

Preserving the Sounds of the South

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SS: The Wessex Film and Sound Archive has some significant collections of local radio programmes, including work from the early days of commercial radio - Independent Local Radio, Radio Victory in Portsmouth, and its successor, Ocean Sound, 210 in Reading and 2CR in Bournemouth. The Centre for Broadcasting History Research in the Media School at Bournemouth University recently collaborated with WFSA in a project funded by the AHRC to digitize and catalogue this material, dating from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s, making it available to both local and regional researchers, and to the UK academic community via an online site. Today David Lee and I want to talk to you about that process.

The first question that might come to mind is “Why bother?” One of the major problems affecting today’s commercial radio is its lack of meaningful content. It’s relationship with its community is often minimal. In order to address this, it’s useful to look at the early development of the medium.

The first commercial station to go on air in the UK – that is to say, legal and land-based – was LBC, the speech station in London, which began broadcasting on 8 October 1973. It was followed a few weeks later by Capital Radio, and then gradually Independent Local Radio as it was called, began to fan out across the UK. The 1970s was a bad time to start any kind of business, and ILR was not helped by being very heavily regulated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority, the grandparent of today’s Ofcom. Remember that the UK is one of the very few countries in the world to have commercial television before commercial radio; the mistrust of commercial broadcasting ran very deep for many years. So when ILR started, it was almost regulated out of existence. I started my radio career with the BBC and in 1980 joined 2CR – Two Counties Radio – in Bournemouth, at its opening in September 1980, and my job was Features Editor. These days there’s not enough speech on ILR to warrant such a post, but in those days, “meaningful speech” as the IBA director John Thompson called it, was a requirement, and the IBA had staff all over the country, monitoring content. So for example, I would be responsible for producing documentaries, placing interview guests in programmes, exploring ways in which the local community could supply programmes of its own, such as drama, providing educational programmes, including material for pre-school children, and establishing an extensive output of daily and weekly religious programmes. And that was typical – most ILR stations of the time had similar output. The stations themselves didn’t like it, because speech programming is not very cost-effective, but it was the law and they had to comply. They were hard times, and it is surprising that only one station – Centre Radio in Leicester – went under. (An ironic fact is that in today’s de-regulated world more than a dozen stations have gone out of business in the last two and half years, with more to come – and it’s not just the recession that is killing them of.)

So the IBA’s regulation was bad for business but good for radio, because stations HAD to produce material that reflected their community, and that made for some memorable audio. There was, from 1973 to 1990, a wealth of quality radio programming coming out of the commercial sector – the Independent sector. (We weren’t even allowed to call it commercial radio, its Independent Local Radio!) In 1990, the UK Government published a Broadcasting Act which went some way

to permitting the deregulation ILR had been craving since its birth. From this time the ground rules changed; local stations could for the first time put share holders above community; out went meaningful speech, consolidation was permitted, and the way was set for the move towards the world of three or four large radio groups we have today, providing a standard mix of output that mostly sounds the same across all its stations.

All of which makes what remains - what has been preserved from the early years - of significant value, not simply because it is radio history, but because it is HISTORY, a part of our past. The Central Southern England archiving project on which my research Centre in Bournemouth has worked with David's team at Winchester, is part of a three-part project to digitize commercial radio from 1973 to 1990 across the UK. Part one of the project digitized what was known as the "Programme sharing" scheme, which operated over a number of years, and which enabled stations to share material that had a significance beyond the local, with other stations. This project was the result of collaboration with the British Library and was funded by the AHRC. The wealth and variety of material being produced at the time that exists in this archive is impressive to say the least. Another part of the project has been to digitize and catalogue the giant LBC/IRN (Independent Radio News) archive. This, funded by JISC, is just coming to its conclusion, and provides unique witness to a turbulent period of history, through the reports and documentaries made by the first radio news organisation in the UK outside the BBC. And the third part of the project is the Central Southern England Archive David and his team have collaborated on with Bournemouth. All three archives are online (currently in a test version) on the British Universities Film and Video Council's website, providing many thousands of hours of searchable radio for the UK academic community.

SLIDE: Screenshot, BUFVC Radio Home page

So that is the overarching rationale behind this partnership. For the Centre for Broadcasting History Research in Bournemouth, to match a national profile of ILR with a local version was clearly attractive. 2CR, Bournemouth, 210 Reading, Ocean Sound and before it Radio Victory in Portsmouth give us a rough triangle geographically and a chance to reflect on how events affected this part of the UK – and to remember for instance, how much that history touched the lives of those living here – I'm thinking for example of the Falklands War here.

