collections found in Europe, North America, Japan, and Australia, the MZTV Museum helps the visitors understand the history of television through objects. This approach demonstrates how the technology was adopted into the living room in decades past, what lies beneath the scratches and dents on specific consoles, or even what an old television receiver might tell us about its owner. (For example, a TV set can suggest how actresses such as Marilyn Monroe snubbed the small screen in favor of the big one.) The museum also broaches the issue of current developments in the media landscape and raises questions of how the licensing of frequencies works, why wrist-watch TV is not a new invention, or what similarities the comparison between the introduction of color television and the first steps of the internet reveals.

What a television museum should present is a question of conception, but first and foremost a question of the interrelationship between the specificity of the medium and the specificity of the institution. Given that “the museum can be described as one of the first institutions of the mass media” by preparing and communicating information to a broad general public,\textsuperscript{22} a television museum broaches a topic that is theoretically not that far from its own shape. Yet, on the contrary, the two media are competitors. With its capacity to provide access to images of distant people and places, television brings the world into the living room—something clearly atypical for a static museum.\textsuperscript{23} Through the fusion of museum and television, the formerly ubiquitous broadcast becomes settled at one particular place, and the audiovisual content is interpreted through a curatorial agenda. Traditionally museums put objects on display,\textsuperscript{24} though there is a long debate about the argument that objects in the museum should speak for themselves.\textsuperscript{25} Even television programming can be defined as objects with reference to their form of storage, for example: the videotape. Nevertheless, the proceeding dematerialization of the collections
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Through digitization comes along with a growing importance of objects, artifacts, and ephemera in the widest sense. The popularity of the hands-on principle in education suggests that a solely screen-based exhibition is not likely to be successful. The significance of objects is described by Geoffrey Galt Harpham:

What we call things has emerged into the conceptual field as a problem, a challenge to our vocabulary: their identity has not been determined, but ignoring them is no longer an option. We are half aware of them as features of the general surround, and they awaken the possibility that material objects, which appear to us primarily as anonymous, random, mute, inert, or functional, can possess a kind of individuality, identity, even an ambiguous vivacity.

Within the context of television, objects like technical artifacts can be as important as the audiovisual content for the understanding of the medium’s history. Surprisingly, the German museum has set this historic equipment aside, although it had—and still has—the opportunity to integrate the large technology collection of the German Broadcasting Archive into its exhibitions. Besides a few ephemera, there are no indications that the conceptual orientation will lead in that direction.

The MZTV Museum, founded and wholly funded by Canadian media mogul Moses Znaimer, shapes itself as a clear counterexample to other television or broadcasting museums that focus primarily on programming. It hosts the biggest collection of television sets and receivers, accessible for the general public, worldwide. The museum focuses on consumer-oriented technology, with omissions of the whole production aspect including cameras, consoles or other behind-the-scenes equipment. Visitors are induced to deal with the cultural impact of the technology in ways that are innovative among the community of audiovisual museums. However, with its lack of the production viewpoint, the museum addresses only a small part...
of the whole technical spectrum.

The collection contains television sets from the 1920s to the new era of plasma and LCD-TVs. Although the focus is on the technical history of North America, it has also a number of apparatuses from overseas in store: many from Japan and some from Europe, including a Kuba Komet from Germany for design purposes. The collecting process is very selective because of the vast range of different models that were marketed and the museum’s own space limitations. In 2007 the museum will move into a larger, 8,000-square foot building on Toronto’s lakefront that will allow the museum to showcase up to ninety percent of its collection. The museum also plans to put more ephemera on display, due to its large complementary collection of videos, books, magazines, photographs, and memorabilia such as music boxes, matchbooks, or salt-and-pepper shakers in form of mini-TVs. The museum also continues to acquire relevant rare books and other printed pieces. In 2006 it bought fifty historical correspondence documents between a Canadian corporation and the British television pioneer John Logie Baird, who wanted to start selling and manufacturing television sets in Canada. The museum even plans to buy a book by one of America’s first television pioneers, Charles Francis Jenkins, from the 1920s for $50,000 (U.S.).

