DAFFODILS, FIELD MICE, AND FERRIES:

BBC'S *VIDEO NATION* AS PUBLIC HERITAGE FILM

by

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DEDICATION

In memory of Jamie Fico, intrepid researcher and fearless community maker.

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ABSTRACT

In 1991, the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) launched a series of shorts in between regular news programming. The program, called *Video Nation*, featured regular Brits telling the camera of various facets of their everyday lived experiences. The ways in which *Video Nation* interacts with and defies typical boundaries of genre and practice in non-fiction television render it ripe for study as a piece of British heritage film history. First, this thesis reviews the history of *Video Nation*'s inception as a program at the BBC and, secondly, analyzes its relationship to other unscripted television programs and community-based research projects. Third, the paper explores the significance of *Video Nation* in the broadcasting landscape more fully as a piece of heritage film. Finally, the paper covers accessibility issues within the project as it stands today. Because of the project's unique positionalities and contexts, *Video Nation* is a program deserving of preservation and improvements to accessibility in order for it to function as a truly public archive.

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, a woman named Connie Mark recited William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" on television: "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills, / When all at once I saw a crowd, / A host, of golden daffodils; / Beside the lake, beneath the trees / Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."[1] Mark was a senior Jamaican woman who had never seen a daffodil at the time that she was made to memorize the poem during her school days in British-occupied Jamaica. As she spoke, the camera turned to the daffodils in her front yard in England. In another televised segment, a father named Mark McLean in Northern Ireland takes his children outside to release a mouse they have caught in their home. In another, Daniella Church takes her camera on a journey back and forth across the River Blyth as she carries on a family ferrying tradition. These people were not celebrities, but their respective slots on the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) Channel Two (typically stylized BBC Two) consisted of two minutes in between the nightly news programming and was presumably viewed by people all over the United Kingdom. Mark, McLean, and Church were participants in the BBC public documentary project *Video Nation.*

Video Nation constituted an unusual project for the BBC at the time, and would likely never be greenlit in today's television production landscape: short videos taped by everyday Brits from all over the United Kingdom, collected and edited together by the BBC into a variety of short-form content that appeared on BBC Two in brief segments (and a handful of longer-form

[1] William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," The Poetry Foundation, originally published 1807, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud.

content) between 1993 and 2000.[2] When *Video Nation* was moved online in 2001, producers generally stopped soliciting recordings from participants and moved toward the archival model that had been designed into the project from the beginning, and participants could rest easy that their videos were available online—they would become part of an archive of British life in the 1990s, as promised by producers.[3] Not only were people like Mark, McLean, and Church to be *featured* in this archive, but they had all played huge participatory roles in the creation of their videos, having considerable influence on topic and complete control over what was said on-camera.[4] Participants were additionally given the right to veto material they had filmed from being broadcast, a notable departure from the practices of other unscripted genres then and now.[5] Later, in 2011, the *Video Nation Archive* was removed from the internet as part of a budget-streamlining undertaking by then-BBC Two Controller Jane Root.[6] Today, if Connie were to search the internet for her powerful words on her experiences of colonial Jamaica, she would find nothing.

I began the project of finding *Video Nation*'s tapes on the now-archived *Video Nation Archives* page on the BBC website with a certain amount of naive enthusiasm. Connie Mark's video was right in front of me; all I had to do was press 'Play.' But when I did, I was confronted with a file type I had never seen before: .RAM, and my computer could not play it. I enlisted the help of a computer programmer, who, after some digging, reported that a .RAM file was simply

[2] Mandy Rose, "Not Media About, but Media With: Co-creation as Activism," in *I-Docs: Evolving Practices in Interactive Documentary*, ed. Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi and Mandy Rose (Columbia University Press: Wallflower Press, 2017), 49.
[3] Mandy Rose, interview by author, remote via Zoom, November 24, 2024.
[4] Rose, interview.
[5] Rose, interview.
[6] Paul, McCann, "BBC's Video Nation Faces the Axe," *The Independent*, June 21, 1999, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/bbc-s-video-nation-faces-the-axe-1101652.html.

a text file with a link in it. That link, of course, was just a link to the *Video Nation* page that I was already on. We concluded that the .RAM file was a vestige of BBC's RealPlayer days, a time when the RealPlayer application would act as the middleman between the viewer and the server housing all of the videos in question. With RealPlayer defunct and seemingly drawing from a non-existent source, I was left with one choice: submit a note to the BBC Complaints office. Complaints responded the following day: "The page you've referenced has been archived, and is no longer updated. As such, some aspects of the page may not function."[7]

Months later, as I interviewed *Video Nation* producer Mandy Rose, she explained that costs of digitizing the collection had proven prohibitive to both the BBC and their television archivists at the British Film Institute (BFI).[8] The overall outcome remains that the BBC Archives are completely inaccessible to overseas viewers and researchers, and practically inaccessible to the average member of the working public within the United Kingdom itself. While the BFI houses all BBC television output, anyone hoping to view the material has to make a physical appearance in London at the BFI Viewing Center to watch any footage. The raw footage by participants of *Video Nation*, meanwhile, has bounced between the BBC and BFI for years, even after the BFI agreed to keep them as a public archive. When the time came, the BFI refused to house the footage if the BBC would not cover digitization costs, which they did not. The rushes currently live in the BBC Archives, but according to Rose, the BBC has no current plans to review the footage.[9]

[7] BBC Complaints, email message to author, September 1, 2024.
[8] Rose, interview.
[9] Mandy Rose, email message to author, September 25, 2024.