So what did the programmes we've preserved sound like? Well, there's some surprising things to discover in the archive: a documentary about Broadmoor Top Security Mental Hospital from Reading's 210, from Ocean Sound, a historical feature telling the story of the giant Fawley Oil Refinery on Southampton Water. For 2CR I produced a range of literary features, among them a series with Lord David Cecil, recorded at his Cranborne home, on writers such as Jane Austen and Charles Lamb. I also made a feature on Tolkien, who lived for a time in Bournemouth, called "Maker of Middle Earth". Here's a good example from 2CR about Thomas Hardy:-

Dr Desmond Hawkins, former Network Controller in the BBC's West Region here in Bristol, and authority on Thomas Hardy, in a programme made for 2CR in 1983, called "Hardy's Wessex" in which he, appropriately, defines the geography of the region in which we are today, as identified by the writings of the great man himself:

AUDIO: Desmond Hawkins, from Hardy's Wessex.

This shows I hope something of the range of material in the archive, accessible via the BUFVC website.

Slide: Screengrab – BUFVC Site - Central Southern England Archive

And here's an example of the result of a search based on World War 11 – an interview with the last surviving crew member of HMS Hood.

Slide: Screengrab: Ted Briggs

News and current affairs of course is an important part of the archive, as with all of the CBHR's collections, witnesses to history and the debates and controversies of the times.

Let's now explore something of the process. I'll hand over to David in a moment to discuss something of the technical challenges we encountered, but I hope this slide will show in a reasonable way how the partnership between us worked in terms of workflow.

Slide: Workflow chart

We had two technicians, on contract in Bournemouth copying material and placing it on our server, as well as a librarian who provided brief descriptions for the web site. One of the central people at the Winchester end was John Moxley, who I can't praise highly enough for his role. Which is a good point to hand over to David.

DL: As you can see from the workflow diagram, we at Wessex Film and

Sound Archive work primarily in CD AUDIO format. This is because

Our users listen to sound recordings on CD players and because, rightly

or wrongly, I believe it is easier for us to stay away from computers at the

moment, except to help restore sound quality on some recordings. I fully

realise that this will have to change, and hope that a Digital Mass Storage

System will be available to us during the next 5 to 10 years. For the moment, however, we are digitising on to gold layer CDs, and making silver CD duplicates for access purposes.

Bournemouth University, on the other hand, are much better resourced and advanced than we are, so they converted our CD AUDIO copies to Broadcast Wave Files, for long term storage on a computer server and data tapes, making MP3 copies for listening purposes online. At the same time, CD AUDIO listening copies were made for us on silver discs, and couriered back to Winchester.

The sharp-eyed among you will already have noticed that tape packaging was scanned for the information it contained. This entailed photocopying the box lids that held contents lists, recording and transmission dates, producer and technical details. Separate pieces of paper were

also photocopied, especially those containing scripts for the presenter to introduce an item, but these were quite rare.

The photocopies were sent to Bournemouth with the gold CD copies, and scanned as .JPEG files for inclusion with the Metadata. It also helped the cataloguer with her work.

Slide: John Moxley

Another valuable source of information was John Moxley, who carried out the digitisation of the analogue tapes using a brand new OTARI machine (which had to be obtained from Japan), our TECHNICS and REVOX machines (for some of the more fragile tapes), and a FOSTEX CD recorder. Anyway, John was absolutely meticulous in note-taking during the process, logging every item by its reference number. By listening carefully to a whole recording, he was able to discover anomalies in details written on the tape boxes – there were many – and identify for the first time what was actually contained on the tapes. In fact, many had been over-recorded for economy – this is local radio, after all – but the previous recording had not been fully erased, so it required great concentration to determine what the main item was. You would not have got that if the tape had just been left to run, and it enabled John to edit out the unwanted material.

He also listened for clues to dates and subjects where no written details existed, using a special calendar to tie down the year, where possible (EXPLAIN).

Technical problems were also noted in detail, including when tape splices came apart during playback. Even now, I can hear the howls of anguish that used to emanate from John's corner on those occasions! So he had to do many repairs. 'Sticky' tapes were baked on the premises in our low-temperature oven until dry and brown, in order to make them more playable, but even this did not work on occasion. We had to abandon those, I'm afraid. Tape heads and transport guides needed regular cleaning, because of the oxide shedding from some tapes, especially AMPEX ones from that period. Some spools even contained different tape brands spliced together, often leading to poor transfers and retakes, due mainly to the sticky sections slowing up a player's transport system, resulting in variations of pitch, for example. These difficult challenges inevitably slowed up the digitisation process.

There were other technical issues, but the most interesting one for us was that posed by the logging tapes we held. These carried recordings of a whole day's output of Radio Victory in its final period, as heard by its listeners; such material is rare in sound archives. In fact, this is potentially exciting for students of radio, because it allows them to experience what the listeners heard at the time – warts and all – and gives a much better sense of the style and delivery of broadcasts then; it also puts individual items in context. In order to get a whole day's output on to a 10½ inch tape spool, a recorder has to run at 15/16th inches per second – a very low speed – and is left by the radio engineer to capture the studio output channel unattended. This is done for legal reasons.

Where does one obtain such machines today, I hear you ask? Well, we were lucky: I did an internet search and found TAPE RECORDER of Ipswich in Suffolk, who collects old Revox equipment, restores it and sells it on. We bought one of his 15/16th inches per second machines for £250 and John set about producing digital copies of selected tapes. Each tape averaged 7 CDs, and signal processing equipment had to be used to improve the poor sound quality generated by such a low speed recording. As you can imagine, it was a slow process!

