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### Worlding the Archive: Radio Collections, Heritage Frameworks, and Selection Principles

Birdsall, C.

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GOLO FÖLLMER, ALEXANDER BADENOCH (EDS.)

## **Transnationalizing Radio Research**

**New Approaches to an Old Medium**

**[transcript]**



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## **WORLDING THE ARCHIVE: RADIO COLLECTIONS, HERITAGE FRAMEWORKS, AND SELECTION PRINCIPLES**

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*Carolyn Birdsall*

In this case study, I develop critical perspectives on institutional radio collections, in the form of sound recordings or other print-based materials. While the institutional practice of recording, editing and archiving radio sounds – prevalent in European broadcasting from around 1930 onwards – largely took place within a framework of national significance, these collections were also governed by aspirations to capture and order the sounds of the world. The present article attends to this ‘worldly’ (if not universalist) scope – and the ‘world-making’ qualities of archival practice (Ong 2011; Cook 2013) – for radio collections that often had a dual focus on long-term historic preservation as well as the needs of program production.

The main case study examined here will be the BBC, in Great Britain, whose documentation and information activities – in the form of libraries and archives – swelled from their modest beginnings to large and elaborate operations during World War II (1939-1945) and afterwards. While a range of departments were responsible for the recording, editing and archiving of radio sound, sound archiving at the BBC is usually credited to a number of pioneers. Most prominent among these are the early members of the Recorded Programmes department, such as Lynton Fletcher, Timothy Eckersley, and Marie Slocombe (Rooks 2012). While Slocombe is popularly known as the ‘founder’ of the BBC sound archive, having initiated the Permanent Library or ‘historic archive’ from 1937 to the early 1970s, this essay draws on recent archival research that highlights both Slocombe’s influential role in compiling, classifying and curating recorded sound as well as issues of gendered agency evidenced in the limitations and frustrations experienced by Slocombe and many of the female library and archival staff (Birdsall 2017).

The transnational perspective on archival collections and practices will be articulated through three sections, which will emphasize the global and imperial background to (sound) recording technologies and archival praxis, and how



the collections reflect multiple and changing concepts of ‘heritage’, with particular attention to the dominant narrative of global and historical significance linked to the recording and preservation of radio sound linked to World War II (1939-1945). The conclusion will synthesize the findings of this case study and critically reflect on the need for further transnational research about radio sound archiving that goes beyond the limitations of the single case study presented here, one whose Eurocentric orientation risks reinforcing the centrality of the imperial metropole, if not other East-West and North-South divisions (Stoler and Cooper 1997; Shohat and Stam 2014; Scales 2013). I will therefore point to the significance of investigating other models, sites and historical periods for radio archival praxis, particularly those that might provide alternatives or challenges to the “audio nationalism” (Western 2015) and “technological imperialism” (Taylor 2002; Yang 2010) in evidence in the case study introduced here.

## **GLOBAL AND IMPERIAL DIMENSIONS TO SOUND RECORDING AND ARCHIVING**

Radio, from its inception, often relied on recorded music drawn from the transnational circuits of the gramophone music industry (Gronow/Saunio 1998; Denning 2015); the gramophone as a cultural form and consumer good, as scholars like Lisa Gitelman (2003, 2004) and Jonathan Sterne (2003) have highlighted, was bound up with racialized and gendered imaginaries. As part of a broader sound media landscape – including telegraphy, telephony, phonography, and sound cinema – radio was largely conceived as a ‘live’ transmission medium from the 1920s onwards. While its ephemeral qualities certainly contributed to the desire to archive radio, the introduction of recording and archiving techniques also met with resistance in Germany, Great Britain and the US, with fears of a loss of radio’s purchase on liveness, or due to market conditions of syndication networks and copyright restrictions (Russo 2004). Nonetheless, the establishment of disc and tape-based archiving was subject to systems of ordering, for which broadcast staff increasingly developed elaborate workflows and systems, such as index cards and catalogue editions. Radio libraries and archives, similar to the phonogram archives found around 1900, had multiple dimensions to their holdings. Within Slocombe’s “Permanent Library” at the BBC, for instance, there were a number of historical wax cylinders, along with selected off-air recordings of programs considered to be of historical importance; representative examples included recorded speeches by former UK Prime Minister William Gladstone or then-Prime Minister Winston Churchill. In addition to program pre-recording and off-air recordings, the early catalogues of European broadcasters such as the BBC or the national broadcaster

