

# THE FUTURE OF RADIO STUDIES

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## INTRODUCTION

Radio has long been an invisible medium, unseen but ever present in our lives. Despite the increased visibility and materiality conferred on radio and soundwork via emergent digital platforms, radio studies as a discipline has continued to share something of the medium's invisibility within the scholarly universe, either missing completely from media studies curricula, scattered widely among different departments – communication, journalism, music, art, literature, and more – or subsumed into more generalized explorations into sound and the sonic environment.

However, the digital revolution has affected radio studies as it has other media, not only opening up the field to new forms of soundwork – podcasts, streaming radio, digital music services, online audio – but providing new sites and sources for radio and sound scholarship, as well, including online journals, newsletters and blogs<sup>1</sup>, radio curation sites<sup>2</sup>, research databases<sup>3</sup>, permanent web interfaces for traditional radio outlets, and last but not least, audio archives. These proliferating digital platforms with their global reach have the potential to make radio studies truly transnational for the first time since Rudolf Arnheim celebrated the medium's boundary-transcending potential in 1936 – before the nationalist fervors of the twentieth-century worked to confine and control it (Arnheim 1936). Now, as radio scholar Kate Lacey has written, we can not only “listen in” but “listen out,” forming new connections and potential

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**1** | Such as Radio Survivor (<http://www.radiosurvivor.com/>), Sounding Out! (<https://soundstudies-blog.com/>) and Hot Pod (<https://www.hotpodnews.com/>).

**2** | For instance, the Public Radio Exchange (PRX: <http://www.prx.org/>) and the Third Coast International Audio Festival (<http://thirdcoastfestival.org/>).

**3** | These include the Media History Digital Library, a database of radio (and film and television) trade publications (<http://mediahistoryproject.org/>) and more recently, a searchable podcast database launched by Jeremy Morris at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Podcastre (<http://podcastre.org/>).

publics that stretch geographical and cultural limitations (Lacey 2013). While this new connectivity has undoubtedly already taken place in the realms of radio production and consumption, in this chapter we examine whether it has been translated to scholarly studies of radio. We argue that it is beginning to do so, but that such translation remains in its nascent stages.

Our chapter both marks this crucial transition and seeks to inspire further exploration, pointing to opportunities for transmedia, transnational, and transdisciplinary investigations as the way ahead for radio studies. In particular, as Golo Föllmer and Alec Badenoch write in the introduction to this book, “[f]or radio scholars it aims to provide both inspiration and concrete tools for breaking through the methodological nationalism that in many ways still structures our research.” In this chapter we argue for the development of new approaches to researching and teaching radio that are as malleable and accommodating as the medium itself, encompassing radio’s historical depth as well as contemporary practices. We draw upon our experience as co-editors of the *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* (Intellect Press) since 2015, which has given us a special window onto the breadth and focus of radio research today, and as co-chairs of the closing plenary session convened at the international Transnational Radio Conference in Utrecht, Netherlands, in 2016.

The chapter begins with a brief historic overview of the field of study, highlighting the role of archives in providing important access to scholars of radio. The next part delves deeper into the interdisciplinary nature of radio studies, illustrated through a mapping of the disciplinary belonging and methodologies of five years of scholarship published from 2012 to 2016 in the *Radio Journal*. This analysis demonstrates the breadth of practices and disciplines intersecting with the study of radio even though most studies are done within national borders. It then considers some case studies that demonstrate new developments in the field of radio studies and how these might be extended and adapted by other scholars. Finally, the chapter looks at how practice-led research methodologies are opening up pathways into radio studies for scholars and students wanting to combine the making of radio and audio content with critical analysis. We also point out some of the continuing obstacles to transnational and transdisciplinary media research, hoping to raise awareness among future generations of scholars and inspire new directions for research and instruction.