What becomes of footage like this, left unreviewed in the archives after a vibrant life as a unique collection in the 1990s? And, more hopefully, what *should* become of it? The ways in which *Video Nation* interacts with and defies typical boundaries of genre and practice in nonfiction television render it ripe for study as a piece of British heritage film history. Therefore, access to the series is vital to studying the changes in first-person documentary media occurring at its time. First, I review the history of *Video Nation*'s inception as a program at the BBC and, secondly, analyze its relationship to other unscripted television programs and community-based research projects. Third, I explore the significance of *Video Nation* in the broadcasting landscape more fully as a piece of heritage film. Finally, I cover accessibility issues within the project as it stands today.

VIDEO NATION

History of *Video Nation*

On an early-morning video call with Mandy Rose, the co-producer of *Video Nation* confirmed to me something I had read in Nico Carpentier's work on the program: "Crucial and unusual is that this approval [of the *Video Nation* project by BBC then-controller Alan Yantob] did not concern a proposal for a programme, but for a project that endeavoured to provide material for a diversity of yet-to-be developed programmes."[10] Imagine the risk, at the time and perhaps even more so today, of commissioning video material from (carefully selected, but still amateur) members of the public with no specific programming mapped. The project almost seems more suited to the age of internet scrolling and online archives than broadcast television, where a wide variety of material collected for broadcast could be searched according to a variety of factors. (This would not necessarily be the most effective or interesting arrangement of the material in an archive, but we will return to that in a later section.)

According to Rose, participant selection consisted of a lengthy process in which first, the public responded to calls for participation in the project via various adverts. Producers would meet with mutually interested parties and familiarize them with the process of talking to the camera before deciding if they would be a good fit for the program.[11] At first, producers wondered if a completely random selection process from the pool of interested candidates would be appropriate, but to them it "didn't feel right."[12] Rose said in a keynote address on *Video*

[10] Nico Carpentier, "The BBC's Video Nation as a Participatory Media Practice: Signifying Everyday Life, Cultural Diversity and Participation in an Online Community," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 4 (2003): 427. doi:10.1177/136787790364003.
[11] Rose, interview.
[12] Rose, interview.

Nation that "the project's very title and the context of the BBC meant that the group we gave camcorders to would constitute a form of statement about the UK at that moment. We needed to take responsibility for the composition of that group."[13] The production team began with geographical representation, deciding to initially base the majority of the participants in England and include eight participants from Scotland and three from Wales on the basis of their relative populations, and then further deciding which percentages of these participants would be of which gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, and income.[14] Upon attempting a demographically accurate sample for the population of each geographic area, however, they ran into further problems of representation:

> For example—in 1991 people who defined themselves as black British were only 1.6% of the population. Looked at one way, that could have meant only one black British person in a group of 50. But that wouldn't reflect life in London or in Liverpool. And anyway, black British people are note only defined by ethnicity. Their lives are also structured by gender, disability, age, religion, class. And they're parents, football fans, postal workers, teachers, Royalists, Labour voters, whatever.[15]

Precisely because of this complexity, they concluded that it would be "neither possible nor desirable to claim to represent the UK in any social scientific way."[16] Instead, they decided to "aim to give a feel for the many different lives and experiences going on in the UK at the time."[17] Once the production team had chosen their 50 participants, producers began cultivating one-on-one relationships with a set of five to ten participants with whom they would collaborate on *Video Nation* material.[18]

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[13] Rose, interview.
[14] Rose, "*Video Nation*."
[15] Rose, "*Video Nation*."
[16] Rose, "*Video Nation*."
[17] Rose, "*Video Nation*."
[18] Rose, "*Video Nation*."

As for production, according to Carpentier, each participant had a small camcorder placed at their disposal, and the participant could more or less decide what to film independently. Occasionally, producers requested specific content in a video, but the general practice was to leave filming in the trained hands of participants.[19] During these training events, "the participants were familiarized with the style and concept that the production team had created… It was, for instance, made clear that the 'subjective' filming style was preferred to the observation style that is common in home movies."[20] And while editorial veto, a "negative right" that allowed participants to veto certain footage from streaming, empowered these same participants to take control of their narratives onscreen in some capacity, it also encouraged them to film with less constraint, revealing more to the camera than they might if they did not think they could ask for footage to be removed later.[21] Rose remembers BBC lawyers at the time worrying that the veto right would prevent anything from ever reaching the airwaves, but producers insisted, and to great effect when it comes to participants' willingness to share their lives on television.[22] Otherwise, participants were excluded from producing roles, editing, and management.[23]

