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Preserving Public Radio - Challenges and Possibilities

Radio can feel like an intangible medium. With the advent of streaming services, podcasts, and other non-physical forms of media, this feeling is almost underscored. However, before the time of streaming dominance in popular media, there had to be physical mediums for everything -- even radio. Master tapes, reels, even fidelipacs and vinyl discs, these all are physical formats that play an important role in the history and function of radio. However, the preservation of public radio broadcasting in particular comes with a plethora of challenges. From ensuring the original physical media the broadcast was kept on is intact, to making sure that metadata associated with original broadcasts is equally maintained, to considering practical capabilities and possibilities for smaller repositories, there is no shortage of obstacles to overcome when preserving public radio. Despite these challenges, I argue that preserving public radio broadcasts is essential to securing cultural memory and well worth overcoming the hurdles.

Public radio can be tricky to pin down as a medium. For the purposes of this paper, I'll clarify that when I use this term, I'm referring to both formal public broadcasts (such as National Public Radio programming) and less formal, more do-it-yourself kind of broadcasts, such as so-called pirate radio shows. That being said, public radio as a medium sits at a compelling intersection when thinking through preservation practices. In some cases, preservation is a second thought because broadcasts were (and sometimes still are) done on the fly and without much thought put towards posterity. (Anderson) In other cases, there are more practical issues at hand such as budget deficiencies and a lack of expertise in the station.

As mentioned earlier, despite these challenges, making sure this medium is preserved for future use/study is crucial for a number of reasons. Primarily, preserving broadcasts such as these offers a rich look into the cultural memory and history of the time in which the broadcast was

made. For example, in Latin America, public radio broadcasts have been tools during times of historic revolutions and turmoil, thus documenting vital moments in history. (Ehrick) Public radio can therefore be seen not only as a cultural artifact, but as a microcosm of historic moments that merits preservation beyond a doubt. I would be remiss if I were to simply leave this paper at this point -- the urgency of the problem of public radio preservation is underlined by the challenges of preservation itself.

Proper preservation techniques can be expensive, tricky, and time-consuming. Not every radio station or archive has the resources to adequately preserve radio broadcasts. For every NPR show being archived (such as *Story Corps*), there is another station somewhere with decaying master tapes, reels of airtime that haven't been heard in decades, and cassettes of material sitting on their shelves. This isn't necessarily the smaller station's fault, but it's still a problem that needs to be addressed. However difficult, making steps towards proper preservation is possible and should be pursued. For instance, organizations such as the Council on Library and Information Resources, the Mellon Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts offer funding for preservation projects. Smaller organizations can apply for these funds to help make their preservation goals a reality. Additionally, there are organizations such as the Radio Preservation Task Force from the National Recording Preservation Board that are working to make radio preservation a priority in archives. (Sheppard) With all of these resources at hand, preservation can be at least somewhat easier than beginning from square one with no idea about what to do.

While physical preservation is an important part of public radio preservation, we must also consider the role metadata plays in preservation. For there to be an accessible, useful, and

informative digital iteration of public radio broadcasts, there must also be well-documented and consistent metadata associated with these recordings. Without prioritizing this information, proper preservation is impossible. While metadata standards for audio preservation can be different from repository to repository, there are some key institutions that have some preferred approaches to collecting and curating metadata. For instance, the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (or, IASA) and a few other organizations encourage the use of the METS (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard) standard set forth by the Library of Congress for recording structural metadata. (IASA) Even the publication Sound Directions offers useful advice on metadata use and recommends METS as a standard while providing examples of their own use of that standard at the two institutions behind the publication (Harvard and Indiana University). (Casey) Then there's the metadata standard that was set aside specifically for public radio -- PBCore.

Public Broadcasting Core was borne out of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and their creation, the Public Broadcasting Metadata Dictionary Project (PBMD) to help institutions -- mainly television and radio stations to make files more accessible and exchangeable across platforms. (Rubin) Since its launch in 2005, the schema has been used not only for radio and television, but also for film. (Rubin) The standard uses 4 content classes, 15 containers, and 82 elements. (PBCore) Additionally, the 2.1 version of PBCore uses 49 XML-readable attributes, making for a more descriptive standard of metadata. (PBCore) It is an open-standard schema, meaning anyone can use it in their repository free of charge. (PBCore) All of these characteristics of this standard make it a compelling option for repositories in need of a metadata overhaul, or even just a standardization of pre-existing metadata in their collections.