## RADIO’S MISSING HISTORY

As noted above, 21st century radio has escaped its former definitional boundaries as well as its national ones. The uses and meanings of radio have expanded and multiplied. Yet radio’s history remains largely obscured, overshadowed for decades by the expansion of television and film studies, themselves relatively

new fields. At the very moment that radio emerged as a dominant medium mid-century, riding on the crest of two decades of innovation and recognized as the central voice of nations and peoples during World War II and the period of reconstruction that followed, television eclipsed it in the 1950s and never looked back. Radio persevered, but as a secondary medium devoted increasingly to music, woven invisibly into everyday life. Radio research and scholarship, just beginning to flourish in the 1950s, quickly took a back seat to its more visible competitors. Not until the 1990s did scholarship on radio revive, receiving further stimulation as digital forms and practices opened up the field.

The loss of a sense of radio's history, and the subsequent failure to develop a coherent set of critical tools with which to analyse and understand its unique contributions to culture and society, is particularly acute in the United States and other countries that lack a strong central public broadcaster. Commercial broadcasters had little interest in preserving their programs or in encouraging criticism and review, especially when they held no ongoing rights in the programs they broadcast: advertisers, who both produced and owned the programs, were not in the media business and did not regard their radio efforts as any more important than last year's Ovaltine sales. It is only through illegal copying and under-the-radar circulation by organizations of amateurs that US radio programs of the 30s through the 50s survived at all (Patterson 2016). And many of them remain locked away still, buried in uncatalogued audio-visual collections in scattered archives, quietly decaying on long-outdated tape stock – though a few recent initiatives promise to do much to correct this neglect and open up the US archive to scholars around the world, as discussed below.

Public service broadcasters typically did far more to encourage critical review of radio programs – as, for instance, in the long-running BBC publication *The Listener* – and made greater efforts to archive their work and preserve their history, but often found themselves faced with economizing imperatives and unfortunate administrative decisions. However, public broadcasters were also more apt to revive and re-circulate their archival programs, a practice that many have now made routine and broadly accessible via digital sites. To give just one example, besides supporting its own radio drama and documentary traditions even after the advent of television, the BBC has done more to keep historical American radio drama alive than any US broadcaster, frequently offering new interpretations of classic American soundwork and providing an internationally-accessible platform for listeners to hear them<sup>1</sup>. This points to the fact that, while research tends to concentrate on national radio traditions, transnational flows of audio influence and culture have existed since the earliest days and can be found in the archives.

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1 | BBC Radio Four Extra, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4extra>.

## INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Radio studies is by nature interdisciplinary. It attracts scholars from a range of different fields, studying radio through diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. Rather than attracting a clearly defined group of 'radio scholars' per se, radio can often be a focal point for academics who see themselves primarily as belonging in other areas. Although there are some institutional places housing a more substantial group of radio scholars, such as the Centre for Media History at Macquarie University in Sydney, in most cases studying radio can be an individual pursuit with few local colleagues.

To illustrate the interdisciplinary aspect of radio scholarship we undertook an audit of a sample of recent scholarship published in the *Radio Journal*, mapping the different methodological approaches used and different academic disciplines involved. The aim of this research is to measure the interdisciplinarity (in both volume and range) that characterizes current radio studies. *Radio Journal*'s current co-editors are based in the USA and in Australia, one with a research background based in Journalism, the other in Media Studies, reflecting the journal's international and interdisciplinary aspirations. Writing in the introduction to the first issue in 2003, the founding editor Ken Garner acknowledged this agenda in choosing a title that includes nods to radio, audio, broadcast and international studies. "A mischievous reading of our full title could suggest we want to have our cake and eat it too. [...] A critic might comment that we are not so much sitting on the fence, as trying to face all four points of the compass simultaneously" (Garner 2003: 5). *Radio Journal* publishes two issues per year featuring approximately six new articles in each. The sample we selected for study included all 57 original articles (editorials, book reviews and conference reports were excluded) published in the journal over a five-year period (2012-2016), which covered the editorial changeover from former editor Tim Wall to the current team of Hilmes and Lindgren.