in Berlin (Reichs-Rundfunkgesellschaft) indicate a range of recorded sound holdings from famous international figures and musical performances to station interval signals (local and international) and test broadcasts. In particular, the sound effects libraries of local and national broadcasters also appear in archive catalogues; while diverse in scope, these collections, their description and use in program production reflect attempts to amass ‘typical’ sound of other places and cultures, some of which were derived from ethnographic sound collections (Birdsall forthcoming). Sound recordings of radio content, finally, also circulated within affiliate systems, such as in North America’s commercial networks, but also between international markets, such as the BBC “Transcription Disks”, which were in competition with the pre-recorded programs offered by companies such as the World Broadcasting Library or Frederick W. Ziv Company (Kompare 2006: 25-26, 33-34; Potter 2012: 102-10).

## HERITAGE DISCOURSES AND THE SOUND ARCHIVE

In 2015, the British Library Sound Archive launched a campaign to appeal to the wider public about the financial aid needed to address urgent preservation agendas with their recorded sound and their increasingly obsolescent carriers. On the campaign website, “Save our Sounds: Saving the Nation’s Sound Heritage,” the canonical example provided is that of Winston Churchill “rallying the nation just before the Battle of Britain” during World War II (British Library 2015). Despite the diverse and transnational composition of the British Library Sound Archive, built on the earlier British Institute for Recorded Sound (founded in 1955), this campaign appealed to the public on the basis of ‘our’ national sound heritage (Müske 2011). A critical response to this would be to ask “whose heritage?” (Hall 1999), and to consider how such recordings have become valued and canonized in public discourse and popular memory (Birdsall 2016).

The case of sound recording and archiving at the BBC is a useful case for considering heritage dynamics in the constitution of recorded sound collections, and the increasingly transnational dimensions to – and perceived value of – content recorded in the context of World War II. If we examine the BBC Recorded Sound catalogues from the mid-1930s, we can find numerous priorities at play in the creation and collection of recordings considered nationally, culturally or politically important, as well as illustrative examples of the radio medium itself.

Firstly, the mid-1930s BBC recorded sound catalogue included historic recordings of past events, such as Armistice Day, New Year’s Eve celebrations, or famous figures, such as the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst. Secondly, there were recordings of European monarchs and international political leaders, such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Benito Mussolini, former German

chancellor Paul von Hindenburg, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. The third category was reportage of recent topical events, as for instance related to 'Abysinia Crisis' of 1935, unemployment, the dissolution of the British parliament, and elections. Fourthly, there were recordings that appeared to be representative examples of contemporary radio, such as the weather forecast, a news bulletin, a quiz show, an "unrehearsed debate", station intervals, test records and program trailers, sound effects and important figures from the BBC, such as director-general John Reith or newsreader John Snagge.

Significantly, however, there are other items that attest to an international orientation with samples of Czech radio, reportage from Nazi Germany, the well-known US radio newsreel "The March of Time" (1931-1945), and Lynton Fletcher's own "Looking Backwards" compilation program, which was a monthly news review for the BBC Empire Service. This is suggestive of an early effort, on the part of Fletcher, not only to maintain collections of important voices or materials for program re-use, but also seeking to preserve representative examples of radio-specific materials in a British and international context.