Video Nation aired its first short, "Mirror" by Gordon Hensher, in 1994 as one of a series promoting the longer *Video Nation* documentary *Money, Money, Money* (1994). Upon the broadcast of *Money*, the BBC commissioned another ten shorts and then subsequently reserved broadcast slots between the nightly news programming for several months into the future. By the

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[19] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 439.
[20] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 440.
[21] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 440.
[22] Rose, interview.
[23] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 442.

end of its run of shorts and a few longer documentary pieces, *Video Nation* had aired on BBC Two for six years.[24]

In May 2000, BBC Two Controller Jane Root pulled *Video Nation* from broadcast in efforts to streamline their content and "hold viewers," perhaps due to the program's typically short length and positioning between regular, longer pieces.[25] Thankfully, the project found a home online in 2001 as a self-described "online community and archive."[26] While the project enjoyed a life online for ten years, the BBC cut *Video Nation*'s website in 2011 as part of a series of about 200 website cancellations, including other moving image archives, due to budget cuts.[27] Therefore, according to my communications with BBC Complaints, "When pages are archived [i.e., no longer active but still available as part of the BBC's archive of online resources], remaining content is unsupported, which is out of the BBC's control."[28] As to who exactly would be in control of the BBC's unsupported content, the answer remains unclear.

In spite of its unusual development approach and distribution path, the project still developed within the tradition of public service broadcasting.[29] Thus, *Video Nation* adheres to the BBC's Agreement with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media, and Sport that the BBC "make arrangements for the maintenance of an archive... of films, sound recordings, [and other] recorded material... which is representative of the sound and television programmes and films

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[24] Nico Carpentier. "Bridging Cultural and Digital Divides: Signifying Everyday Life, Cultural Diversity and Participation in the On-Line Community Video Nation," *Steunpunt Re-Creatief Vlaanderen* (May 2002): 14.
[25] McCann, "BBC's *Video Nation* Faces the Axe."
[26] Carpentier, "Digital Divides," 15.
[27] "BBC to Cut Online Budget by 25%," BBC News, January 24, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-12265173.
[28] BBC Complaints, email message to author, September 10, 2024.
[29] Nicole Matthews. "Confessions to a New Public: *Video Nation Shorts*," *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 3 (2007): 444. doi:10.1177/0163443707076184.

broadcast... by the BBC."[30] The agreement goes on that those arrangements must ensure that the archive is kept safely according to standard archival practices and, crucially, that the public must have "reasonable opportunities to visit the archives and view or listen to the material kept there..."[31]

Rose stressed to me in our conversation that participants in *Video Nation* were under the impression that their recordings would become an archive of the everyday public of the 1990s United Kingdom.[32] And while the BBC has kept to their word in the most literal sense—the tapes of the *Video Nation* shorts are housed in the BBC's archive—this hardly constitutes a publicly available archive that give the public "reasonable opportunities to visit."[33] What was once meant as an archive of a fascinating and unique public broadcast project now prompts of producer Mandy Rose in an email exchange: "It is lamentable that a project based on recordings by the public is not accessible to the public in some form."[34]

Video Nation in Context

Wrapped up in the emergence of *Video Nation* is the history of another trailblazing British ethnography project: Mass Observation (MO). The project, founded in 1937 by Charles Madge, Tom Harrisson, and documentary filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, began as an

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[30] United Kingdom. Department of Culture, Media and Sport. *Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation*. (bbc.co.uk, 2016), https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/agreement.pdf.
[31] United Kingdom. Department of Culture, Media and Sport. *Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation*. (bbc.co.uk, 2016), https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/agreement.pdf.
[32] Rose, interview.
[33] United Kingdom. Department of Culture, Media and Sport. *Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation*. (bbc.co.uk, 2016), https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/agreement.pdf.
[34] Mandy Rose, email message to author, September 24, 2024.

ethnographic project by and for the British public.[35] By 1939, when MO published the book *Britain by Mass Observation* using findings from two years of anthropological observation by participants in the group, MO had amassed 1,500 citizen-observers in the United Kingdom; many in London, Worktown, and Blackpool who conducted interviews, attended community events, and essentially eavesdropped to conduct their research.[36] The organization also asked people to observe their own behavior patterns and activities via "day surveys" on specific days throughout the year, which were worked into books such as *May the Twelfth.* MO found themselves fascinated with the everyday as a way of touching the British public in a way that media directed *at* the public could not. MO scholar Ben Highmore writes, "Put starkly; unless there are mechanisms for a population to represent itself as day-to-day reality, then there are plenty of powerful forces prepared to speak in its name. Thus, MO establishes itself as a counter-form to the way that radio and newspapers speak 'on behalf' of an audience or readership."[37] This, he contends, is what makes MO relevant to the current moment. However, MO differs from the forms of sharing on so-called 'platforms' like social media today in that it was part of a larger social project. He writes, "The insistence on a 'science' within MO is again an insistence on the fact that the observer isn't a sovereign subject but is part of a collective."[38] Highmore's mention of this collective identity/project brings *Video Nation* to mind. In fact, while developing *Video Nation*, producers visited the MO archive housed in the University of Sussex Special Collections at the Keep, and they left with the strong sense that they were following in its wake. [39]

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[35] Ben Highmore, "'The Observation of Everyone by Everyone': The Project of Mass Observation in 1937," in *Mass-Observation: Text, Context, and Analysis of the Pioneering Pamphlet*, ed. Jennifer J. Purcell (Bloomsbury, 2023), 8.
[36] Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *Britain by Mass Observation* (Penguin, 1939), 12.
[37] Highmore, "'The Observation of Everyone by Everyone,'" 24.
[38] Highmore, "'The Observation of Everyone by Everyone,'" 24.
[39] Highmore, "'The Observation of Everyone by Everyone,'" 24.