Reading articles, identifying their methodologies and nominating academic disciplines is inevitably a subjective and somewhat arbitrary process. This is further complicated by the hybrid nature of all media (especially in a digital era) and the diverse origins of media and communications as a broad topic of scholarship, which differs greatly from institution to institution and from country to country. For example, here psychoanalysis is counted as a methodology, but for some academics and institutions it is a field unto itself. Similarly, radio studies and screen studies are counted as distinct disciplines, but for some scholars they are more routinely thought of as sub-sets of media, cultural or literary studies programs. (Never mind the additional debate about what to call a field of study in the first place.)

We attempted to counter-balance the subjective nature of this approach in a number of ways. Firstly, since the premise of this audit was to assess the extent

of radio studies' interdisciplinary nature, the articles were tagged with as many disciplines (e.g. media studies and education) or methodological approaches (e.g. psychoanalysis and focus groups) as were applicable. Secondly, we gave precedence to the methodological and disciplinary contexts explicitly self-identified by the authors themselves, in the body of the article, in their biographies and author-provided keywords, and implicitly identified in literature reviews, theoretical frameworks and list of references.

The articles primarily fell into two or more of the following broad disciplinary categories: radio studies, media studies, journalism, critical/cultural studies (including studies of popular music, gender, and race), historical studies, education and communications. Other disciplines identified included linguistics, management, economics and commerce, and psychology.

| DISCIPLINES               | TOTALS |
|---------------------------|--------|
| RADIO STUDIES             | 32     |
| MEDIA STUDIES             | 31     |
| OTHER                     | 11     |
| HISTORICAL STUDIES        | 11     |
| CRITICAL/CULTURAL STUDIES | 10     |
| COMMUNICATIONS            | 8      |
| JOURNALISM                | 7      |
| EDUCATION                 | 4      |
| GRAND TOTAL               | 114    |

*Table 1: Overview of the most common disciplinary categories of articles published in the Radio Journal 2012-2016.*

The methodological approaches present in the sample encompass quantitative analysis (varied); historical analysis (mostly involving new archival research); qualitative methodologies comprising one-on-one interviews, focus-groups, surveys and case studies; studies of production practices including practice-based research, participant observation and media ethnography; studies of content and aesthetics including psychoanalysis, textual analysis (close study of a radio program, podcast or their para-texts<sup>2</sup>), content analysis (study of phenomena across a large sample of texts); and other analytical approaches self-identified by the authors but unique to their article including 'self-ethnography', 'cluster analysis' and 'website audit'. 'Media analysis (general)' was used to identify extensive critical analysis of radio industries, aesthetics, audiences

**2** | Para-texts includes all associated extra-texts interconnected with a primary text (eg press-releases, websites, social media, fan media etc).

and social contexts which was not based on new empirical data or close study of content.

| METHODOLOGIERS/APPROACHES | TOTALS |
|---------------------------|--------|
| INTERVIEWS                | 29     |
| MEDIA ANALYSIS (GENERAL)  | 15     |
| QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS     | 9      |
| TEXTUAL ANALYSIS          | 8      |
| CASE STUDIES              | 8      |
| HISTORICAL ANALYSIS       | 7      |
| FOCUS GROUPS              | 6      |
| SURVEYS                   | 6      |
| OTHER                     | 5      |
| CONTENT ANALYSIS          | 5      |
| PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH   | 5      |
| DISCOURSE ANALYSIS        | 4      |
| PSYCHOANALYSIS            | 4      |
| MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY         | 4      |
| PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION   | 3      |
| SELF-ETHNOGRAPHY          | 1      |
| GRAND TOTAL               | 119    |

Table 2: list of methodological approaches identified in studies published in the *Radio Journal* 2012-2016.