With the later establishment of the Permanent Library under Marie Slocombe, the curation of historically-significant recordings became more formalized. Nonetheless, Fletcher and Slocombe's efforts to frame and promote their collections in terms of national and cultural significance was also, in part, in response to the internal challenges posed from the late 1930s into the war, to the remit of the Recorded Programmes department. The department was criticized by BBC Engineering as usurping the role of their own Technical Recording units, and by program producers, who either wanted to have their own program-specific sound libraries, or complained about slow disc processing (BBC WAC 1943). One of the critiques articulated by engineer Martin Pulling was that in the US context, CBS and NBC did not maintain extensive recorded programs and archival services, but rather left such tasks to national libraries such as the Library of Congress. While the internal reviews allowed the Recorded Programmes Department to remain intact, these criticisms led to Fletcher being forced to step down as director (BBC WAC 1943).

## **SELECTION PRINCIPLES AND THE ARCHIVE AS 'MEMORY ACTOR'**

Prior to his dismissal, Fletcher and his colleagues participated in a number of programs and promotional activities to inform the public about the importance of sound recording and archiving for program production during war, as well as preserving the memory of the war for the future.

In *Museum of Sound* (1943), interviews are conducted with the heads of the BBC Recorded Programmes Department (Lynton Fletcher) and Engineering

Department (Martin Pulling), who are described as responsible for the recording and technical operations of the BBC. The film begins with the narrator reading the text “Old Sounds are Kept Safe and Sound in the Recorded Programmes department.” During an interview with Fletcher, he notes that the Recorded Programmes department has to respond to all requests that come in, often needing to edit and rearrange material, due to the different needs of programming for home listeners as opposed to overseas services. He describes the Permanent Library as striving to preserve recordings for future re-use, as emblematic of “some of those things that characterize our life and times.” Fletcher then concedes that the recordings themselves are produced by the BBC Recording Service. Martin Pulling, superintendent engineer of the Recording Service, describes the four methods of recording in regular use: magnetized steel tape, large disc recording, recording on film and lacquer-coated metal discs. They play several sequences of Winston Churchill, an Edison recording of William Gladstone, as well as a sequence about the voices of present-day leaders like Stalin and Roosevelt, as being useful for future generations.

In this same period, a recording of a four-part series, titled “You Have Been Listening to a Recording” was broadcast on Saturday afternoons in March-April 1942. During this ‘guided tour’ of the items in the Permanent Library, Fletcher subsequently notes the benefit of their collection for interested people and ‘serious’ historical scholars in future, who he imagines as being given access to “scenes and events from the present” and the voices of “men who shaped our world.” He qualifies these statements by noting that ordinary people’s voices are also represented, and then introduces Slocombe, who mainly plays clips with recordings of male voices, a number of which are military personnel providing testimony to their experiences of World War II. Marie Slocombe served to reinforce her gatekeeping role in determining which voices, musics and sounds were worthy of recording and archiving (Birdsall 2017). In the post-war era, Slocombe continued to be interested in regional accents, dialects and musical forms, due to her involvement in the BBC Folk Music and Dialect Recording Scheme (as well as the International Folk Music Council), but she also acted here as a ‘gatekeeper’ in determining which field recordings would be acceptable enough to fit the criteria of ‘broadcast quality’ (Western 2015).

Beyond such promotional vehicles, internal correspondence has shown the extent to which the BBC’s recording services expanded in the context of around-the-clock wartime programming, with employees also assisting wartime language services, which – during the course of the war – included 36 different languages. While supported by disc recording and pre-recording services, most of these language services do not seem to have been selected for the Recorded Programmes library, and have only – in some cases – been incorporated into European exile government collections, such as the Dutch holdings

now preserved by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Image (Beeld en Geluid n.d.).