Video Nation further took inspiration from the BBC Community Programmes Unit (CPU), which existed from 1973 until the end of the 1990s and sprung up as a result of a documentary about Guinness workers released in 1971. According to Carpentier, the film "contained harsh criticisms on the paternalistic attitude of the BBC toward ordinary people from the mouth of a number of Guinness workers and played a crucial role in the development of the CPU."[40] For the first 20 years, the CPU's approach was characterized by a "continuing process of mediation" by professionals from the BBC, or by campaigners or service providers, that maintained a distance between the network and their participants.[41] Only at the inception of *Video Nation*'s direct predecessor, *Video Diaries*, did this approach change.[42] Subject participation marked this new approach by the BBC, and producer Mandy Rose describes *Video Nation* as a marriage between MO and the aforementioned *Video Diaries* (1991).[43] Carpentier writes,

> *Video Diaries* consisted out of one hour documentaries that were autobiographical and subjective, addressed the viewer directly – using the first person mode - and were made by nonprofessionals through the use of lightweight cameras… The production process was oriented towards handing over control to the non-professional author of the diary and was based on a partnership between the producer and the author.[44]

Video Nation took up the mantle of participant-made media in its place just one year after *Video Diaries* had finished in 1991.[45]

According to Nicole Matthews in "Confessions to a New Public," the emergence of *Video Nation* at this moment in time points to a new focus on 'media of the self' due to new forms of

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[40] Carpentier, "Digital Divides," 13.
[41] Carpentier, "Digital Divides," 13.
[42] Carpentier, "Digital Divides," 13.
[43] Rose, "*Video Nation*."
[44] Carpentier, "Digital Divides," 13.
[45] Carpentier, "Digital Divides," 13.

literacy, like technological and media literacy, becoming more widespread around the time of *Video Nation*'s creation.[46] In fact, *Video Nation* emerged at the same time as an entirely new genre of television was slowly beginning to take over the airwaves: reality television. Reality programming had been steadily growing in popularity, some would say since the emergence of audience participation segments on radio broadcasts. Emily Nussbaum writes in *Cue the Sun: The Invention of Reality TV*, "Pundits hated the audience participation shows from the start, a response that was saturated with class revulsion: These were vulgar programs, created by vulgar people, for vulgar people, *about* vulgar people."[47] The same is often said for the descendants of early reality programming that we see on streaming services and the Bravo channel today, although class plays a far different role in how people interact with the shows than it once did. *Video Nation*, then, sprang from the same source as reality television in two respects: both descend from the same audience participation genre of the 1930s, and both were able to flourish in the 1990s because of new lightweight, low-cost video equipment.

The development of these technologies is also inextricably linked to increases in surveillance around the 1990s. With the rise of baby monitor cameras and other forms of personal and home surveillance devices, the rough aesthetics associated with surveillance became more commonplace in the media. Clip-based reality television shows like *Cops* and *America's Funniest Home Videos* popularized the low-resolution look of surveillance devices, and viewer's willingness to engage with footage like this on programs like *Video Nation* could have been due to a comfortability with surveillance footage in the public that was completely

[46] Matthews, "Confessions to a New Public," 438-439.
[47] Emily Nussbaum, *Cue the Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV* (Random House, 2024), 4-5.

new at the time.[48] Increases in surveillance in the workplace and public life around this time also had drastic effects on what people felt was acceptable in terms of privacy. Clay Calvert in *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture* writes,

> [Increased workplace surveillance] greased the skids for a growing sense of resignation—if not quite willing acceptance—among many people of the fact that their daily activities are constantly subject to recorded visual scrutiny... The more accepting we are of having our own behavior visually monitored and recorded, the more our own comfort level with watching others' activities increases. If we can be watched, in other words, then we certainly should be able to do some watching of our own.[49]

That "watching of our own" comes in many forms: talk shows and reality television, as well as other unscripted media that constitute less of an invasion of privacy but still engages with surveillance aesthetically and in terms of personal disclosure.