The audit also captured authors’ institutional affiliations and country location, which provide a sense of the geographic distribution of research. It clearly demonstrates the preponderance of scholarship emerging from the UK and Australia, followed by the US, Spain and Italy, as illustrated by the table below. This raises questions about where studies of radio from other countries are published, particularly those from non-English speaking countries and which strategies can be employed to support more linguistically and geographically diverse scholarship in international journals such as the *Radio Journal*. These are important questions for the community of radio scholars to explore further.

| COUNTRIES   | TOTAL |
|-------------|-------|
| UK          | 19    |
| GRAND TOTAL | 69    |

| COUNTRIES          | TOTAL     |
|--------------------|-----------|
| AUSTRALIA          | 17        |
| USA                | 9         |
| SPAIN              | 4         |
| ITALY              | 3         |
| CHINA              | 2         |
| DENMARK            | 2         |
| GERMANY            | 2         |
| IRELAND            | 2         |
| CANADA             | 1         |
| COLUMBIA           | 1         |
| NEW ZEALAND        | 1         |
| PORTUGAL           | 1         |
| SWEDEN             | 1         |
| GREECE             | 1         |
| SCOTLAND           | 1         |
| POLAND             | 1         |
| MALAWI             | 1         |
| <b>GRAND TOTAL</b> | <b>69</b> |

*Table 3: list of authors' institutional affiliations and country location for articles published in the Radio Journal 2012-2016.*

Authors and their affiliations were weighted equally, regardless of co-authorships. It is noteworthy that the majority of articles are single-authored. Only one article had more than two authors, having emerged out of a large cross-European research project with ten authors from ten different institutions and eight countries. This article titled "Radio formats and social media use in Europe – 28 case studies of public service practice" was excluded from the final tally because it was a singular phenomenon; however, it is worth noting its significance in the context of this book identifying the relevance of transnational research of radio. The very fact that it is an outlier is perhaps indicative of the need to encourage more large-scale transnational collaborations.

Based on a selection of articles from only one English-language journal, this sample is in no way comprehensive. It does not, for example, include research being published in book form, as conference papers, in other dedicated radio and broadcast journals, in non-dedicated media and communication journals (where one might presume a high degree of interdisciplinarity) and of course, in audio form (since some researchers are also practitioners). It is, how-

ever, a large sample of new research published in one of the very few dedicated peer-reviewed international journal platforms for radio-related scholarship. It includes 57 articles by more than 65 different authors working across more than 50 institutions and 20 countries. As such it is an indicative sample of the interdisciplinary nature of the field of study and the variety of methodological practices scholars employ in pursuing their study of radio. It also illustrates the individual nature of writing about radio, with the lion's share of articles single-authored. Some recent European collaborations point to the potential for joint transnational research approaches; however, judging from scholarship in *Radio Journal* over the past five years, this has not been common practice.

## TRANSNATIONALIZING RADIO HISTORY: METHODS AND TOOLS

New digital archives are opening up the borders of radio studies like never before. Though still in their early stages, digital sound sites that not only preserve radio heritage but make transnational access an immediate, casual event (compared to arduous visits to physical archives still largely necessary) have provoked ambitious, large-scale projects that further promise to place sound on an equivalent status as visual evidence in world cultural history. The LARM Radio Research Archive in Denmark (Statsbiblioteket, n.d.), the Radio Preservation Task Force in the US (Library of Congress, n.d.), the pan-European Europeana Sounds project (Europeana Sounds, n.d.) are just a few projects aimed at preserving and making accessible sound histories formerly locked behind national and institutional walls. Other digital innovations highlight the perseverance of contemporary radio as a live, streaming medium, such as the recently-launched *Radio Garden*<sup>3</sup> featuring a clickable globe that allows access to current broadcasts around the world. And taking advantage of the visual materiality that digital platforms add to sound media, *Radio Atlas*<sup>4</sup> brings us something long desired by radio scholars and listeners everywhere: carefully crafted subtitled radio, translating radio programs produced in various languages into English, as their original sound plays on digital screens. As more cross-translations occur, this gives us for the first time the ability to hear an original production while being able to understand its meaning. It also begins to open up radio and soundwork to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community, an enormous social contribution.