The BBC's collaboration with American radio, and the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), during the Allied Force invasion of Europe from 1943 onwards, produced recordings – often made on new portable disc recorders – that were copied and added to the Recorded Programmes collections (Bishop 1945). In the wake of the war, a number of noticeable developments contributed to the preservation and canonization of wartime broadcast recordings. Firstly, the large numbers of discs in wartime radio had expanded the scope of the Permanent Library, which by late 1948 included the Transcription Service Library, and had 12,500 discs (BBC WAC 1948). The idea that war-related recordings should be held by the BBC is also supported by an attempt, in 1949, to arrange for 7500 disc recordings of the Allied military tribunals in Nuremberg (between 1945-46) to be held at the BBC's Maida Vale archive facilities. Allied Forces, while occupying Germany, had also seized matrices of National Socialist radio recordings; the dubs, known as the "RRG recordings" were also brought to the BBC in London after the war, and are today held by the British Library Sound Archive (Birdsall 2016). Previously, National Socialist officials had seized radio collections and other sound recordings during the occupation of Western and Eastern Europe; towards the end of World War II, some historic radio collections were brought to Prague, Graz and Wrocław for safekeeping, with some of these materials later rediscovered in the Czech Republic and Russia during the 1990s (Birdsall 2016).

The war had heightened the sense of radio recordings as culturally valuable, with some of these damaged and destroyed, while others were confiscated as war trophies during and after the war. In terms of canonization, the previous has shown how BBC staff like Fletcher and Slocombe were keen to demonstrate the re-use of recordings of voices by famous leaders like Winston Churchill, while transcription programs were re-used, intermittently, in the US from the 1930s, and played an important role in fueling "the nostalgia for (and marketing of) 'old time radio' (aka 'OTR') in the 1960s" (Kompare 2006: 34). Indeed, an important development in the post-war era was the release of records with compilations of significant recordings, some of which were intended for school pedagogy. One such example is *Historic Voices and Music from World War II* (1966) in the US, or the highly-successful box set *Nederland 1940-1945* (1965), which was compiled by the Dutch sound archivist Rolf Schuurisma. Another important theme in the early post-war period was a growing awareness that the diverse recording methods used during the war were at risk of deterioration. At the BBC, towards the end of the war recommendations for long-term cooled storage of lacquer disks, matrices, pressings, films and magnetic tape were received from the film and music sector, in this case by representatives from EMI, the British Homophone Co, and the National Film Library (later

British Film Institute). This example is suggestive of how certain ‘best practices’ for archival preservation were already circulating between film, music and radio institutions, which later became more formalized in the context of international organizations like the International Association of Music Libraries (IAML), and later the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA) which grew out of it in 1969.

From the perspective of the present, it is crucial to critically consider the importance of archivist selection practices, and keep in mind the multiple forms of historical exclusion inherent to broadcasting’s institutional practices (Stoever 2016). Writing about the US context, Susan Douglas (1995: 5) has noted that “[w]hile radio brought America together as a nation in the 1930s and 1940s, it also highlighted the country’s ethnic, racial, geographic, and gendered divisions.” From the outset of broadcasting, therefore, there was a highly selective understanding of who was included in radio’s imagined audiences and national public sphere. These conditions had repercussions for broadcast content, who produced it, and how it sounded, and also, subsequently, which programs were pre-recorded or recorded off-air for historic preservation. While there were a variety of exclusions and blindspots, in the context of World War II, one of the major criticisms of the British media – and the BBC in particular – concerns the limited reporting on the persecution of Jews in Europe prior to 1945 (Seaton 1988).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined sound recording and archiving practice at the BBC as a case for considering the possibilities of transnational perspectives on the early history of radio sound archives. The first section sketched the pre-existing developments of global markets for recorded music, sound reproduction technologies and technical expertise, and noted the rise of sound archives as an example of the “heritage of empire” (Swenson 2013) in the context of European imperial centers, often within science institutions that collected the voices and music of ‘other’ cultures. The second section then attended to the content of radio collections, taking up the pervasive national discourse in past and present imaginations of national broadcasters like the BBC, while also highlighting the heterogeneity of recordings – and the transnational relations and exchange influencing the content and orientation of the archive. This section emphasized how the lead up to and aftermath of World War II not only expanded the scope of sound recording and archiving activities. The following and final section further outlined the prioritization of these wartime recordings in archival selection and canonized through re-use in programs and LP compilations; this resulted in marked absences and the reproduction of blindspots endemic to both program schedules and in archival selections.

