

# Materialities of Television History

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In 2018 and 2019, I was lucky enough to access fanzine collections in Ontario and Texas. In both, I focused on a subset of zines that published 'letters of comment' (LOCs), known as letterzines, focusing on a sample from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The LOCs are not only about the programmes that the letter-writers are watching but also about how, where, and when this watching happens. In terms of materiality, these letterzines account for historical relationships with television in at least three directions:

- Reflecting on working with paper documents and their digital copies. In one case, the complementary collections overlapped, and the handwritten annotations on archived pieces differ. Material conditions of watching television are part of fans' accounts of being an audience.

This piece expands and reflects on these directions.

As material objects, I encountered these documents as physical artefacts and in their digitized versions. In Ontario, I worked through uncatalogued paper zines, pausing to note the texture, colour, and form as I took thousands of photos for future study. The material in Texas was supplied as pdf and tiff files, without getting hands-on. I'm mindful of my different approach to working with zines in both forms: the practice of reading and reviewing documents by flipping through physical pages (having sat on a plane to get there) differs from reading text in an image file at my leisure on a laptop, which differs again from being able to search through OCR'd pages in a pdf.

Each zine is a unique object, and this is emphasized with handwritten notes that individualize these 'mass' printed materials. For example, in the two collections, there are a pair of copies of the same zine issue, one postmarked June 1976, the other postmarked July 1976, with handwritten notes on the final page. One is evidently a personal reply to a previous query; the other apologizes to the recipient for the delay in mailing the zine. These each give the individual object an anchoring in someone's life, making them more than just printed matter. They are not only periodicals but they are also used as notepaper.

The zines are a forum for television talk, with the letters themselves capturing historical accounts of television viewing. This is not merely what fans thought about storyworlds but includes the practice and experience of being a television audience. Offhand comments around the shows themselves show how media consumption is integrated into daily life and the material conditions thereof. For example, one LOC writer in 1975 describes keeping a Nielsen diary but points out its design does not capture that their schedule was atypical, or any qualitative response to what they watched, and that they had to fight with their antenna to get a decent colour picture of a syndicated *Star Trek* episode. However, in these comments and peripheral details in between plot and character chat, we get something of the texture, colour, and form of the material realities of pre-digital television.

The author subsequently developed this reflection into two articles (see Stevens 2020, 2021).

## REFERENCES

- Stevens, E. Charlotte (2020), "'Researching *Starsky and Hutch* is exquisite torture': Letters about television in 1980s media fanzines', *Alphaville*, 20, pp. 213–19.
- Stevens, E. Charlotte (2021), 'Historical binge-watching: Marathon viewing on videotape', in M. Jenner (ed.), *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 23–39.