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Beyond Netflix and TiVo: Rethinking HBO Through the Archive

Shayne Pepper (North Carolina State University)

As you read this, someone out there is writing an essay about HBO. We hear them every year at SCMS and NCA, and our inboxes continually receive the CFPs for edited collections on the series of the moment. Though this work is often important and insightful, it is true that as HBO approaches its forty-year anniversary much of this work has focused on the last ten years of programming – all but ignoring the first thirty.ⁱ As we continually try to keep up with new content, we must not ignore the crucial history of HBO’s early years and all that the archive has to offer.



HBO Logo from the 1980s

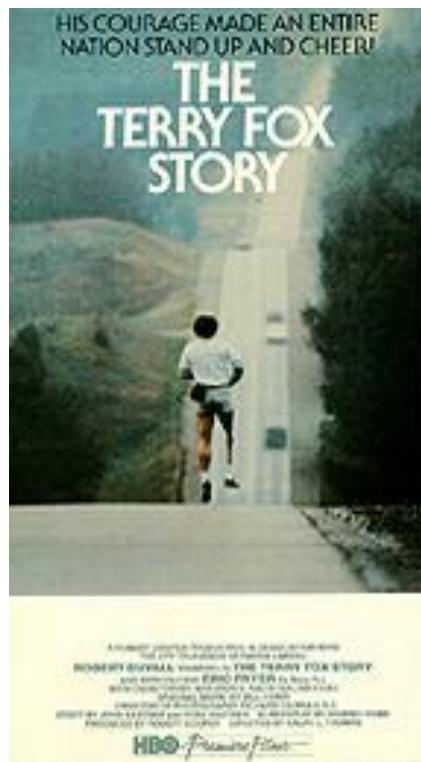
<http://www.retrojunk.com/img/art-images/hbo2.jpg>

My goal here is not to simply argue that we need to expand our corpus of programming (though we should). It is also not just to say we need to spend equal time examining HBO’s earlier history (though we certainly must). My goal is to argue that we need to reexamine what it means to say, “I study HBO.” For all of the wonderful scholarship that is sure to come from studies of *Treme*, *Bored to Death*, or *The Pacific* in relation to HBO’s discourse of innovative “quality television,” it is absolutely essential that we have a clearer understanding of how that discourse was established in the first place. We can’t simply build from those claims of quality *a priori* and not take into account the historicity of that discourse.ⁱⁱ We so easily talk about studying “early cinema” and “early television,” but have you ever met a scholar who proudly claims to study “early HBO?” It seems that somehow the historical turn never quite fully turned in HBO scholarship.

While requisite early programs such as *The Terry Fox Story* or the “*Thrilla’ in Manila*” may get mentioned in necessarily quick and broad histories, it is often only as a stepping-stone to begin the sexier discussion of more recent HBO fare. What is skipped in the process is a whole host of programming that played a major role in creating the HBO that we know today. This early original programming, what HBO called its “magazine programming,” often came in non-fiction forms and often in the style of PBS’s cultural programming. For example, a great deal of HBO’s work in the late-1980s and early-1990s falls under the umbrella of the “Project Knowledge” series, a group of public service-oriented programs that were aired on HBO but were also distributed on videocassettes with workbooks to schools and other locations.ⁱⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, programming such as this is almost completely absent from scholarly work on HBO.

Thinking historically about HBO means reaching further back than what's currently playing on the Sunday-night lineup. Our Netflix queue cannot be the extent of our archive. We must be prepared to spend time in the library stacks reading issues of *Cablevision* or programming guides from the late 1970s and early 1980s. This may mean spending hours online trying to rescue VHS tapes from the oblivion of dusty library shelves. Sometimes, yes, we must even travel. For example, in researching HBO's HIV/AIDS-related programming, the only place to see *Eagle Scout: The Story of Henry Nichols* or the fascinating stand-up comedy special *The Power of HIV-Positive Thinking: A Tragicomedy* is to physically spend time in Los Angeles at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Clearly, the titles and histories of early programs like these do not circulate in the pages of HBO's written history. This is partly because when writing about HBO now, we seem to be limited to what we have on our TiVo.



