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10-1-2016

# Sound Recognition of Historical Visibility: The Radio Preservation Task Force of the Library of Congress: Introduction

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Accepted version. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2016): 229-232. DOI. © 2016 Informa UK Limited. Used with permission.

## SYMPOSIUM: SOUND RECOGNITION OF HISTORICAL VISIBILITY: THE RADIO PRESERVATION TASK FORCE OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

“Sound Recognition of Historical Visibility: The Radio Preservation Task Force of the Library of Congress: Introduction”

Authors: Josh Shepperd, Amanda Keeler, and Chris Sterling

This issue of *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* serves as a gesture toward increasing attention to many untold cultural sound histories. The “question” of radio preservation, we’re just coming to realize, closely equates to our responsibility to identify gaps within our historical record, as those gaps are delineated along race, class, orientation, and gendered lines. Sound preservation turns out to be one strategy for how to reconcile failures of recognition. It’s widely accepted that a historian must not project a different meaning upon historical materials than its author intended. Yet at the same time historians might now play the role of advocates, by increasing representation through digital preservation. Sound history is one of the last frontiers to build paths of visibility among scattered records. The Radio Preservation Task Force (RPTF) of the National Recording Preservation Board of the Library of Congress represents one such project. National in scope but local in focus, the RPTF is currently in the process of constructing several interconnected initiatives that will culminate in a detailed mapping of the cultural history of radio, so as to reveal previously hidden experiences, events, and perspectives.

It’s now accepted by many historians that metadata is an effective way to inform conceptualization of content. The contemporary avalanche of new digital sources has influenced historians that availability of sources and social visibility are related questions. If critical historians plan to contest how “official knowledge” is structured, to some degree this now must include to what extent historians themselves are willing to attempt to reconcile and address a lack of categorized resources. Without exploring the Derridian implications of the following

observation, for some reason sound history has always taken a back seat to the written word. Historians have done a poor job at advocating to maintain, process, and make available interviews, oral histories, public forums, and live broadcasts.

The historiographical limitations of the paper-source paradigm become more conspicuous when considering just how many primary source records historical players themselves have produced. We're finding that what we consider to be a viable primary source is closely related to who has been perceived as deserving of posterity. Many archives lack historical traces from both specific alterity groups and nontheatrical sound. These omissions are related, and an unexpected outcome of digital innovation has been that scholars have been revisiting historiographical questions related to content accessibility and inclusion in historical memory.

Interest has rapidly expanded in finding, digitizing, and making available otherwise untold histories. In February 2016 the Task Force commenced the first digital humanities media history conference on Capitol Hill, which included participation from over 120 academic, federal, museum, and practitioner groups. The event received an unusual amount of press coverage for a media history event. One resounding issue that the press repeatedly fixated on was the sheer amount of labor required to do radio preservation, including the complex political economy that it takes to conduct preservation, copyright law, institutional time, and funding. Part of the process includes raising awareness about what might be found on radio recordings.

Radio has been an important object of entertainment, and it's true that radio is one precursory institutional model for television. But radio is also a precedent for social media, since it's often been used as a communications technology with different goals than entertainment—from community building through Low Power FM, to nontheatrical broadcasts and advertising, to drive time and call-in shows. The Radio Preservation Task Force considers these sound

recordings to be important primary sources representative of local histories.

The goals of the emergent work of radio preservation closely connect to our expanding concept of who has counted as a historical player. Sound has been one medium by which historical agents have attempted to witness, discuss, and save the various events and beliefs. With the introduction of digital humanities methods, historians have been provided with a twofold opportunity: 1) to contextualize and quantitatively triangulate new historical trails as materials are made available, and 2) to find and introduce new primary sources into public record, especially in cases where paper trails fall short.

The following articles cover new historical research, preservation methods, and explorations of underrepresented texts and social histories, in which radio has served as a cultural medium. These pieces explore ways that radio might become a source for the adjudicating eye of historians, as a medium that contributes to official knowledge. Historians are expert detectives; a regular part of the work includes delineating the relationship between a sense of what happened to the many tangible informational paths in which an event might be studied. This has always included some degree of discovery and revelation of new information. In the case of digital history, every historian now has the ability to make materials available and searchable to other historians with relative immediacy, thanks to recent metadata innovations in Library Science.

A positive outcome of digital archival work has been the increased collegiality and materials networking between historians and archivists. In some cases we've seen the long-overdue emergence of archivist prominence, for their ability to maintain and execute the logistical underpinnings demanded of well-researched scholarly historical writing. In the case of this special issue, members of the Task Force focus on the ways that digital information has

influenced contemporary historiographic approaches and assumptions. Each author works from the perspective that preservation of media history is bound to historical visibility.