Perhaps these videos document the shift into a more confessional version of the first-person media one sees today on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram; or, as posited by Jon Dovey in "The Confessing Nation," perhaps they rather act as a sort of 'coming out,' a refutation of penance by participants who bare themselves to the public upon each viewing.[50] In either case, norms of appropriate behavior are called up and judged by the viewing public.[51] Reasons for self-disclosing in public (off- or online) are multiple and complex in nature. Calvert writes about the multiple functions served by self disclosure as: 1) "self-clarification," in which one discloses information in preparation for speaking about personal experience, 2) "social validation," by which one hopes to obtain advice or feedback about their behavior in order to reveal something

[48] Nussbaum, *Cue the Sun!*, 98.
[49] Clay Calvert, *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture* (Westview Press, 2000), 91-92.
[50] Jon Dovey, "The Confessing Nation," in *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television* (Pluto Press, 2000), 111.
[51] Matthews, "Confessions to a New Public," 441.

about their self to others, 3) "relationship development," in which one uses personal information as a commodity to exchange, and 4) "social control," in which one basically attempts to manage others' opinions of them by strategically revealing information.[52] Similarly, he specifies the reasons that people engage in what he calls "mediated voyeurism," a concept that is distinct from *Video Nation*'s brand of disclosure but is helpful for locating *Video Nation* in the 1990s media landscape. These reasons might be as a diversion or distraction from the viewer's real life, as a way of learning about the world or others without engaging with them directly, and for social reasons such as watching a television show so that you can talk about it with your coworkers the next day.[53]

All of the prior concepts clearly apply to some of the reasons for participating in or watching *Video Nation* in the 1990s. However, the program should also be considered distinct in some significant ways from the reality television craze, as well as from the invasion of privacy inherent in surveillance media. Both of these elements affecting privacy fall under Calvert's definition of mediated voyeurism. Of privacy itself, Calvert writes that it is a social construction which changes and varies from time to time, often pushed along by the media's tendencies to invade privacy. Crucially, he explains that "[privacy] thus may be evaluated in terms of the power and ability of an individual to control the flow and dissemination of information about himself or herself... Privacy, in brief, involves related concepts of self, control, access, and information."[54]

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[52] Calvert, *Voyeur Nation*, 84.
[53] Calvert, *Voyeur Nation*, 57.
[54] Calvert, *Voyeur Nation*, 78-79.

Because of the control granted participants of *Video Nation* by BBC producers, the program remains distinct from forms of mediated voyeurism proliferating at the time. Calvert also specifies that mediated voyeurism "refers to *the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for the purposes of entertainment*," which certainly does apply to *Video Nation*; but crucially counter to the production ethics of *Video Nation* is also "*frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of mass media and the Internet.*"[55] When *Video Nation* was moved online in 2001, the public could explore new ways to engage with the program's participants and each other via the comments section. Unfortunately, from looking at those comment sections today, it appears that this function of the website was severely underused. While theoretically, a participant from the show *could* interact with viewers via this platform, it does not appear that any ever did. Whether or not this constitutes a loss of discourse remains up for debate, but the fact that the option did exist at one time remains significant. This was an era pre-YouTube when even such things as the comment section and search bar were far from ubiquitous.

Video Nation as Heritage Film

I have already laid out the unique position the BBC afforded *Video Nation* as a collection of footage from which editors drew programs—as opposed to the other way around—as well as the fascinating media and technological context in which the show arose. However, the program has other significances for the field of documentary film and broadcast, as well as for British history and politics as a document. For these reasons, I argue, *Video Nation* should be considered

[55] 45 Calvert, *Voyeur Nation*, 2. His emphasis.

a piece of heritage film. While some definitions of the phrase 'heritage film' refer specifically to fictional films taking place in historical Britain, I use this phrase here to emphasize the legacies that unique projects with significant public followings have. In doing so, I posit heritage film as material worthy of preservation and public accessibility because of its unique position in the culture and history of the United Kingdom and documentary in general.

The BBC already holds the legacy as the world's longest running public broadcast company.[56] The fact that they chose to run a project/program like *Video Nation* is significant in itself because of the BBC's long track record as a cultural institution. The project's adoption by the BBC lent it validity as a piece of media, unlike other amateur video camcorder media, while simultaneously establishing itself as a willing experimenter in a rapidly changing media landscape.

Video Nation also perhaps benefitted in the cultural sphere as a sort of continuation of the Mass Observation (MO) project from decades earlier, and which had been resuscitated by the University of Sussex less than a decade earlier. It certainly followed in the footsteps of MO's interest in the 'ordinary' public of Britain, attempting to fashion themselves as something of a more democratic public record. Taking that idea further, Matthews writes, "the subject matter taken on by contributors to *Video Nation* very much bears out the feminist slogan that the personal is political."[57] She brings forth examples of participants filming on their relationships to housework: a fisherman jokingly argues with his partner about why he never does the dishes, and

[56] Margaretta Jolly, "Listening Projects: The BBC, Oral History, and the Nation in Fractured Times," *The Oral History Review* 51, no. 1 (2024): 108. doi:10.1080/00940798.2024.2324062.
[57] Matthews, "Confessions to a New Public," 444-445.

a woman sweeps an earthen floor in her home while talking aloud to the camera about the division of labor amongst other members of her alternative community.[58] Matthews goes on,

> *Video Nation* is not just political in the expanded sense proposed by new social movements like feminism. Big 'p' political conclusions have often been made by contributors to the programme. For instance, a doctor in Northern Ireland, feeling the butterflies in his stomach while waiting for his son's exam results, described the emphasis on testing in modern education as 'a form of child abuse'. A crofter in the Shetland Isles, checking her farm's weather station, criticizes the government's policy of not taking into account the wind chill factor when calculating pensioners' cold weather payments. These contributors, reflecting on their own experience, make arguments that are very clearly assimilable into quite conventional notions of the political.[59]

Yet, the videos remain both public and intimate. Through the representation of a diverse range of British voices on television, *Video Nation* represented a project whose concerns "very much centered on the definition of nationhood and the articulation of voices within public space."[60] It is also worth noting here that both producers, Mandy Rose and Chris Mohr, are accomplished female film producers in a field in which women and gender minorities are vastly underrepresented. Representation matters in *Video Nation*, and attempts at representing more than the white men of the nation are apparent in both participant selection and the make-up of the production team, which leads us to the significance of the program for the field of documentary film and television.