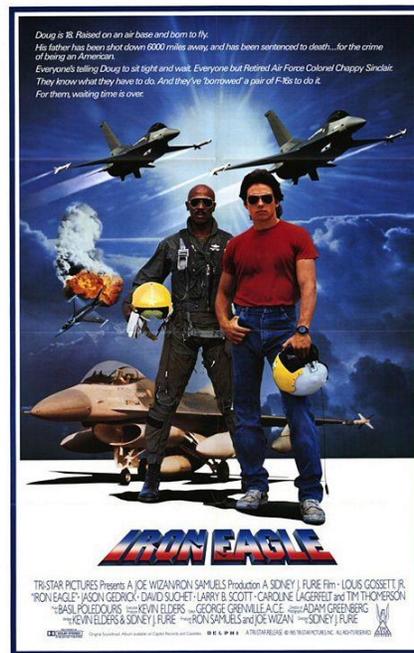
The Terry Fox Story

<http://images.rottentomatoes.com/images/movie/coverv/19/110519.jpg>

Of course, the archive is not simply a broader corpus of programs. We come only slightly closer to a better understanding of the forty-year old HBO when we examine more closely those first ten or twenty years of programming. As a term that is continually reconceptualized, renewed, and debated, the archive can be the ever-growing apparatus that links objects and discourse together. As Jeremy Packer writes, “[The archive] doesn’t zero in on media content as such but rather tries to map the surrounding terrain where the crucial battles took place that determined how media and communications would be enacted.”^{iv} The archive, in this sense, is not simply just the body of texts. It is also the system that framed and/or created those texts and subsequently gave them meaning. It is essentially the closest thing we have to recreating

historical context, and without excavation of this material, all current and future studies will be, in some sense, ahistorical and incomplete. In the end, we can't do it alone and must be willing to seek out the media librarians, archivists, and industry folk who can point us in the right directions. They too are all part of the living archival apparatus.

This means moving beyond just programming (new or old) and taking into consideration industry discourse. It means an analysis of the entire apparatus of producers, subjects, audiences, cable companies, programming guides, trade journals, and advertisements. Working toward a more complete history of HBO necessitates reconstructing the story of a particular moment in the early history of cable television. In many ways, the story of HBO *is* the story of cable, and that is the story of the technologies, commercial interests, and regulatory decisions that framed its expansion. On its own, textual analysis of HBO programs is unable to piece together the ways in which HBO executives made deliberate decisions early in the network's history to steer programming away from sports and second-rate Hollywood fare like *Iron Eagle* and toward a more high-brow, culturally important, and critically acclaimed line of programming that we discuss ad-infinitum today.^v

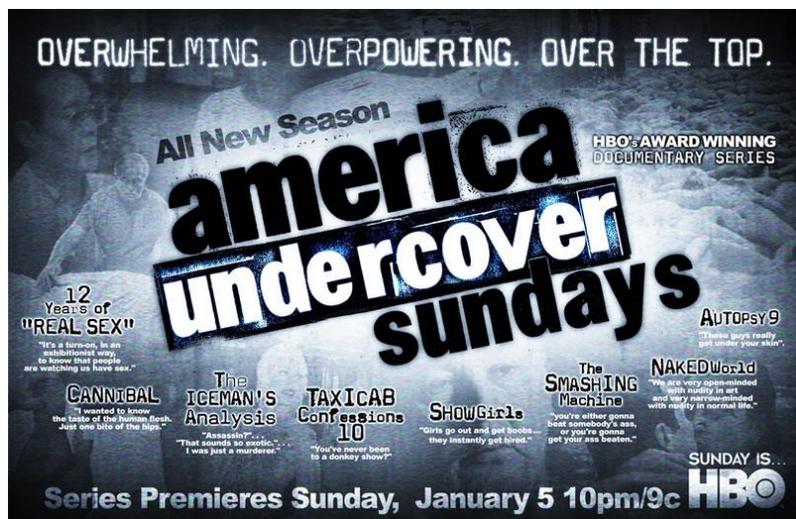


Iron Eagle: An example of HBO's early programming investments
http://chasness.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/iron_eagle.jpg

Combing through trade journals and press releases from the late-1970s and early 1980s tells us a great deal about HBO's first foray into the realm of original programming. In the early years, at a time when the HBO's schedule was not yet 24/7, the shift to an investment in original programming was not quick. A study of HBO's birth and adolescence, right after the establishment of PBS, gives us an interesting way of understanding a large portion of HBO's programming. We begin to see that many of the televisual forms that HBO mimicked and tweaked were those of public television. It was reported in January of 1981 that "HBO [had] its eyes open for that special form or idea that [would] really set original programming apart from commercial broadcasting and the efforts of the other pay services." As HBO's vice-president of

programming, Frank Bondi remarked in an interview given in late-1980, “There’s no magic recipe. It probably comes down to a combination of intuition, timing, and luck.”^{vi} Because of the increasing competition from basic cable stations and other subscription-based pay-channels, HBO needed to find the thing that would set them apart. To some degree, HBO found it by looking to PBS.