I, too, would like to sing John's praises for his work on this project. It required a lot of patience and attention to detail, which fed back into our meetings with Bournemouth in the form of some

very useful suggestions, including what should be digitised.

So how has Wessex Film and Sound Archive benefited from this project? First and foremost, I would like to state that we would not have got preservation and listening copies made without such a project as this; we simply do not have the staff or resources. It was very important that the fragile audio tapes in our ILR collections were digitised, as was shown by the numerous occasions when 'sticky tapes' had to be baked in order to obtain a signal from them. The summary descriptions of tape content would also not have been possible, and yet they make a crucial difference to how such material is perceived and how it is used. The 'minimal' title descriptions we had before the project did not help reveal the true contents of our ILR collections. Now that this information is in our own catalogue, it has become available online to the whole world, so who knows what will be the response? One can only guess, but experience already gleaned from the partial summary description cataloguing of our BBC Radio Solent collection leads me to believe that this could well involve family history, use in talking magazines for the blind and partially sighted, in presentations to groups of all kinds, in education, and in community projects, as well as re-use by broadcasters, of course. Knowledge is power to do all of these things and more.

The project also enabled us to discover further material and help underline its importance to the social history of the region, such as the news reports and special events; it was particularly interesting to compare reports of the Clapham rail disaster and its aftermath from different ILR stations. There were also many examples of recordings which had much wider interest, such as documentaries about the raising of the Tudor warship 'Mary Rose', the Falklands Conflict and the anniversary of D-Day 1944, as well as some revealing interviews with celebrities. Students of radio will be particularly interested in the ability to listen to broadcasts as they happened. It was also very worthwhile for us to work in partnership with Bournemouth University – much was learnt on both sides, and it was a positive experience for us. We will certainly be looking for more such collaborations in future.

SS: An issue with all three of the archives has been that of intellectual property rights. In this, we have been helped immeasurably by having direct links with the radio industry. At the time these programmes were being made, the Independent Local Radio stations were represented by a body called the Association of Independent Radio Contractors (AIRC). This organization later became the Commercial Radio Companies Association, and is now subsumed into The Radio Centre, based on Shaftesbury Avenue. The continuity between the three organisations has meant that their executive has been able to liaise between the CBHR and the current company owners. Due to the changes in ILR ownership rules, this has been complex. Individual companies (such as 210 and 2CR) became part of large groups in many cases after 1990, and often those conglomerates have gone through multiple ownership over the years. Some companies, like Radio Victory, no longer exist. Together with the Radio Centre, we have been able to draw up an agreement which has satisfied all sides, based on the educational password protected nature of the archive.

This has been a project fuelled by good will; there has never been a commercial radio archive in the UK – the survival of a lot of the material has been sometimes almost miraculous, and we know that a lot has been lost over the years. So the projects have had two elements – preservation – in some cases almost akin to rescue archaeology, and dissemination. There has been a fruitful partnership, not just between WFSA and Bournemouth University, but with the radio industry

itself, in the locating of material, and this goes on. These days some of the most interesting work remains in personal archives, in the lofts and sheds of the people who made it, and who have enough pride in it to have retained their work. With the three projects gaining some publicity now, I anticipate that this will continue.

There is still much to be done; the metadata in the Central Southern Archive needs to be further developed, BUFVC and the CBHR are planning to create a tool to search across all three archives, and I am in the process of bidding for funds to create an oral history, linked to the programme material. An example of the possibilities of this can be found in the LBC/IRN Archive, where we have a recording of a young Jon Snow commentating on the end of the Balcombe Street siege of 12 December, 1975, the first known use of a Radio Telephone in news reportage, which enabled IRN to break the news first. Ultimately I hope to compile a series of interviews with reporters and broadcasters, reflecting back on their work in the 1970s and '80s, linked to the programmes themselves. How useful it would be to listen to the Balcombe Street siege recording (for instance) And then be able to hear Snow's reflection on the event today?

As to back-ups, in addition to the working online version, one resides at Bournemouth University, one at AHDS, now taken over by Kings College, and one is with the British Library.

It is – and will remain – possible to monitor the project as it develops through the use of the Independent Local Radio Blog, set up by the CBHR. This continues to grow, and is I think, a useful tool to use alongside the archives themselves. You can find this at <http://independentradio.wordpress.com>

Slide: ILR Blog

1 Address

2 Screengrab

At the CBHR, we believe that the Central Southern England Archive at the WFSA is a key audio witness to society and history during an important part of our recent history, and we have greatly valued our partnership with David and the team in developing our mutual vision in developing this. The tripartite ILR audio archive overall, which we've been talking about, also demonstrates that audio documents are as valid as any other archival artefact. Their preservation and availability to education will demonstrate increasingly that importance in the years to come.

Slide: Thank you

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