Video Nation represents one of few relatively successful collaborations between a huge media conglomerate and the general public as media-makers. (I use the word "few" here not to imply that I know of any other examples, but to leave open the possibility that others exist out there.) Part of the reason for this success was the significant amount of control that participants

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[58] Matthews, "Confessions to a New Public," 444-445.
[59] Matthews, "Confessions to a New Public," 444-445.
[60] Matthews, "Confessions to a New Public," 435.

were afforded during the production and post-production processes. Participants had camcorders placed almost completely at their disposal by the production team, and "the decision about what to film was theirs."[61] Participants underwent training and were familiarized with a sort of standard style and concept by the production team, which meant that participants were encouraged to utilize a subjective filming style with voiceover as opposed to the objective style of home videos at the time.[62] Producers at times asked participants for more specific footage or counseled them during production, but overall maintained a sort of distance from the actual filming of most of the shorts eventually broadcast on television. When *Video Nation* moved online, the BBC provided more hands-on participant counseling in order to produce more intentionally curated material.[63]

On the other hand, structural roles for participants seem rather limited. The public was largely excluded from roles in management, producing, and editing, although participants had the right to editorial veto in their contracts which editors and producers alike respected. However, this editorial veto was largely a "negative right," which both empowered participants to prevent material from broadcasting and also encouraged them to film with less restraint, knowing that they could rescind permission to broadcast certain material.[64] Jo Henderson favorably compares the program to "the genre of access television that was possible in some broadcast contexts but not particularly one which was invested in the representation of its cultural authority, because of the accompanying concern of accountability in a public service broadcaster."[65] Additionally

[61] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 439.
[62] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 440.
[63] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 439.
[64] Carpentier, "*Video Nation* as a Participatory Media Practice," 440-442.
[65] Jo Henderson, "Documents of Ordinariness: Authority and Participation in the BBC *Video Nation* Project 1994-2011," (University College London, 2019).

unusual is the lack of imposed narrative evident in the programming produced from *Video Nation* by a large corporation like the BBC, and especially when we consider the rise in popularity of other forms of nonfiction television, such as talk and reality television, around this time. But where reality television posits difference as a "the disruption or problem that needs to be solved," *Video Nation* presents difference as non-deviant and makes an appeal for mutual understanding and unification.[66]

The 'ordinariness' of the *Video Nation* participants seems to rest on their positions as non-media makers, but the emergence of new recording technologies suddenly "enabled 'ordinary people' to occupy new positions in the public broadcast sphere."[67] Some might posit Video *Nation* as an artifact of the shift to a more confessional mode of first-person nonfiction media, something we still see today in YouTube vlogs and TikToks. Others, like Dovey, maintain that *Video Nation* represents less of a confessional and more of a 'coming out' by "refusing the penance that 'deviance' provokes" by representing themselves *as themselves* on television."[68] Matthews goes on to say that *Video Nation* is in fact the opposite of a confessional despite its deeply personal nature precisely *because* of its position as a public broadcast program.[69] Regardless, the project took part in a budding, and then exploding, tradition of first-person nonfiction media available on the internet, especially after the publication of the online *Video Nation Archive* in 2001.

The return of the *Video Nation Archive* online would constitute a great victory for heritage film produced by the public and for the public, a rare form of media in itself. A

[66] Dovey, *Freakshow*, 117.
[67] Henderson, "Documents of Ordinariness."
[68] Dovey, *Freakshow*, 112.
[69] Matthews, "Confessions to a New Public," 442-444.

sociological study on the BFI's *Britain on Film* (*BOF*), an online project that provides access to British heritage films through an online streaming platform, by Fujiwara et al, compares study participants' uses of the *BOF* platform with feelings of well-being and the amount they would be willing to pay for the service. Not only did participants report statistically significant increases in their well-being after engagement with *BOF*, but the study also revealed some interesting results from the data they collected on participants' opinions on paying for *BOF* content. Participants displayed a small but "overall positive" willingness to pay for *BOF*, and even further were willing to pay an additional top-up donation for the archival work involved. This extended to participants who were non-users of *BOF* but were willing to pay for the ongoing cultural value of preserving the material—they "[valued] each aspect distinctly".[70] Fujiwara et al go on later, "Many cultural goods will be valued by the public without ever having used them. Non-use value refers to the value that people place on archive film that they may not use themselves, but whose existence they value, and that they want to preserve for others and for future generations."[71] This is not to mention that 97% of the material available on *BOF* is already free of charge.[72] If one considers *Video Nation* a piece of British film heritage, then it seems that not only would they likely be willing to pay for it, but they would also value the archival work behind the project and be willing to pay the optional top-up donation.