The field of radio scholarship is clearly changing. In terms of outlets for publication, until recently only two academic journals existed that focused spe-

3 | <http://radio.garden/>

4 | <http://www.radioatlas.org/>



cifically on radio-centered research: the Radio Journal (founded in 2003 by the UK-based Radio Studies Network, now a part of the Media, Communications, and Cultural Studies Association of the UK [MeCCSA]) and the Journal of Radio & Audio Media (founded in 1992 as the Journal of Radio Studies, a publication of the US-based Broadcast Education Association). Two recent online open-access journals have appeared dedicated to analyses of radio and audio forms: RadioDocReview critiquing radio documentaries/podcasts and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) publication *Radio, Audio and Society*. Increasing literacy about radio production is encouraged through online websites and resources dedicated to understanding radio production, eg. HowSound's (PRX, 2017) podcast about radio storytelling and website portals like Transom.org (Transom, n.d.) providing useful how-to guides to production as well as critical analyses of productions. Traditionally print-based outlets such as New York Times and other print/online publications are turning to audio to innovate and expand to new audiences. They recognise the power of hearing stories told in audio forms and the growing interest in audio as premium communication platform:

There's something about audio: a growing trend in media, it offers the distinctive intimacy of hearing journalists and others giving voice to their findings, opinions and experiences. (New York Times, 2017)

According to the British Library's Future of Radio report (2016), radio listening remains steady and has not been affected as intensely as have audiences for the digitally disrupted newspaper, television and music industries (British Library 2016: 8). Furthermore, the experts consulted for the 2016 report believe this trend will continue with no major reduction in consumption of speech and music programming in the next 20 years (British Library 2016: 8).

As outlined in the audit above, studies of a single national space have dominated recent submissions to the Radio Journal, but it is significant that in our special issue on podcasting (April 2016), a far more transnational approach applied across the majority of work published. However, there is much still to be discovered by deep focus on national audio cultures and institutions, as exhibited particularly well in Enric Castelló and Marta Montagut's 2015 article on *Documentos RNE*, a documentary series on Spanish National Radio that uses archival radio elements to construct – and to challenge – national memory of historical events (Castelló and Montagut 2015: 5–21). Such a meta-historical approach to radio history – critically re-examining the radio archive and re-articulating it to current concerns and interpretations – provides an example of a research method that is at once national and transnational: it reveals deep meanings in a specific national media culture while providing an example of how such an analytical approach can be used by researchers in other national

and institutional situations. Other researchers focus on ways of analysing the persistent ephemerality of the radio experience, such as Katrine Pram-Nielsen and Jacob Kreutzfeldt's interrogation of newly-accessible digital archives to provide insights into a moment of live radio experimentation in London in 1998. Combining an analysis of archival metadata itself, alongside preserved memories and recordings of never-repeated community events in sound, their research provides a model for a new way of connecting the cultural space of radio to the study of the past (Nielsen and Kreutzfeldt 2016: 159-175). Physical events can evoke transnational experience as well, as Zita Joyce explores in her article on the way that community radio stations responded to the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquakes of 2010 and 2011, illuminating radio's frequently crucial role in emergency situations around the globe (Joyce 2015: 57-73). While such articles may focus on a particular national or regional context, they highlight essential qualities of radio's cultural and social roles that apply across traditions and borders. Their chosen methodologies, shared with a transnational community of scholars, help to build a toolbox of critical methods long lacking in this neglected field. Further, by their emphasis on the processes and conditions of sound-based communication – the semiotic flexibility, ephemerality, and time-based 'live' nature of radio broadcasting that persists into the digital age – they point to the necessity of innovating new ways to understand and to study radio as it exists today.

