

A World in Your Ear: Radio Archives and Education

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Introduction

Some years ago, as part of a broadcasting oral history initiative in the Media School at Bournemouth University, I conducted a series of recorded interviews with retired BBC staff who had been active in the development of radio during the first half of the twentieth century. Among those I interviewed was the late Dr Desmond Hawkins, a former controller of the BBC's West Region, a moving force in the creation of the Natural History Unit in Bristol, and an active programme maker in pre-war British broadcasting. He recalled the experience of listening to early transmissions during the 1920s from the then British Broadcasting Company: "I first experienced a Shakespeare play through radio...and Beethoven – I heard my first quartet not in a concert hall, but in my living room. My parents were not the types to take me to such events *in situ* so to speak, but fortunately I was part of the first generation for whom sound broadcasting provided access to the cultural world beyond the family walls." ¹

For the young Desmond Hawkins, radio's democratising power was a key to his first response to the medium. For several subsequent generations, prior to the development of television, the same was true, not solely in terms of high art, but crucially in the field of entertainment, music and news. The power of sound to create pictures in the mind, to fuel the imagination or to simply tell stories has remained constant and much vaunted through the years, and the development of new media. At the same time the death of the medium has frequently been predicted, not least within the first decade of the twenty first century,

when downloading content and new platforms for delivery have forced the industry to consider in which direction it is to reinvent itself this time. One of the beneficiaries in this new world of downloads, *podcasts* and audio on demand is showing itself to be speech-based radio; the technology which enables listeners to store content on mp3 players also enables them to create and understand the value of their own personal archives. Thus we are coming to a point where the purpose of radio archives needs no explanation or justification; it is ‘case proven’.

Radio Ballads and New Beginnings

When, in 1958, Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger made *The Ballad of John Axon*, a new form of radio feature blending actuality, location-recorded speech and music, enabled largely by new portable recording technology, it is likely that they saw themselves as programme makers developing radio into fresh fields of making and production. The fact that 50 years on, this and the subsequent seven other *Radio Ballads* would have spawned an annual conference studying their work and methods, as well as a commercial release of every programme in the series, may well not have occurred to them.² The fact is, there has emerged over recent years, the new academic phenomenon of “Radio Studies”, which, coupled with a growing industry awareness of its past, is developing useful work in the exploration how – and why – radio interacts with its audience.

Yet the value of our radio collections exists beyond the confines of the study of the medium for its own sake. Charles Parker left a huge personal archive of tapes, books and papers, now held at Birmingham Central Library. This material is perceived as a living,

valuable resource, not just for the study of radio, or the past, but as a modern-day commentary and cultural link in today's mixed society. *Connecting Histories* is a partnership project led by Birmingham City Archives, working with the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick, and the *Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures* group. The mission statement of the project clearly articulates the role of archives as currency rather than history:

Britain today is commonly portrayed as a multicultural nation. However, the diverse historical experiences which constitute the story of this 'new' Britain are less well known. The history of the West Midlands in the 20th century is central to this story but the stories that make up this history remain largely hidden in archive collections. *Connecting Histories* aims to release the potential of these collections so that connections can be made between the past and the present and thereby encourage debate about our shared identities, our common sense of belonging and our multiple heritages.³

The audio material recorded by Parker and his team half a century before this project, is given a new importance here, rediscovered and placed in context to relate to 21st century concerns.

Witnesses to History

The pace of change affects us all, we live increasingly in a sort of permanent present; that strange country, the past, where people did things differently, seems increasingly remote. Yet within 100 years we have moved to a point only dreamed of by historians of

yesterday; the very existence of broadcasting is still just – only just – within the lifespan of a human being. A man or woman born in 1910 grew into a world where mass media provided a commentary on their life. Imagine reading Pliny the Younger and *hearing* the voice of the Emperor Trajan, or being able to play news reports from the French Revolution... Film, television and sound can do this with modern history; above all, sound, the human voice, concentrates the mind on the *spoken* text. A transcript will give you the sense and meaning, but a recording demonstrates the nuances of speech, the hesitations, the inflections, the thought process and the emotion. A written version of Herb Morrison's famous commentary on the Hindenburg disaster of 6 May, 1937 conveys only a fraction of the anguish in Morrison's voice as he strives to describe the experience. Here, the impact of the event is in the sound of the voice as much as in the words themselves.⁴