So Where Is *Video Nation*?: Access Questions

[70] Fujiwara et al., "A Case Study on the Public Value of Online Public Access to Film Heritage," *British Film Institute's Britain on Film Study*, January 2017, 11.
[71] Fujiwara et al, "Case Study on Public Value of Online Public Access to Film Heritage," 19.
[72] Fujiwara et al, "Case Study on Public Value of Online Public Access to Film Heritage," 4.

As demonstrated in the previous two sections, *Video Nation* interacts closely with concepts of reality television, confessional internet culture, historical projects like Mass Observation, and British broadcast history in general, while simultaneously remaining distinct from them, thus constituting a unique piece of British screen heritage that is deserving of preservation and availability to the public. That public, of course, includes the people who made the program themselves, who were under the impression that their tapes would be part of a larger archive on their lives and culture for the foreseeable future.

If that's the case, then where did my aforementioned experience tracking down this *Video Nation* material come from? While I have already detailed my experience using the formal BBC complaint track, no further answers were forthcoming no matter how long I searched. I knew already that the videos had to be somewhere, as per the agreement between the BBC and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media, and Sport; however, when I turned to the BBC Archives, all I could find were the curated pieces on display on the homepage, or specific eye-catching collections available to watch directly on the website. One can use the search bar at the top right of the window to search the full BBC website, but what one cannot do is actually search the archives. When at last I discovered the BBC ArchiveSearch, the official tool to search through all of the BBC's archival collections at once, I of course attempted to register an account but was unable without a BBC sponsor; in other words, I needed someone with a BBC email address to commission me to make a project for broadcast in order to use the archive search tool. Pleas from my university's Collection Development Librarian were no use. I was not getting in.

Upon further investigation on the Archives Services webpage on "Archive Access for Non-Commercial Use," I learned that the BBC Television Archive is in fact housed at the BFI.[73] As per the BBC website, "The British Film Institute (BFI) provides public, on-request access to the BBC Television Archive."[74] What that means, it turns out, is not that the archive is *easily* accessible to the public per se, but that it is *technically* accessible to the public: in order to view BFI archival material, you have to make an in-person appearance at the BFI Research and Viewing Services facility on the BFI campus, or otherwise organize a viewing session at another predetermined location approved by the BFI. Under this principle of complete control over the viewing experience by BFI staff, viewings can only take place during normal business hours, and thus render the experience inaccessible to a majority of the working public. Never mind if you do not live in London already, or are unfamiliar with an archive environment and unsure of the rules and procedures of the space, all while under what is, to some, unnervingly close staff supervision. Rose revealed in an email exchange that she has heard from others that *Video Nation* is difficult to find in searches through ArchiveSearch. Rose surmised that there was some sort of metadata issue that made the material not easily discoverable. While she planned to raise this with the BBC at the time, no progress has been made on this front to my knowledge.[75] The experience of *Video Nation* is technically available to the general public, 'accessible' is not the functioning word in this case.

But whose duty *is* it to make sure that BBC material is accessible? Especially in the case of *Video Nation*, it is seemingly nobody's. Recall BBC Complaints's wording that the availability

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[73] Archive Access for Non-Commercial Use," BBC Archive Services, n.d., https://www.bbc.co.uk/archiveservices/archive-access-for-non-commercial-use/.
[74] "Archive Access for Non-Commercial Use," BBC Archive Services.
[75] Mandy Rose, email message to author, September 25, 2024.

of the *Video Nation* material online was "out of the BBC's control."[76] *Surely*, I thought, *that can't be true.* Ah, contraire. According to my communications with Rose, when the BBC took the *Video Nation Archive* offline, they contracted the BFI to house the raw footage from the project. The BFI agreed under the conditions that the BBC cover the necessary digitization costs, which the BBC at the time either could not or would not do.[77] And while the BBC technically owns all of the footage from broadcast, it is physically housed on the BFI campus, who are already in charge of the viewing environment restrictions that render viewing practically inaccessible. Both the raw footage and the broadcast shorts seem to have fallen through the cracks into a sort of accountability sink, where any desire to access the material is virtually impossible to communicate to anyone with any say in the matter. The small circle of people with the desire and resources (such as being able to afford time off work, or an understanding of archival research) is narrowed still by those within a manageable distance from London.

Archive catalogs, according to library researchers Dilger and Thompson, should "more than anything be about the extension of knowledge networks, and [they] believe the best way is facilitating the creation of weak ties."[78] The extension of knowledge networks as the function of a catalog website, which I suggest for the purposes of this particular collection, resonates with the founding principles of the project as a series of interrelated nodes—individual videos related to the others in the collection by creator, region, subject, or other criteria. While limiting in some respects, users would essentially 'subject-heading search' and discover other kinds of related content that they might not have sought out initially through a keyword search.