Even so, the museum does not aim to be a center of technical expertise, where visitors learn something about how television technique works. Its focus lies on the question how consumer technology crosses with culture and how it influences different forms of history, whether economic, social, or political. The vast majority of original artifacts from the early days of television have been destroyed; many of these destroyed receivers were unique. Museum founder Znaimer is often quoted by the press with his catch phrase, “There are fewer pre-war TVs left in the world than Stradivarius violins.”29 One critical problem that museums generally face results from the desolate state of the technological television heritage: the value of a single specimen may be exorbitant. This concentration process, combined with the inflation of the collectibles market, requires something that museums usually don’t have at their disposal: a sufficiently high budget.

With a wealthy founder and funder, the MZTV Museum has other concerns: with its large collection of TV sets and complementary artifacts, the issue of deaccession is constantly on the agenda. The museum has a deaccessioning policy that makes arrangements for situations when a duplicate object becomes too costly to store or it is of no further importance to the collection. Unlike television museums that focus on program history, where the necessity of continuous collecting stays a central task, deaccessioning is a rising issue in the object-based museum community.30 With the growing awareness about the MZTV Museum and its search for old artifacts, there is reportedly a large willingness by private individuals to donate their discarded television sets.31 The museum mostly turns down such offers because it does not want to function as a repository. The selection process evaluates individual items and questions whether they tell a story: “Sometimes we collect a TV set because the story that the family can tell us about it is quite valuable”, says museum producer/controller Michael Adams.

Despite its efforts to restore and operate its artifacts, the MZTV Museum has understood that its mission disagrees with a primarily archival function. The preservation of the collection is essential, but only one part of its approach of teaching the cultural effects of television technology. In addition to school tours and a website that provides additional information, the museum’s educational outreach allows interns to produce short documentaries about their experiences working and learning at the museum. Such public involvement extends to an oral history project that has been running since 1995 in which visitors recall their earliest memories of watching television and what they predict the future of the medium could look like. The collection of those video recordings shows the extreme differences of perspectives and holds source-material for studies about the changing role of television over the years and generations.

Conclusion

Our television heritage is a shared heritage. It lies in corporate and university archives, in libraries, in the attics of former broadcasting employees, and
in the hands of private collectors. It is in television museums where the general public can find their way into the content and technical history of television. Nonetheless, the role of such museums has changed as the archival showcase model has yielded to the growing importance of attracting, engaging, and educating the public with a broad lineup of accessing tools, models, and instructions.

These museums’ important role as access institutions for television history is supplemented by their responsibility for providing context and interpretation. Otherwise, museums would simply leave their visitors alone with their impressions of the medium’s artifacts—the way television did and still does in the home. Without offering guidance to the past, present, and future of the media world, the museum loses its authority. Especially in the 21st century, television belongs in the museum as television as we have known it evolves and converges with cell phones, iPods, and the world wide web. More importantly, educational services will become essential for older generations to understand new developments in the industry and their relationships to the past they have lived through. Adult education is a field that was and still is neglected by television museums and that risks expanding the generational gap between young and old television audiences.

There has been a rise in the importance of education for museums generally, which has reshaped not only their public programs but even their missions. This has likewise become true of television museums and points to the inadequacy of the either/or (either featuring programming or technology) models of the leading museums in the U.S. and Canada. The complexities and possibilities for television museums affected the new German museum as it developed amidst changing paradigms for museums and drew from prior media institutions’ endeavors. Increasingly, it is not only about the collection any more, but also what museums and visitors make out of it.

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Notes

1. The major private broadcasters RTL and ProSiebenSat1 originally agreed to contribute financial support but now hesitate due to the debate over the orientation of the new museum.
4. ICOM Statutes, article 2, paragraph 1.


19. MT&Rs Television Curator Ronald Simon, who joined the staff in the late 1970s, interviewed by the author on August 4th, 2006.


28. Together with related books, magazines, toys, and other ephemera, the collection includes some 10,000 objects. The value of the collection is an estimated $5 to $6 to six million (U.S.). Gayle MacDonald, “One Man’s Shrine to Must-See TVs,” *The Globe and Mail*, 2 April 2002.