Within the United Kingdom, we may be aware of two principal sources of audio history, available to varying degrees to public and academic scrutiny; the BBC Sound Archive and the British Library Sound Archive, one, the sound of broadcast history and the other, the broader soundtrack of life, both touching from time to time. Yet there has been, until recently, a neglected and at risk third source, another voice that provides a different angle, an approach to broadcasting as oral/aural history that, because of the pace of change in radio regulation, technology and style, might not at first seem to offer promising potential for the historical and social researcher. UK commercial radio – or “Independent Local Radio” as it was first titled under the severe regulation of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) at its birth – did not come into existence – legal existence at least – until 8 October, 1973. Compared to other national broadcasting

systems, this is highly unusual; look outside of Great Britain, and you will find that most media cultures embraced commercial radio before commercial television, the financing following the developing technology. This has not been the case in Britain, with ITV, born in 1955, coming almost 20 years before its radio equivalent.

Thus we have a relatively short historical span, yet within that period, two vastly differing models of broadcast output. The over-regulation of UK commercial radio, up to the 1990 Broadcasting Act, when companies were released to a certain extent from the public service role they had been forced to play under the IBA, produced as a by-product of commercial aspiration, a range of often excellent and largely forgotten speech programming – “meaningful speech” was the phrase coined by one IBA executive. The changing map of commercial radio – the amalgamation or disappearance of the original companies, the creation of large groups such as GCap, Emap and others – all this might suggest that many of these archives have been lost or destroyed. While in some cases this is true, there have been a number of notable cases where collections have survived, often against the odds. One such archive, the subject of digitisation and cataloguing by the Centre for Broadcasting History Research in the Media School at Bournemouth University, and academic dissemination via the BUFVC website⁵, is the Felicity Wells Memorial Archive – the IBA/AIRC ILR Programme Sharing Archive, covering programmes covering all sorts of subjects, shared between stations between the late 1970s and 1990.

This material is being augmented by other collections; the Wessex Film and Audio Archive in the Hampshire Record Office holds material which is the subject of a similar process – a tripartite collaboration between the County Archive, the CBHR at Bournemouth and the BUFVC – to make commercial radio archives from Central Southern England available to researchers of late 20th century history and sociology. Here we are able to examine specific aspects of media/audience relationships, taking important historical events as case studies. For example, the Falklands conflict of 1982 affected the whole country in one form or another, but for families of service personnel in cities such as Portsmouth, the impact was visceral. Radio Victory was the Independent Local Radio station serving Portsmouth at the time; the war demanded a re-examination of its role, and the Wessex Archive gives us insight into the pastoral place of local radio within a community in emotional crisis. At the same time it provides a window on national and international history at once unexpectedly intimate, personal and often extremely poignant.

To these collections can be added a third strand from UK commercial radio, the archive of LBC/IRN, the largest and most significant British radio news collection outside of the BBC. LBC (The London Broadcasting Company) was the first legal, land-based commercial radio station in Britain, commencing broadcasting at 6.00am on the 8th October, 1973. For nearly the first twenty years of its existence, it was a company linked to Independent Radio News, and the sound archive of those years has been preserved on more than 7,000 reels of quarter-inch tape. Here is the witness of a new strand of

broadcaster on the turbulent twilight of a century, including all of the Thatcher years, the destruction of Apartheid and the issue of Northern Ireland. Thanks to funding provided by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)⁶ this invaluable archive will become academically available through a further partnership between BUFVC and the Bournemouth Centre for Broadcasting History Research, turning a collection of boxes of fragile tape, almost forgotten, into a vibrant, accessible witness, available to listen to and reference online to education at every level.⁷

Preserving Yesterday

Thus it can be seen that the responsibility of those involved with this work is two-fold. Firstly there is often a process akin to rescue archaeology; the importance of the work has to be established, and the material saved, often involving remedial technical issues. Once preserved, transferred to what is hoped to be a stable medium the second aspect of such projects takes over – that of making the material available to new and coming generations.