PBCore is a crucial tool to consider when thinking through potential strategies for preserving public radio broadcasts. For one thing, it was made by and for those in the public broadcasting business. It is also equally useful that it's a free, open, and easily accessible metadata schema. If an institution doesn't have the immediate resources to physically repair a collection, they can at least begin at the metadata level and collect as much information on their objects as possible for posterity. Without the core data about the materials housed in collections across the world, there's no way to tell what's what. Dissociation, or the loss of meaning for an object, is a devastating and all too real threat to older materials in sound collections. If someone in an archive finds a wax cylinder twenty years from now, but there's no accompanying metadata with it, how can they begin to put the pieces together about what this object is and how to best preserve it? In this way, maybe the silent heart of audio preservation sits squarely in the realm of metadata.

In choosing what we should and shouldn't preserve, we are ultimately affecting the core of preservation work -- thinking through the processes of selection is another crucial point to examine within the preservation process. Who gets to decide what stays and what goes in a collection, and what does that reveal about the organization making the choices? In their review of the WGBH Archives, Mary Ide and Leah Weisse outline their reasoning for their selection choices:

> "A thorough review and culling of the collection has been supported by the Foundation with two goals in mind: first, we seek to develop a quality collection of production content, one that has been pared of duplicate items, has had materials removed that are no longer deemed to be of production or administrative value, and has been weeded of documents whose retention periods have expired; second, we describe the collection to the item level with as much production content and brief program description as possible." (Ide)

Here, there consensus seems to be focused on a streamlined kind of preservation for materials, prioritizing records that are still active and choosing to dispose of inactive records. There also seems to be a strong emphasis on metadata collection, which is important to note. Every repository is going to approach collection acquisition on its own terms, whether that means making the rules hard and fast (like the stipulation in the above guidelines for what to do with inactive records) or taking a more relaxed approach. The important thing is to choose a system that works best for whatever repository you're in.

In audio collections, for example, it might be hard to parse out what is "active" and "inactive" since these materials didn't serve the same purpose as, let's say, business documents. Yes they may have been used on a daily basis with decreasing or increasing frequency, but they don't have the same sensibility about them re: use. Sure, people may still listen to old broadcasts from time to time, like the re-runs of Casey Kasem's work that have international syndication, but they are not referenced on a day-to-day basis in quite the same way as business documents. (Biography.com) Listening to an old episode of American Top 40 on your way home from work is a completely different experience than reviewing old meeting minutes from your business's most popular organization. Audio collections call for their own criteria for collection acquisition, and it will differ from place to place (much like with any other archive). In rare cases, there is another problem when it comes to handling collections -- the organization of it all.

Take, for instance, the archives of New York Public Radio, or WNYC as it is also known. They are one of the few stations in the nation to have a comprehensive archive of materials, and although they've only been archiving materials (read: digitizing) since 2000. (Houtman) However, their problems arise due to some slight discrepancies that might not be a problem in

other, more traditional archives. That is, the distinction between certain terms such as "series" and "show" can be slippery at best. In a traditional archival setting, "series" are defined as a similar group of records arranged by using their original filing system. (Houtman) In public radio, and PBCore, a "series" designates "A group of separate items related to one another by the fact that each item bears, in addition to its own title proper, a collective [series] title applying to the group as a whole ..." (Houtman) Adding even further confusion to the mix, the term means something else to web developers, which are a key component in making the holdings of WNYC's archives available to the public online. In their understanding, the term "series" means more of a way for show producers to arrange content. (Houtman)

This is certainly a lucky problem to have when you consider the dire state most audio collections are in -- whether that be from conditions to loss of the materials themselves. However, even these small issues are important to note, because they still matter when thinking through preservation practices for any kind of audio archive that wants to be accessible to the public. Without working through the muddy nature of archival/radio/web developer nomenclature, we don't get any closer to serving the purpose of archives in the first place -- to give access to users who stand to learn from a collection's holdings. WNYC may be making strides in preservation generally, but they still have a lot of work cut out for them when it comes to organization and accessibility.