This issue of the *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* is organized into three sections. The following pieces cover new historical research, preservation methods, and explorations of underrepresented texts and social histories, in which radio has served as a cultural medium.

The first three articles function as traditional historical work that utilizes archival materials. First, John Nathan Anderson's article, "Illicit Transmissions: Engaging with the Study and Preservation of Pirate Radio" explores pirate radio enthusiasts' counter interpretation of "public airwaves" and broadcasting in "the public interest." Anderson reminds scholars of the vast work that remains within this under- studied but thriving area of radio broadcasting.

In the second piece, "'Salúd, Amigos': Negotiating Border History in Rural and Farm Radio of the Rio Grande Valley," Rodolfo Fernández and Deborah L. Jaramillo analyze two scripts from Bradford Smith's papers, locating their contradictory messages and competing narratives about the Rio Grande Valley and the region's Mexican roots in the mid-twentieth century. The article brings new attention to a long neglected arena of radio studies—border radio. Further, Fernández and Jaramillo's article reminds scholars that even minimally cataloged archives can prove useful for historical work. Finally, Sonja D. Williams excerpts a chapter from her book *Destination Freedom: A Historic Radio Series About Black Life*. In her contribution, she details Richard Durham's radio series *Destination Freedom* (1948–52), and the political struggles Durham navigated to bring his radio program to life.

The next two articles examine the call for educational radio and the programs that these calls produced in the 1920 and 1930s. First, in "Defining a Medium: The Educational Aspirations for Early Radio," Amanda Keeler examines the promotion of radio as an educational

technology across the 1920s. Using discourse analysis of articles found in trade journals, magazines, and newspapers, she explores the varying degrees of enthusiasm both for and against education by radio during this formative decade. In “Educational Radio, Listening Instruction, and the NBC *Music Appreciation Hour*,” Brian Gregory examines one successful program that arose out of the call for educational radio: Walter Damrosch’s music appreciation programs. As Gregory demonstrates, Damrosch saw radio as an ideal method to teach listening to students, but his methods ran counter to contemporary ideas about education versus entertainment radio.

Two pieces in this issue show how scholarly work can both introduce new research into the field while also commenting on the difficulties of radio history and archival work. Jason Loviglio’s article, “Reading *Judy and Jane* in the Archive” utilizes the extant scripts and recordings of this radio program to highlight the different analytical outcomes possible between reading radio scripts and hearing recordings. Similarly, in “The C.B.S. Problem in American Radio Historiography,” Michael J. Socolow delineates the scholarly gap on the formation of CBS and its subsequent business dealings. Socolow traces the decisions over the years that may have led to the company’s decision not to archive its papers.

In addition to the traditional historical pieces, this issue features several short “think” pieces that interrogate terminology, methods, and scholarly gaps. In Michael Austin’s piece, “Experiencing Radio at the Interface: Preserving the Past and Designing the Future of Radio” he examines the interdisciplinary uses of the term “interface” as it relates to the materiality of radio objects, intuitive learning technologies, and “the Internet of Things.” Laura Schnitker outlines the complications with the term “college radio” and the largely unexplored history of U.S. college radio stations in “Archives, Advocacy, and Crowd- Sourcing: Towards a More Complete Historiography of College Radio.” In the next article “Tripping Down the (Media) Rabbit Hole:

Radio Alice and the Insurgent Socialization of Airwaves,” Marco Briziarelli discusses Radio Alice, a “free radio” active in late 1970s Italy that challenged traditional forms of broadcasting. Katie Day Good explores the visual aspects of radio in “Radio’s Forgotten Visuals.” She examines “illustrated radio,” one experiment in audiovisual broadcasting that existed decades before the mass popularization of television. Finally, both Cynthia B. Meyers’ article “Commerce and Culture: Histories of Radio Sponsorship Yet to Be Written” and Christine Ehrick’s article “Radio Archives and Preservation in Latin America: A Preliminary Overview” suggest several avenues for future radio scholarship based on existing archives that have yet to be explored in depth.

The final section of articles focuses on the archive. In “Revitalizing the Northwestern University Radio Archive Project: Rediscovering Midwestern Radio History,” Laura LaPlaca discusses the status of the radio archive donated by Chicago station WMAQ radio pioneer Judith Waller. In Shawn VanCour’s article, “Locating the Radio Archive: New Histories, New Challenges,” he assesses The Library of Congress’s National Recording Preservation Board archival inventory project to date and makes suggestions for future collection and analysis of papers and recordings towards the production of new historical accounts.

The work of the Library of Congress’s Radio Preservation Task Force continues, and we hope to contribute to the construction of a holistic picture of American experience one step at a time, with each new discovery of a historical sound recording.