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Keeler, Amanda R., "Radio Research as Critical Archival Studies: Cross-Sector Collaboration and the Sound Record" (2019). *College of Communication Faculty Research and Publications*. 527.
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Radio Research as Critical Archival Studies: Cross-Sector Collaboration and the Sound Record

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Radio studies occupies an unusual position within film and media studies. As *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* Editor, Anne MacLennan (2016) has noted, the area is often recognized as a euphemism for media history. It’s a small sub-discipline that has already been legitimated, yet at the same time has difficulty maintaining visibility within broader media studies discourses. Fewer graduate programs are supporting radio or media history research, with notable exceptions, leading to fewer media historians rising to replace a previous generation that has recently retired. But the work continues and has undergone several recent changes. Radio studies often receives the most traction when it’s associated with contemporary debates in media research, such as sound studies, or as Michelle Hilmes has proposed (Hilmes, 2013), further unification of sound analyses into categories such as “sound work.” This strategy has experienced some degree of success. National conferences such as the Society of Cinema and Media Studies have recently recognized multiple sound-based

and history projects with major awards, and radio researchers are well recognized by colleagues working on television and digital media.

As media studies continues to mature as a discipline, scholars have realized that there's an incomplete record of the object of study. A relatively new field, media studies is still without, for example, a comprehensive sense of how media has been utilized by producers outside of the highly gate-kept world of advertising-sponsored production. And for that matter, though recent books by Vancour ([2018](#)), Stamm ([2016](#)), and Socolow ([2016](#)) have helped to clarify these questions, there is still much to write on the origins of research and development practices, production cultures pre-1970, or how mass media developed its economy of scale. Radio studies has embraced a discipline-clarifying role, and it's possible to imagine a revival of media history research in the near future.

Radio as an Area of Research in Critical Archival Studies

Perhaps the biggest spike in interest has come from outside of media studies itself. Over the past five years radio studies has especially experienced growth across public and federal sectors. Radio recordings turn out to be largely nontheatrical, meaning that they represent important, previously unexamined sources of civic, social, cultural, and political history. Institutions focused on preserving and making available U.S. cultural history have begun to look to sound to fill in gaps in the 20th century record. The Library of Congress Radio Preservation Task Force (RPTF) has become a decentralized clearing house for this work, serving as an intermediary between media studies and public institutions. Mandated in 2013 by then National Recording Preservation Board Chair Sam Brylawski, based upon recommendations in the National Recording Preservation Plan, the RPTF is essentially a federal project populated by academic researchers working to support the political economy of preservation. Its first director, eminent media historian Christopher Sterling, advocated for decades that radio receive federal recognition, and it's thanks to his pioneering scholarly and political work that the project exists. Calling upon a constellation of close to 300 professors and archivists, the RPTF is organized to support media studies by locating and making sound (and sometimes televisual) texts available for public and academic research. The RPTF is organized as a horizontalized quorum structure, in which experts in major areas of media studies and information science work together to identify consensus on areas of deficiency in research. Its large repository of scholars helps archives to write, apply for, and obtain grants, while increasing demand for archival preservation by developing new curricular materials from recently digitized materials, which are deposited into a big data interface that also contains results from an ongoing national survey of collection-level radio collection descriptions.

As we wrote about in the last special issue (Keeler, Shepperd, & Sterling, [2016](#)), sound history is cultural history, and gender, race, orientation, and labor experiences are regularly found on call-in shows, journalistic recordings, and talk formats. These formats have made radio preservation and access an intriguing opportunity to support debates in cultural studies, political economy, and memory studies, a point well-highlighted by Jennifer Stoever's recent work (Stoever, [2016](#)). If we take access debates seriously, we find that important events caught by radio broadcasts reveal political, aesthetic, activist, and interpersonal histories otherwise not accounted for by the historical record. As RPTF Director, Josh Shepperd has recently written (Shepperd, [2018](#)), understanding radio as an underrepresented historical archive provides a promising subdiscipline of cultural theory, visibility, and critical archival studies research. Additionally, radio's new association with the critical archival studies landscape makes it a promising avenue for coalitional work. One doesn't have to be scholar to care about media preservation, which has led to a series of collaborative projects across academic, federal, public, and private sectors.

The consequence has been that we are beginning to clarify all of the related steps necessary to transform archival collections into canonized, curricular materials. Without going into too much detail here, the act of

preservation includes identification, cataloging, cleaning, and testing the objects, obtaining permission and planning for possible cease and desist letters for publicly available materials, building digital humanities interfaces, maintaining those interfaces, and making preserved materials available, including raising awareness that the materials exist. Then, if a project is lucky, preserved materials end up in dissertations, classrooms, and public memory. Every single one of the bracketed areas above represents a distinct, fully formed sector in the academic, public, private, archival, or federal sectors. Radio preservation, and for that matter all unconventional object preservation, requires a huge amount of collaboration and development of political will.

The pieces collected for this issue address the research and logistical management of preserving and understanding the cultural history of sound. Articles discuss digital dilemmas of storage, the historiographical lenses in researching sound history, and understanding the steps necessary in preventing the losses of cultural memory that concern so many. The issue has provided a space for junior scholars to describe research projects in process, giving a glimpse into the future of radio studies. Pieces detail the relationship between radio as object of study, and the stewarding work that academic researchers are going to have to conduct over the next several decades if we're to preserve cultural history.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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