Cameras are everywhere, media files can be saved in the proverbial cloud, and images emerge and circulate at an alarming pace. We often characterize our collective relationship with media in terms of access and overload. From the thousands of photographs we have taken on our smartphones, to the constant flow of streaming content, to the ever-changing social media feed, there is just too much media to attend to. At the same time, online digital media have given us the sense that media artifacts are endlessly available and accessible. Search engines help us to find media we want to see, and algorithms are poised to pinpoint the most relevant content. Our gaze has been trained on the particular media artifacts that are available to us or are easily discoverable, turning our attention away from more obscure media.

In this In Focus dossier, we seek to exhume artifacts that have been lost, buried, or otherwise overlooked in the morass of media. We note a methodological conundrum in which our analytic eyes have been trained on what is already apparent rather than what has been overlooked, often systematically so. We argue that, collectively, these media are not disappearing or lost or unwatched because of mere oversight, or by conscious choice, but because of

structural obscurity. In other words, we wish to call attention to the structures that condition what we do not encounter.

We ask, what can we learn from media that just do not circulate? What might it look like to attend to the labor and reception of making and sharing such media? And how might we do so in ways that value the presence underlying the apparent absence? What implicit values are indicated in the act—willful or not—of obscuring certain media from view? What methods might account for the lack of access to or exclusion of certain media?

The essays included here encourage scholars and students of media to value the unwatched and unseen as they consider the production and status of existing but not necessarily accessible media artifacts and archives. We take an ambitious approach, spanning a range of media practices and technologies across geographies and time. Whether focusing on newsreel outtakes filmed in semi-colonial Shanghai, defunct websites run by southern US border vigilantes, retired domestic violence photography files, rarely seen YouTube videos, collections of African American home movies, or undistributed feature films, each essay contends with the factors that structure the relative obscurity of its artifacts and the implications of their absences.

While media scholars have long attended to media that go unseen, the focus has generally been concentrated more on viewer or curator decisions rather than on the structures that obscure artifacts or practices. In the collections On Not Looking: The Paradox of Contemporary Visual Culture and Unwatchable, various authors explore the reasons why viewers find certain content difficult to watch or not worthy of watching. And while literature on structured obscurity of media exists in the study of online media, such scholarship tends to focus more on the invisibility of production labor than on the artifacts themselves. While we are also interested in media labor and production practices, our aim is to stress the structures that occlude artifacts. Other texts have considered the ways copyright law structures the politics and practices of archival institutions when they digitize and share artworks that have no traceable owner or have been abandoned by their owners, such as Claudy Op den Kamp’s The Greatest Films Never Seen: The Film Archive and the Copyright Smokescreen and Dan Streible’s work on orphan films. Meanwhile others, such as Giovanna Fossati, have concentrated on the ontology of media artifacts themselves to discern how we can even begin to make sense of what we are looking at before we analyze it.


Of course, there are many reasons that a media object goes (largely) unseen. Sometimes, copyright issues determine whether it can be (easily) accessed. In this dossier, Jaimie Baron draws our attention to the absence of an important but seldom-seen film by Shirley Clarke—*The Cool World* (1963)—which was novel for employing a collaborative and participatory film practice that crossed racial and class lines in the early 1960s. Baron examines the reasons for the film’s limited circulation since its initial release, arguing that its lack of distribution due to the vagaries of intellectual property rights occludes politically significant resonances between the time of the film’s release and the present moment—and the historical consciousness they may yield.

At other times, algorithms, rather than intellectual property rights, make content almost impossible to find. In her essay, Lauren S. Berliner argues for attention to what she calls *digital obscura* online as she discusses how unwatched YouTube videos that have been filtered out, or simply unwatched, can help us discern the themes, identities, and production practices that escape algorithmically informed circulation and representation. These videos also make more apparent the technical systems that structure meaning about particular digital media artifacts.

Certain objects, such as outtakes, were never meant to be seen and yet they contain images that may illuminate history from a different direction than the text from which they were excised. Xin Peng elucidates the value of Fox Movietone newsreel footage titled “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes”: “an invaluable filmic record of the making of a Chinese film in an era of which the majority of films are lost.” She navigates methodological conundrums regarding the problematic status of newsreel outtakes and posits that this historically important form of unwatched media allows scholars to interrogate the historiographic and ethnographic value of moving images and the speculative potential of unedited and uncirculated footage.

Similarly, *useful media* such as police photographs, produced to document a crime, were never intended for broad circulation but can take on new resonance when they are unearthed by artists who see in them attributes beyond their original pragmatic functions. Kelli Moore takes a retired domestic violence police photography project as a point of departure, discovering how contemporary visual artists critically represent the iconography of domestic violence. Moore traces how artists have imagined and reimagined domestic violence, creating new forms of visual representation that underscore the resonance of such images in our collective consciousness.

Other media objects, such as home movies, also change in meaning and effect when they move from the private to the public realm, raising questions about what it means to watch a film originally produced for a limited set of eyes. In her essay, Elizabeth Patton discusses the value of archiving, preserving, and providing access to the home movies of African Americans. She scrutinizes the role that archives and archivists play in foregrounding representations that shape narratives about African American history, often emphasizing injustice and resistance but very rarely middle-class leisure and everyday activities. Her essay draws attention to the ethical considerations of making this private media public and illuminates the ways boundaries
and barriers are set by institutions, researchers, and the owners of private archives that determine what gets seen and what does not. Patton models best practices for working with media rights owners, emphasizing the importance of building relationships of trust and reciprocity.

Finally, technological obsolescence is one of the main reasons media becomes inaccessible: defunct websites, old file types, and other extant but unplayable media may proffer forms of evidence that move against the grain of established or coalescing historical narratives. The erasure of threatening texts—those that espouse hate, for instance—is a loss for historical consciousness and understanding even as this erasure ameliorates other harms. What is almost, but not-quite, erased becomes a means of seeing otherwise by fostering an encounter with the negative space left by dominant streams of media production. If we can glimpse it, this negative space holds great promise for scholarly insight. Diana Flores Ruíz makes this clear in her examination of the recently defunct website for the Mountain Minutemen, an Arizona-based nativist extremist organization that emerged in response to 9/11. Her essay puts forward methods for working across three dimensions of such a media loss: the gains made by the eradication of media that stokes racialized harm, the persistence and adaptation of discriminatory media across platforms, and the analytic value of understanding how such organizations mediate hate.

Taken together, these essays aim to activate a methodology that will hold the processes by which media artifacts fail to circulate to the light. We do not merely argue for attention to our respective artifacts. Instead, we advocate for increased attention to loss, absence, and oversight as a resistant methodology for our field.

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