## NEW PRACTICE PATHWAYS TO THE STUDY OF RADIO AND INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES

One of the most notable developments in the pedagogy of radio and sound-work is the increase of practice-led (also referred to as practice-based) research frameworks that may provide potential future pathways for the field. In Australia, practice-led PhDs in the humanities have been growing fast, with an 80 per cent increase in enrollment in Australian universities between 1997 and 2007 (Adams et al, 2015). This movement builds on a recent definition by the Australian Research Council of what constitutes research:

Research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative. (Australian Research Council 2015: 3)

Along these lines, students can opt to generate research by producing in-depth radio and audio pieces, accompanied by an exegesis where the practical component is critiqued and analyzed within a relevant theoretical content.

This growing interest in practice-led Masters and PhD studies indicates that we might see the next generation of radio and sound scholars adopt more diverse forms of scholarly work. In the US, Northwestern University in Chicago has recently introduced a Masters program in Sound Arts and Industries, the first new sound-based graduate program to emerge in decades, emphasizing both practice and research. Older graduate programs, mostly in Journalism schools, have revamped their radio and audio curriculum to keep up with renewed student interest in the field.

In Australia, development of a recognized research assessment framework has opened the research door for scholars and students wanting to explore radio by combining practice and theoretical analysis, where the production of radio documentaries, for example, becomes a site for exploration as well as a non-text based platform for sharing research (Lindgren 2014). The incorporation of practice as a recognized aspect of research in Australia was strengthened and articulated in the 2015 research statement by the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA) stating,

Journalism practice is the process by which information is independently researched, gathered, analysed, synthesised and published, or by which innovative approaches to journalism are developed. The Excellence in Research for Australia framework (ERA) acknowledges in-depth, original journalism practice and publication as equivalent to traditional research outputs. (JERAA, 2017)

The Australian example is not, however, uncomplicated for radio studies. The above statement covers journalism but, as highlighted in the audit of 57 Radio Journal articles presented above, journalism is not one of the most common disciplinary lenses used in radio research. To complicate the situation in Australia further, the research assessment framework separates the study of journalism and creative arts on one side from communication, media and cultural studies on the other through different research codes. This type of research assessment exercise is well-known to scholars in the UK (although with a different model from Australia), where it is referred to as Research Excellence Framework (REF).

This administratively-created separation between research fields in Australia and elsewhere becomes a sorting mechanism for how research performance is assessed and ranked. The assessment is important for individual scholars and for institutional reputation, affecting the ability to attract research funding within a particular field. Furthermore, the Australian research framework splits studies and practice, locating practice-led work in journalism and creative arts with its provisions for recognizing practice as research, whereas the most relevant field for radio studies, media studies, does not commonly include practice-led research in its research assessment. These disparities clearly point

to a need for more transnational conversation about radio's place in the evolving academic universe, particularly in post-graduate instruction and training.

## CONCLUSION

Although the Australian example above is nation-based, it does highlight more generally some of the challenges faced by a field of study dispersed across disciplines and methodologies, particularly in a rapidly changing media ecology. It also reminds us of the value of creating and maintaining strong scholarly networks and publishing opportunities that encourage interdisciplinary and multi-modal studies of soundwork. It prompts us to reflect on what we understand radio studies to be and how we imagine the field of study might develop in a fast-moving media environment. How can we continue to develop the field? What mechanisms are required to support a vibrant radio studies field in a fragmented and changing environment? Rather than diminishing in popularity, radio, always the most versatile of media, continues to showcase agility in adapting to change. The podcasting boom is one example, illustrating a growing interest in forms of audio narratives from audiences, practitioners and scholars. It appears radio is holding strong, assisted by digital technologies making radio and audio content sharable to transnational listeners. This chapter has suggested that despite the obstacles, there is plenty of potential for radio scholars to utilise this changing environment to undertake innovative transnational and cross-institutional research that can extend our knowledge of this dynamic medium.

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