While I have highlighted the national and transnational dimensions to the first decades of sound recording and archiving at the BBC, I would like to emphasize the necessity for further transnational research about radio sound archiving beyond this single case study with a largely a Eurocentric orientation. Firstly, this case study has emphasized a national broadcaster (with international services) that is consistent with the public service tradition of broadcasting; the archival practices studied here could thus result in further comparison with not only other public and state broadcasting contexts, but also commercial and ‘mixed’ models.

Secondly, in terms of other sites, it would be productive to focus further attention on regional comparison, with attention to broadcast practices that were established in the wake of decolonization and anti-colonial struggle, as well as other types of radio, such as free radio, underground and communist radio, student radio or internet radio. For these considerations it is instructive to build on the critique of the archive by gender, sexuality and queer studies, and acknowledge the importance of community radio interventions and archive/documentation initiatives, particularly from the 1960s onwards (Mitchell 2016). Another important context for the re-use and consumption of radio archival materials is their use as audiovisual aids in education; this is not only significant for the reproduction of certain historical canons (such as the World War II materials discussed here), but represents the present-day potential for encouraging an ‘archival consciousness’ in pedagogy and research (Birdsall 2015; Ehrick 2017).

Examining other sites and types of radio also require researchers to take a critical view on the “fetishized investment” in sound recordings for historical radio research (Dolan 2003: 67). This tendency can overlook the role of the myriad of ‘paperwork’ involved in broadcasting, with written archives – such as the BBC Written Archives Centre in Caversham – as crucial to researching the histories of recording and archiving. This chapter has highlighted how such ‘soundwork’ was as much about sound technical work as paper-based procedures (such as indexing, cross-indexing, and cataloguing).

Finally, the periodization of the present chapter, largely focused on the period around 1930-1945, concerns sound recording and archival practices at the BBC were reliant on analogue based storage media, such as phonographic discs, steel tape and film. This acts as a prompt for further research developing transnational perspectives on later developments in radio archival practices, in particular for the introduction of other technical formats such as magnetic tape and, later, digital recording and preservation strategies. Recent scholarship, for instance, has also emphasized the importance of studying amateur, fan and other “rogue” archival practices (Brandellero et. al. 2013; de Kosnik 2016), which is a necessary perspective in radio scholarship on recording practices and archives, in order to do more justice to audience listening, consumption and recording practices, particularly in transnational frameworks, such as

across the Cold War's 'Iron Curtain' (Badenoch/Fickers/Henrich-Franke 2013; Bohlman 2017). In this vein – considering transnational radio consumption and memory processes – Jaimie Baron (2013) has argued that the digital circulation of archival materials calls for new perspectives beyond official institutions, such as the BBC or British Library Sound Archive, and attending more to how these materials produce experiences for its present-day audiences.

The present chapter has emphasized the institutional origins of radio sound recording and archiving as an under-researched and a rich site of enquiry. The task of investigating the transnational dimensions to radio history – and recording and archiving in particular – also contributes to the larger project to consider “entangled” media histories, which, as Michele Hilmes (2017: 142) has pointed out, encourage researchers to “consider the many ways that the development of media and its crucial (but too often neglected) role in shaping world history has reached across national borders, encouraged exchange and cross-influence, spread across media platforms, and flourished outside the traditional frameworks within which they have been primarily understood.” As such, this chapter’s effort in ‘worlding the archive’ is a first experiment in enquiring into the formation of radio archival institutions from such perspectives of transnational collaboration, exchange, and circulation, with particular attention to the formative role of World War II as a site of ‘world history’ and heritage-making.

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