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[76] BBC Complaints, email message to author, September 10, 2024.
[77] Mandy Rose, email message to author, September 25, 2024.
[78] 65 Bradley Dilger and William Thompson, "Ubiquitous Cataloging," in *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, ed. K. R. Roberto (McFarland, 2008), 23.

The related content that one might not see in a keyword search, as I have referred to it, is exactly what Dilger and Thompson intend when they use the phrase 'weak ties' in their work on cataloging. 'Strong ties,' on the other hand, would be videos that are so closely related in topic or otherwise that something like a keyword search would, in fact, reveal all of them. The authors write, "People tend to cling to what is familiar. As a result, strong ties can create the information equivalent of vendor lock-in. Ideally, people and other knowledge-gathering systems need *both* sorts of ties: weak ties provide novelty and encourage innovation, and strong ties to enable complex tasks."[79] The catalog, then, "was designed to respond to a desire that will never been [sic] satisfied because it is insatiable, a form of play."[80] It is precisely the 'subject-heading search,' exploratory research style proposed for this online archive that encourages this insatiable, playful urge, rather than a meticulously regimented research plan that utilizes more exacting search tools. The original *Video Nation Archive* website fostered the same inclination. In "Uncivilizing Society," an essay by Rachel Hurdley in the collection *Mass Observation: Text, Context and Analysis of the Pioneering Pamphlet*, the author explicitly encourages researchers to use analog archives for precisely this reason—a reason which applies to the *Video Nation* collection just as much as to the Mass Observation Archive in Bristol. Hurdley writes,

> So much is there in the Mass Observation Archive that might be disposed of in a carefully designed research project, with aims, objectives, and well-defined research questions. Confusion, annoyance and diversion through the by-ways of MO [Mass Observation] hierarchies, folders and files forces the researcher to reconsider how she wastes so much in the eagerness to make a thesis, an 'end.' Taking a messier approach to sociological knowledge-making as a process of beginnings and endings, rather than a finite product, radically alters the politics of

[79] Dilger and Thompson, "Ubiquitous Cataloging," 43.
[80] Dilger and Thompson, "Ubiquitous Cataloging," 45-46.

> research… No longer are 'we,' the academics, in charge. Rather, the participants and all the knowledge they make, even the lost and unknown, have presence.[81]

My own process of coming to research *Video Nation* has proven equally circuitous. What began as a written project on folk horror made way to a focus on 'ethnographic surrealism,' which led me to Mass Observation. One day I looked up and discovered that my unending research on Mass Observation, including a visit to the archive in Bristol, had led me to *Video Nation*. Imagine my real-life horror when these hypothetical videos over which I had pored such time, energy, and attention, proved virtually unavailable.

[81] Rachel Hurdley, "Uncivilizing Sociology: How Mass Observation Can Free the Discipline," in *Mass-Observation: Text, Context, and Analysis of the Pioneering Pamphlet*, ed. Jennifer J. Purcell (Bloomsbury, 2023), 75.

CONCLUSION

Of course, any project to return *Video Nation* to the internet would require a significant amount of funding from a yet-non-existent source, on top of a more in-depth look at things like engagement strategy, copyright, and potential ethical issues that are outside the scope of this thesis. Currently, the fate of the collection remains undetermined. As of writing, the latest update from producer Rose is that she is part of an "on-going conversation" about the fate of the *Video Nation* material.[82]

As of writing, a small, unofficial selection of *Video Nation* shorts are available on YouTube from a source who wishes to remain anonymous. As such, open access to *Video Nation* remains impossible without some sort of word-of-mouth knowledge of where certain videos might live at the moment. This is not to mention that the BBC is unaware of this online connection, and its dissemination, while laudable, increases the risk of the BBC discovering the collection and removing it.

In fact, this YouTube channel is where I first saw Connie Mark, although not, as I had hoped, in her powerful "Daffodils" video. That one may be nowhere online. Mark this time appears in 25-minute *Video Nation* piece called "On TV." She talks about her favorite television program, *Neighbors*, and how it reminds her of her neighbors in Jamaica before her move to England. The video reminded me that I had read somewhere over the course of my research that Mark had accepted an award on behalf of *Video Nation*, so I took to the internet to find a trustworthy source of such information. What I found instead were articles and interviews about the same Connie Mark in West Kensington, retelling of her service during World War II and her

[82] Mandy Rose, email message to author, March 19, 2025.

later career as an important Caribbean activist in England. Her former home in London even has one of the United Kingdom's famous 'blue plaques' outside of it, and Google honored what would have been her 95th birthday with artwork of her on its home page.[83] Not every participant has such a footprint. Daniella Church, it seems, is still ferrying pedestrians across the River Blyth.[84] Of Mark McLean I am not sure. As I move from article to interview, node to node in an ever-increasing sea of information on people whose lives I may find fascinating or mundane, I consider all of the other people who can be found within the archives of *Video Nation*, and what someday—I pray to the gods of media research—we might discover whilst moving between and amongst them in a truly public archive that they themselves created.

[83] "Connie Mark," Never Such Innocence, n.d., https://www.neversuchinnocence.com/connie-mark-second-world-war.
[84] As per an assortment of posts on social media.

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