

THE CURRENT STATE OF AMERICAN TELEVISION AND VIDEO PRESERVATION

SPECS BROS., LLC

INTRODUCTION

SPECS BROS. is a magnetic tape decontamination and restoration facility. We specialize in disaster recovery and the rejuvenation of archival tapes suffering from material breakdown. Since 1983 we have been examining, testing, cleaning, repairing and restoring tapes that would not play back at all or exhibited signal retrieval problems. Our extensive hands-on experience and focus on physical restoration prior to playback give us a unique perspective on video preservation.

We are pleased to have been asked to share our experience with this body as we sincerely agree that the community as a whole needs to take an in-depth look at the problems of preservation. We need to communicate what is being done now, envision what may be done better in the future and reevaluate some of the assumptions we have labored under in the past. Since we deal with the practical realities of video preservation on a daily basis, we have identified a number of actions and biases that have far-reaching effects.

PERCEPTUAL BIAS

Initially, two preconceptions one encounters repeatedly must be addressed if any current video preservation initiative is to be successful. The first is "print and film are physical media but video is an electronic medium". While video may be recorded, manipulated and transmitted electronically, the medium on which the information actually exists *is* physical. With videotape, the potential for preservation is greatly enhanced by the fact that the signal itself is fairly hard to destroy. However, retention of the signal becomes academic if the physical tape has been so abused or degraded that the signal cannot be retrieved.

A perceptual bias effectively disassociates the physical tape from the program or image it contains and makes tapes vulnerable to mistreatment. Humans are, by nature, visually and task oriented. A videotape containing images of "President Nixon" physically looks like a disk or a small plastic box. Its physical appearance recalls neither the President nor the many hours of shooting and editing required to create the program. Experience shows that personnel do not intuitively make the connection. Once a program has been recorded or viewed, the tape itself becomes an object, divorced from the image it contains and emotionally devoid of value.

