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Recommended Citation
Rosenblum, Aaron (2016) "How to Get Yourself (and Your Collections) on TV," MAC Newsletter: Vol. 44 : No. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol44/iss1/8

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How to Get Yourself (and Your Collections) on TV

by Aaron Rosenblum, The Filson Historical Society

If your repository is located in anything larger than a small city, likely one or more network television stations produces local content for daily news shows being broadcast across your region. These stations are constantly looking for content for their morning and evening news shows, and you can turn their need for content into a terrific outreach opportunity for your institution and your collections.

Based on stereotype or prior viewing, you may think that your local news programs are interested solely in making minor crimes in your community seem monumental, and, while the stations very likely know that shock and fear keep viewers tuned in, sometimes they just have nothing better to run. But you can provide something more exciting than the usual—moving images of local history! The suggestions below will help you navigate the media landscape and get your film collections seen by more members of the communities from which they likely came.

Here in Louisville, all four networks (NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX) produce daily local news shows. All have covered the Filson Historical Society in the past, but the ways in which the material reached the airwaves has differed. In some cases, the stations have contacted the Filson looking for still or moving images to use as b-roll for a story on a related topic. (“Do you have any film footage of Broadway in the 1960s?”) Other stations have been interested in more in-depth coverage of stories that illustrate our region’s past. But if you’re starting from scratch, you’ll have to learn which stations are interested in your content to begin with.

First, if you aren’t a regular viewer, survey the media landscape in your community to see whether any of the local news anchors or producers take a special interest in local history. Many network station websites host at least short-term searchable archives of their content. See what pops up when you search for local history, famous names, and historical events in your area. You can also ask around town or ask around the office who might watch the local news more than you do. A producer or host already attuned to local history will be more likely to air your content or welcome story ideas based on your collections. Sometimes, as mentioned, stations will already be contacting you, in which case you can skip this step, though it never hurts to cultivate new contacts in the local media. Generally speaking, anchors’ and producers’ contact information will be available if you dig deep enough or sometimes if you just keep an eye on the screen during a newscast.

While there’s no reason in particular not to develop an interest in and receive coverage of your manuscript and photo collections, audiovisual materials offer an especially captivating look at local history. There’s a reason no one’s ever produced a show called *America’s Funniest Home Photographs.*

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Take a look at your digitized films and pick times of year or occurrences that line up with the content. If you have footage of the old high school football rivalry in town (as we do), pitch it for a story to air during football season, not in the middle of the summer. Have a notable annual event in town and footage to match (the Kentucky Derby, for instance)? Something seasonal (snow on your historic downtown)? Your films will stand a great chance of being broadcast when pitched for a story commemorating an anniversary or just the arrival of the event or season.

Once you are in contact with a producer, he or she may request footage to preview. You can send a low-quality access copy of your footage for this purpose, with a request that this version not be used on the air. Also request a time log of the desired segments from the producer. Then you can produce a reel for the station containing only the required footage, at the requested resolution. Remember that, once the story is accepted, or once your footage is in the hands of the station, you will lose a little control of the content. The producers might want to spice up the story a little, and as long as they do so without fabricating or distorting, this is probably all well and good.

When being interviewed, live or in a prerecorded segment, try to relax and answer the questions you are asked in a straightforward manner. Remember that not everyone in the audience will know your institution, its mission, or the names and dates in local history that may be obvious reference points for you. Be informative, but don’t go overboard or try to cram an entire finding aid into your answers. If you perform regular outreach to general audiences, think of this the same way.

Whenever you provide materials of any kind for use by the press, it is important to determine ahead of time whether your usual use fees will be applied. Whether or not you discount or bypass your usual fee structure in exchange for exposure, you should certainly require of the network a credit line on all broadcast images and films. One way of ensuring this is to attach a watermark to all materials tendered to the station. In the Filson’s experience, a discreet watermark in one corner is acceptable. It’s possible the station could remove the watermark by cropping the footage, but this rarely happens. A huge watermark in the middle of the footage, on the other hand, might be rejected out of hand and might distract from the content of the footage. With a small watermark, the footage still shines through, and you are more or less assured your credit.

After your content airs, you’ll need to keep an eye out for your images being used as b-roll for other stories in the future without your permission for this further use. It is best to make plain at the outset that the permission given is solely for the story for which the image was requested and the few offshoot stories associated with it—stories are often used on the 6 and 11 o’clock news, or in the evening and the next morning. Even if you are providing your content free of charge, you may want to use your normal photo/
film licensing order forms, which may already include language governing future use. If not, add such language for the purposes of the station's order.

If you believe your members or patrons, or anyone following your newsletters, Facebook page, and so on, might be interested but are otherwise unlikely to be tuned in when the segment airs, post about it before and after. Again, for those who miss the broadcast, try to provide a link to the video afterward. Often, donors and patrons are excited to see their institutions receive coverage at this level and may spread the posts or videos around themselves.

Once you have made your appearance, be sure to check the station’s website within a few days to see if it has uploaded the segment. And don’t be scared to watch and share! While you may feel like you embarrassed yourself, you probably didn’t. While I have certainly made an embarrassment of myself (see photo), I did so more or less on purpose, and I also made the hosts smell a reel of film with vinegar syndrome on live morning television, an accomplishment of which I am immeasurably proud!

If the station on which you appear does not post its content on the web, ask in advance if you can receive a recording of the segment. You may wish to keep the recording for internal distribution to anyone in the office who might have missed it or for screenshots to be posted on blogs and web pages (and your own social media account, of course). You may also be able to embed the station’s video on your own site (until the recording is taken down), generating more views of the segment among your patrons.

You can expect feedback from the viewing audience, whether your own regular patrons or viewers who were previously unaware of your institution or the content being shared. This feedback can include helpful descriptive information, praise, or sometimes criticism of some aspect of the work, the institution, and so on. So far, the Filson has enjoyed very little negative feedback and plenty of praise for our appearances, as well as a few opportunities to learn more about our own collections.

Having our materials carried on local network news has had positive outreach and acquisition impacts for the Filson. It has let the public know we are here and that we are interested in types of materials that viewers might not associate with a historical society or archives. Because the Filson actively produces many lectures and events, it has also been a means of promoting those aspects of our mission. And, last and probably least, it has allowed us to go on TV!

A title card from the Judge Arthur E. Hopkins Film Collection at The Filson Historical Society

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