That is to say that in addition to grappling with the finer points of term definitions for their own purposes, WNYC is also consistently working on how to approach their collections on a digital scale. As of now, their older archival holdings and materials can be accessed online, albeit separately from their more recent material. However, the people at WNYC eventually

want to be able to integrate their daily activity with the work they've done with older materials into their current work. Yet this still remains a distant goal for them, because while they have a plan for staying relevant as an online presence with regards to style/aesthetics of their site, they're still not sure how to reconcile their past and present. (Houtman) The question of a web presence and what accessibility should look like is a concern for most archives at a certain point in their life, and there isn't a quick and easy method to follow because of the differences present in each repository -- whether that be through holdings, resources, or other means -- that will affect how this content is shared and distributed with online users. So, much like any other facet of dealing with audio collections, what eventually ends up working for WNYC may not work for other repositories depending on their goals and other factors.

We've explored the ways in which archives and other repositories can help preserve their most vulnerable materials. There are grants, free tools, and more resources at hand. All of this is to say that while working towards preservation, it's important to remember what, exactly, that means. As I mentioned earlier, public broadcasts have served a great purpose in capturing the culture of the time in which they were made, but they also serve as a witness to the history of that same time. Preserving public radio broadcasts is vital to a country's collective cultural memory and a crucial component of preserving their history as well. In her overview of radio archives in Latin America, Christine Ehrick notes that in places such as Argentina and Chile, the most important public broadcasts documented dictatorships and revolutions during the Cold War era, and therefore help preserve the public memory. (Ehrick) Additionally in Latin America, the preservation of public radio has been a low-priority item for a lot of repositories, making the region's recordings endangered. (Ehrick) Some repositories still have a great deal of material to

salvage, such as one of Mexico's most prominent archive for broadcast materials, XEW/Televisa Radio archives in Casa Alvarado within Mexico City. Out of this extensive collection of over 145,000 recordings, only 15% have been digitized as of 2016. (Ehrick) However in the past decade, these institutions have been using their resources to create partnerships that can help bolster their preservation efforts. There's the Museo de la Palabra y Imagen (MUPI), which teamed up with The University of Texas at Austin in 2013 to help digitize and catalog the Consalvi collection. This collection, made up of the broadcasts from Venezuelan journalist Carlos Henríquez Consalvi's *Venceremos* radio show as well as others. (Ehrick) This is an excellent example of what can happen when an archive takes proactive measures to ensure their collections are kept safe for years to come. These case studies outlined in Ehrick's work are all indicative of the same thing: that preserving sound materials doesn't mean just that alone -- it means preserving and protecting histories that might otherwise be lost to time. This is the soul, the why of preserving audio materials and cannot be underemphasized.

The *why* is something we must always keep in mind when approaching any kind of collection. Whether it's to document the rise and fall of revolutions and dictators, or to simply remember which song in America was at the top of the charts in 1985, the endgame is really the same at the end of the day. When we talk about preserving our cultural memory, this is what we're talking about. Preserving powerful, devastating, and sometimes gruesome histories side by side with important cultural artifacts -- such as the previously mentioned *Top 40 with Casey Kasem* -- is all part and parcel of archiving in the first place. Without acknowledging both sides of history, the unnerving and the inspiring, we cannot claim to have a full historical record. Indeed, audio archiving and preservation can be one of the best examples of being able to record

histories from multiple vantage points and perspectives. Collections can house cassette tapes, 8-track tapes, reel-to-reel recordings, and even wax cylinders with music on them under one roof while also holding tapes or reels of historic speeches, oral histories, and other more traditional forms of audio documentation. This is a perfect example of the fluidity of audio archives and how they can encompass a variety of materials. This fluidity is an important component of the *why* for preservation as well.

Without being able to look at a range of materials, from the seemingly silly or insignificant to the more traditionally historic, and decide they need to be saved for posterity, we cannot have a comprehensive record and cannot properly serve our users. It's as simple as that. Preservation can be a tumultuous process, from beginning to end but throughout it all it's crucial to remember that there is a purpose behind the maddening rush to save tapes with sticky shed syndrome or to collect all the metadata possible from an old tape. There's a centered, calm, and even noble purpose in the middle of the chaos that reminds us on a daily basis of why we need to continue the work we've started in the first place. Sometimes it can be something to hold onto when things aren't going well in the processing room or the tape we thought would have important, revelatory information actually can't be played back on the machine we have in house.

At the end of the day, it's important to take a step back and remember exactly *why* we put ourselves through this -- for the greater good. For making sure that history isn't lost in a time when authoritarianism and memory subterfuge is a commonality of our daily lives. When we live in times such as these, where history and events are called into question by even those in the highest positions in office, our job becomes vital to our communities. Without audio archives

acting as wards of a specific way of understanding history, we only have an incomplete picture of what the world was like, and no way of understanding what it's becoming before our very eyes.

