O ur planet is a busy place. For one thing, it’s crawling with billions of human beings—citizens struggling for humane treatment, politicians making promises to their constituents, soldiers fighting wars, and businesspeople wrangling advantage over their rivals. For more than half a century, television journalists have been pointing cameras at these frantic activities and bringing them into living rooms across the country.

History is the collective memory of the human race, and TV news broadcasts are history in the making. Yet, for many years after they began broadcasting, the networks did not keep copies of their daily news programs. Each network jealously hoarded files of its best footage, but made no promises to their constituents, soldiers fighting wars, and businesspeople wrangling advantage over their rivals. For more than half a century, television journalists have been pointing cameras at these frantic activities and bringing them into living rooms across the country.

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Every taped program displays both the network identification and the date and time (in Central Time). This running clock coordinates the various aspects of the collection. Later, while writing a brief synopsis of each program, an indexer records the start and stop times of each news story, along with key items of information that will aid a search of the database.

"On the evening news," says Lynch, "we describe down to the individual item—every single story—and every commercial, although on commercials all we do is list the product."

As with all research institutions, the TV News Archive wrestles with budget issues that affect quality. For example, most programs are recorded on three-quarter-inch tape. Twenty-four hours a day for a while, we use two-hour VHS. "The larger tape costs more times as much per hour. Lynch explains that they simply cannot afford to run the more expensive tape all day long. Around-the-clock coverage also requires more staff time, particularly to catalog the resulting backlog accurately. "The last Gulf War," Lynch sighs, "just about closed the archive, it cost us so much money."

Copies of every evening news program or news special are available for loan, but copyright restrictions do not allow materials to be sold. Because of its unique collection, the TV News Archive is besieged with requests from many different kinds of patrons. One man is slowly working his way through the Weathergate coverage. Another researcher wanted to document the progression of public discussion of diabetes over the years. Some researchers spend months and months looking for just one story. Lynch says with a smile, "We’re just getting old enough for history."

Eventually, like everything else in the world (for example, radiology departments, as discussed in the winter 2003 issue of Vanderbilt Magazine), the TV News Archive will switch completely to digital equipment. This change will take place slowly, but when completed it will make the material available to researchers and students much more quickly. Patrons will merely have to find their item in the index, click on it, and view a small version of it on the computer screen, as easily as they might sample a movie preview on the Internet now. To begin evaluating the magnitude of the task...