We might, in rediscovering such archives, and giving them new life, occasionally pause and reflect on the often remarkable background to the very survival of these newly found collections, consider how fortunate we are that they exist, and that their importance has been recognised. Yet in so doing, we might well run the risk of being complacent about preserving the voices of our present, before they themselves become obscured by the next layer of time. From 2005, Ofcom has been periodically licensing a new strand of broadcasting in the form of Community Radio stations. Here is society speaking to itself at local and ethnic level, catching always a moment in time, a snapshot of existence.

What would Parker, MacColl and Seeger have made of such material? More importantly, where does – where will – that material go? Some stations may keep local archives, but Community Broadcasting is by its very nature volunteer based, chronically short of cash and resources, and born into a world where the pace of reflecting today through media at every level moves us too quickly beyond yesterday. We have a unique, one-off opportunity to help these new stations to themselves help future generations understand what the very word “community” meant at the start of the 21st century. Yet to do so, some form of national, overarching archive strategy needs to be established as a matter of urgency; we cannot keep everything of course, but we should be aware of the importance of this new resource at the time of its genesis. It will be a tragedy if, despite the apparent lessons learned from the preservation and cataloguing of past collections, we find ourselves in a similar – or worse – position in ten or twenty or fifty years time, when today’s audio voices are silent and lost.

As we have seen through the example of Birmingham’s *Connecting Histories* project, past and present can hold a vital dialogue together. Perhaps crucially, we have now at our disposal a new use of technology which potentially by its very existence provides the platform for a personal archive. The growth of downloadable programmes – *podcasts* - has been pushing us towards a redefinition of what we mean by radio, and an awareness that an audio archive, be it institutional or personal, is a device whereby we take sound content and make it available “on demand”, when and where we want to access it. Every mp3 player owner is his or her own archivist. This being the case, the public perception of audio preservation is growing, providing a major opportunity in education for the use of voices from our past – local, national and international – to talk to us of *their* present.

It also provides us with a developing technology which is revolutionising the means by which those voices talk to our students.

The title of this article was chosen with some thought; it reflects a radio programme which until May 2007 was a regular part of the BBC Radio 4 schedule, a magazine of audio from all over the world, reflecting specific topics of common interest. Such insights matter, it is sad that such a programme should cease, yet notwithstanding that, the world is whispering in our ear from all sorts of other sources; now the technology exists which enables students not simply to quote from a written text, but to include an *audio* quotation within an electronic essay, the voice of the historian, the poet or the scientist themselves. We have moved here from a “push” media culture, where the broadcaster sends the content to the listener when the scheduler decides, to a “pull” initiative, with the listener in control of ‘when and how...’ It is the very accessibility of recorded sound, stripped of visual distractions, which makes this all the more exciting - and that of course is the very stuff of which old-fashioned radio has always been made. The turning of pages augmented by a murmur of voices is the gift of accessible audio archives. Let us ensure that the understanding of the importance of these things, manifest in the preservation and transfer of knowledge from existing sound archives, continues to inform our strategy for the ongoing development of future resources, as and when they become available.

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¹ Video Oral History Archive, Centre for Broadcasting History Research, the Media School, Bournemouth University. <http://media.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/cbhr.html>

² The complete *Radio Ballads* were issued as a series of individual CDs by Topic Records in 1999

³ www.connectinghistories.org.uk , accessed June 2007

⁴ The complete Hindenburg broadcast, including an interview with Morrison, conducted the day after the event, was issued on a CD entitled *The Aviators* (Pavilion Records PAST CD 9760) 1991

⁵ www.bufvc.ac.uk

⁶ www.jisc.ac.uk

⁷ The digitisation, cataloguing and dissemination of these collections is part of an on-going partnership between the Centre for Broadcasting History Research and the BUFVC, with the objective of making material available for academic use through online access on the BUFVC website.