Ultimately, it's important to recognize that the challenges and hurdles for public radio preservation that I've outlined in this paper are only the tip of the iceberg. Every repository will come with its own challenges that might be apart from what I've mentioned here. They may also have even further off-shoots from what I've already mentioned. Whether that means dealing with a tight budget that won't grow thanks to unsympathetic higher-ups, limited resources for playback and digitization, or even loss of materials due to irreparable deterioration. However, throughout all and any of these challenges we cannot forget that overcoming them is the key towards creating a more complete historic record through audio collections.

So, while dealing with any of the aforementioned challenges I've outlined above, it's crucial to hold onto this center of preservation praxis: what we're doing matters. It's for posterity, it's for the record, and it's one hundred percent worth fighting for. Anyone who thinks otherwise clearly doesn't belong in an archival setting. Whether it's budgetary, resource-centered, or just working on metadata collection, every repository has to deal with them at some point. Even WNYC, which arguably has a pretty comprehensive record of their history and recordings, is struggling to come to terms with how to best make their collection accessible online. They're also dealing with the struggle of keeping multiple definitions of what a "series" is under control, allowing for a more organized structure for their collections as a whole. (Houtman) They might be the best example of problems in preservation persisting across repositories no matter their stature -- simply put, if it's not one thing, it's something else.

However daunting these challenges may be, it's always best to remember the work being done at the center of it all. Much like with the efforts of MUPI mentioned earlier in preserving radio broadcasts from a contentious time in history, our efforts in the field of audio preservation are of the utmost value because they have the power to preserve one of a kind records. There is nothing quite like an audio record, nothing that captures not only the documented history of a moment, but the texture and context of it as well. In order to preserve it all, we need to stay grounded in this belief: that we must remember the *why* behind the work we do on a daily basis. Without this grounding, we would be lost and could not possibly continue with work as we know it. The *why* is an imperative, a reminder, a stalwart truth: we need to preserve public radio broadcasts simply because they are invaluable documentations of the past.

As I've written about earlier in this paper, the urgency of preservation is always marked by the *why* behind it all. Why bother cataloging all of these tapes that may never be used again? Why think through a dedicated schema? Why even take the time to travel to a storage unit somewhere far away, to dig through boxes, to look through houses, to see what can be salvaged from the piles of junk? Why is a question that can buzz on forever. It can make the most stressful day even worse when thought of in the middle of trying (and perhaps failing) to revive a recording. It can keep us annoyed, upset, or frustrated in the workplace.

And yet, we could not get the work we do done without it, because the *why* is also so, so much more. The *why* is remembering what the purpose of long days and nights in the processing room means for our long-term future. It's changing our thinking of our day-to-day processes as being in the realm of the mundane, to remembering that the work we do is in the realm of protection, stewardship, and guardianship for the future. These may all seem like lofty ideals that

don't have much to do with the practical work flow of working with audio materials on a day-to-day basis, and yet, they're still true. We can be both archivists doing mundane tasks in their offices, working nine to five, reaching small goals for our collections on a weekly basis, and we can still be those stewards of history, except for maybe when we're on our lunch break. Preservation is so much more than the work we need to complete to accomplish it. It is an imperative to keep history not only stable, but alive and thriving. Without such an imperative, the work being done not only in audio archives or collections, but in archives around the world would be rendered moot. While working through digitizing cassette tapes may not feel like a noble or magical act when in progress, it very much is. In the same vein, public radio may not seem like the most exciting genre of audio preservation to examine, but it's one of the richest because it's a medium borne by the people and for the people. There is a sense of do-it-yourself enthusiasm in the work of public radio stations, balanced with the decorum of broadcasting in general. In some cases, there isn't even that, but no matter the case, public radio is an important part of the historical record and cannot be overlooked in discussions about preservation.

Overall, the practical workflow of making this happen doesn't feel magical or noble when in action, but there is something bigger at work all the while. Whether it's digitizing a reel-to-reel recording or collecting metadata from a vinyl record, the work that comes with audio preservation is almost a kind of alchemy unto itself. We take old, almost forgotten things, extract the information and vital parts, and transform them into something that can hold on for just a bit longer, so that others may discover their magic too.

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