Josh Greenberg has given a new way of viewing what we thought was a familiar story: the widespread adoption of the video cassette recorder in the home. Instead of just being about watching The Tonight Show the next morning, the device became the platform for collecting, archiving, sharing, and learning from a vast archive of film and video. The VCR permanently altered the American mediascape and Greenberg shows us why and how.

—eva zamora, author of Copyvrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity

Joshua M. Greenberg is Director of Digital Strategy and Scholarship at the New York Public Library.

From Betamax to Blockbuster, Joshua Greenberg explains how the combination of neighborhood video stores and the VCR created a world in which movies became tangible consumer goods. Greenberg charts a trajectory from early “videophile” communities to the rise of the video store—complete with theater marquee lights, movie posters, popcorn, and clerks who offered expert advice on which movies to rent. The result was more than a new industry; by placing movies on cassette in the hands (and control) of consumers, video rental and sale led to a renegotiation of the boundary between medium and message, and ultimately a new relationship between audiences and movies.

Eventually, Blockbuster’s top-down franchise model crowded local video stores out of the market, but the recent rise of Netflix, iTunes, and other technologies have reopened old questions about what a movie is and how (and where) it ought to be watched. By focusing on the “spaces in between” manufacturers and consumers, Greenberg’s account offers a fresh perspective on consumer technology, illustrating how the initial transformation of movies from experience into commodity began not from the top down or the bottom up, but from the middle of the burgeoning industry out.

“This is an important study of consumers’ adoption of the VCR that advances current scholarship on the VCR revolution. Greenberg’s book is original and thought-provoking.”
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The first video cassette recorders were promoted in the same way as an extension of broadcast television technology—a time-shifting device, a way to tape TV shows. Early advertising for Sony’s Betamax told potential purchasers “You don’t have to miss Kojak because you’re watching Columbo.” But within a few years, the VCR had been transformed from a machine that recorded television into an extension of the movie theater into the home. This was less a physical transformation than a change in perception, but one that relied on the very tangible construction of a network of social institutions to support this new marketplace for movies.

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Inside Technology
edited by Wiebe E. Bijker, W. Bernard Carlson, and Trevor Pinch

A list of books in the series appears at the back of the book.
From Betamax to Blockbuster

Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video

Joshua M. Greenberg
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One untraditional aspect of my research was the use of a website to collect memories and stories from people on both sides of the video store counter (see the appendix). My eyes were first opened to this method during an Exploring and Collecting History Online weekend seminar, sponsored by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, and I’m particularly grateful to Dan Cohen and Jim Sparrow for guiding me through the process of designing and deploying videostoreproject.com. As of this writing, the site has received well over a thousand stories, thanks in large part to a kind post by “Moriarty” on the film gossip site Ain’t It Cool News, which prompted a veritable tidal wave of respondents.

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