An example of HBO finding its footing somewhere between a discourse of quality and the success of risqué and edgy entertainment can be seen in the dueling logics behind *Time Was* and *Candid Camera*, two programs that aired on HBO in the late-1970s. In these we can easily see the two threads that would guide HBO to the present day. In epics like *Time Was*, a PBS-style documentary of major historical figures and events such as Babe Ruth or the sinking of The Titanic, we can see a precursor to later programs like *From The Earth to the Moon* or even *The Pacific*. In *Candid Camera*, an uncensored version of the popular network television show, we can find the seeds of much of the “America Undercover” series like *Real Sex* and *Taxicab Confessions*. After finding critical success and awards with the more highbrow fare, HBO quickly cancelled the popular *Candid Camera*. In an interview with the senior vice-president of programming, Michael Fuchs, he said, “It was one of the most popular original programs we had, but we are pulling it because of image and taste. It is not the type of project with which Time Inc. [HBO’s parent company] wants to be associated.”^{vii}



http://davidtessler.com/images/43au_over.jpg

As these examples demonstrate, if we ignore the archive, how can we expect to have anything close to a fully formed understanding of HBO today? As we all know, HBO did not spring up fully formed, but we must spend the time doing this archival work to understand how we got here. We must uncover the path from boxing matches and *Iron Eagle* to epic productions of quality like *Angels in America* or *Band of Brothers*. We need to be able to trace the shifts from broad entertainment like *Candid Camera* to interventions in progressive politics like *The Girl in the Café* or *The Laramie Project*.

In my own research on HBO’s HIV/AIDS programming, I’ve come across countless other threads that are just primed for exploration by the same scholars who have done such great work on more contemporary HBO programs. We can’t forget that writing a history of this institution means more than just the requisite glance at what happened before 1998. What we

choose to write about now, in what are sure to be the first of many years of scholarship about HBO, is, in effect, creating a new archive for future studies. Without substantial archival research at this stage, extending beyond what's on our TiVo or Netflix queue, our work risks saying that there was no HBO worthy of study before four single ladies in New York City talked about sex or a New Jersey mob boss began seeing a therapist.

Shayne Pepper is a doctoral candidate in the Communication, Rhetoric, & Digital Media Program at North Carolina State University. His research interests are in film and television studies, focusing on popular representations of political activism. His work has appeared in *Culture Machine*, *Film Criticism*, *Nebula*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, and *Scope*.

ⁱ Two recent edited collections on HBO (the first of their kind) have worked to historically situate HBO but still necessarily spend much of their time on more recent programming, examining individual series and movies. See Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffery P. Jones (eds). *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008) and Mark Leverette, Brian Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (eds). *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (London: Routledge, 2008). Before these two books were published, the only major book-length work that focused on HBO from an historical and industrial perspective that didn't limit itself to a particular series was a non-scholarly book: George Mair. *Inside HBO- The Billion Dollar War Between HBO, Hollywood, and The Home Video Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1988).

ⁱⁱ For a useful overview of how this discourse of quality has shaped criticism of HBO's programming, see Christopher Anderson. "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television." In *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 23-41.

ⁱⁱⁱ This partnership with educators is nothing new and dates back to at least 1981 when HBO collaborated with the National Educator's Association to distribute worksheets about its *Remember When* program to students. In turn, the NEA endorsed HBO's programming in its journal. See *Cablevision* May 4, 1981. Many titles in the "Project Knowledge" series also had accompanying educational materials. For a look at a more recent example of this involving *The Laramie Project* see Jennifer Peterson. "Media as Sentimental Education: The Political Lessons of HBO's *The Laramie Project* and PBS's *Two Towns of Jasper*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 26(3), 255-274.

^{iv} Jeremy Packer. "What is an Archive?" *The Communication Review*, 13 (2010), 100.

^v *Iron Eagle* is one of a handful of Tri-Star Entertainment pictures. Tri-Star Entertainment was a joint venture between HBO, CBS, and Columbia Pictures and was created, in part, to increase the amount of films that could fill HBO's schedule.

^{vi} "HBO, Showtime Refine Original Programming Policies." *Cablevision* January 5, 1981, 17-18.

^{vii} "HBO Outlines '81 Specials Strategy." *Cablevision* January 26, 1981, 14.