

Chignell, Hugh (2013a) **‘The BBC, Radio Archives and the Role of the Academic Researcher’**, Centre for Media History, Bournemouth University

This is a polemical blog post which I wrote in 2013. It was reasonably accurate at the time but this is a fast moving area so, for example, the arrival of the ‘Infax lite’ BBC Pilot database at the BL reading rooms, a very welcome development, is not mentioned.

These are my current thoughts about the state of UK radio archives and especially the BBC sound archives.

The purpose of this blog is to identify some of the key themes and issues around British radio archives and how they might be studied and used by researchers.

To put it rather more bluntly; this is about the considerable obstacles faced by researchers in their attempts to listen to and use the BBC’s radio archives. Which is not to say that other output (commercial and community radio) is not important and that is being dealt with elsewhere.

Let’s start by considering the nature of the problem. By far the most important collection of archived radio (probably in excess of 100,000 hours) in the UK is held by the BBC in its Sound Archive. This can be accessed by non-BBC staff but only via the British Library’s listening service. However this is very far from straightforward. The catalogue of the BBC sound archive, Infax, cannot be seen by researchers at the British Library for complex rights reasons and so the researcher has to either make do with the very bare bones of the redacted Infax catalogue or ask politely at the information desk where a member of the BBC staff will have a look.

Having identified a programme from the past there is then a wait of several days even weeks before the audio is available in one of the listening booths at the BL. Again this is beset with problems because the researcher cannot take a copy of the audio for further listening and study but instead has to listen and take notes. Even worse, it may not be possible to pause the audio to write because if the audio is on a shellac or vinyl disc there is no control apart from a red telephone which connects to the audio technician.

So the system for researching and studying our radio heritage is extremely cumbersome, but some people do succeed in listening although this usually involves having insiders in the BBC who are prepared to ignore their employment contract and provide the odd CD in a plain envelope. There are also private collections of old BBC radio and some universities, including Bournemouth, have quite significant collections of radio programmes donated by BBC staff who presumably didn’t want their work to be chucked in a BBC skip.

The common response to this complaint is that the BBC itself is doing wonderful things to open up the archive and make this heritage available online. If we go to the BBC website we will find quite large amounts of old output now available including long running series, most notably Letter from America, Desert Island Discs and In Our Time. There are also smaller but interesting moments from the past available to listen to including from the Second World War.

But this 'supply driven' approach to providing archives is very far from adequate.

The problem is to do with the nature of the demands of researchers. What researchers want is apparently very far indeed from what the BBC wants to supply.

Here are some examples based on my own interests but also part of what might be an emerging canon of important radio output of the 20th century. This is a list of what I think are some particularly significant old radio programmes;

J.B.Priestley Postscripts to the News

1956 Suez crisis radio news reports

Sam Hanna Bell This is Northern Island (1949), The Return Room (1955)

Giles Cooper plays, The Disagreeable Oyster (1957), Under the Loofah Tree (1958),

Unman, Wittering and Zigo (1958)

Radio Four's The Long March of Everyman

John Peel as Radio One DJ and presenter of Radio Four's Home Truths

All of the programmes listed above are remarkable for some reason or another. Priestley was a major radio star of the Second world War whose well documented talks radically redefined what radio could achieve. Hanna Bell is an extraordinary and increasingly recognised producer who heralded the development of regionally based radio features and documentaries. Cooper is probably the single most important BBC radio dramatist. The Long March was fabulously extravagant and expensive radio which again took the medium to new places. I could go on but everything in this list should be heard again and again and yet...

Not one of these programmes can be heard to today, unless you are one of those very tenacious British Library card carrying researchers. None of them are online, are part of the much-vaunted 'digital public space' or the newly 'opened up' BBC archives. They may be critically important parts of our radio heritage but not in the eyes of BBC Archives.

What then is the way forward? If it is the case that the situation is in urgent need of change then perhaps we should be clear about who needs that change? Who wants radically improved access to BBC and indeed other radio archives? There certainly is a very small group of radio academics, together with a similarly small group of PhD researchers, who feel this lack most acutely. But these people are actually very important for the good of the archives as a whole. It should be stated with some force that the failure to listen to academics has been a serious mistake in the BBC. These people are the, very expensively trained and supported, experts on old radio programming, but you really wouldn't know it if you look at current archive policy. How precisely do radio scholars and historians inform the current BBC archive policy? How does their knowledge and insight into BBC programming help in the selection of the material put online? It doesn't.

But radio scholars are merely the vanguard of the potential community of users of well selected radio archives. Other university and college lecturers and school teachers stand in their wake ready to make use of old radio in their teaching of the next generation of radio producers. Then there are the current radio producers who would benefit from having access to radio heritage. Not to mention the general public who paid for the programmes in the first place through the licence fee.

Recommendations

The desperate state of British radio archives is well illustrated by a look at the wonderful LARM project in Denmark, the goal of which,

...is to establish a platform that will allow researchers and university students the ability to stream sound to their own computers directly from the digital archive, which at the conclusion of the project will contain more than one million hours of sound.

We are so far from that solution that it is barely helpful but at least LARM can show what can be achieved when universities, broadcasters and libraries work together. In the UK a few quite small steps would make a huge difference without typing the BBC up in copyright and other rights' issues.

1. Provide accreditation to academic researchers to use BBC sound archive catalogues.
2. Allow accredited researchers to purchase access to BBC sound archives (currently granted to independent producers).
3. Allow the academic community to inform the selection of radio programmes to be put online.
4. Promote the use of archived radio by publishing collections of programmes and other output under the guidance of radio scholars.
5. Introduce the opportunity for users of the online BBC archive to add metadata.

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