

THE FUTURE OF CBC'S PAST: CBC RADIO ARCHIVES¹

By Ernest J. Dick

Introduction:

In 1970, the *ARSC Journal* (Vol II, No. 2/3) published an important article on broadcast preservation within the English network of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Robin Woods summarized the current status of preservation within the CBC, and made an eloquent and compelling appeal for the development of systematic program archives at the CBC. I returned to this article many times in my work as an archivist with the Sound Archives at the National Archives of Canada. Both its vision and its invaluable information on radio archives were useful and inspiring.

Most recently, I have had occasion to revisit this article again in my assignment at the CBC to do a review of the current status of CBC archiving. My report entitled "The Future of the CBC's Past" attempts to carry on in 1990 what Robin Woods began in 1967. My task is inherited from Robin Woods, clearly the CBC's first archival conscience, and I am proud to be continuing the work that he began.

This article will take the component of the CBC broadcast heritage of greatest concern to ARSC members, its radio archives, and bring readers up to date on its development. It was prompted by a positive response to the audio presentation to the joint IASA/ARSC/CAML conference in Ottawa in May 1990.

Two parallel and complementary developments have occurred at CBC Radio Archives over the past 2 years. First, the functions and legitimacy of Radio Archives have become more closely integrated into radio programming. Budget streamlining has forced this, but the increasing reliance of programmers on archival material has facilitated it. Secondly, a relationship has developed with the National Archives of Canada with public research access and permanent archival preservation of CBC's sound heritage becoming their responsibility. This article will not chronicle all the steps in this evolution, but rather describe the current status of the preservation of CBC English radio programming in Canada.

Programming Use of CBC Radio Archives:

Programming use of CBC Radio Archives consistently has been increasing over the past 20 years with every expectation that it will only grow further in the future. Radio Archives responded to 958 requests in 1974, that figure quadrupling to 3,909 requests in 1988-89. This number then increased by 40 percent in 1989-90 with

5,473 items supplied to requesters. Radio Archives staff, indeed, wonder if these trends will continue and what coming years have in store for them.

Retrospective documentary programs have always caused heavy use of Radio Archives and CBC Radio continues to generate such documentaries. In recent years these retrospective documentaries have been placed within omnibus series such as "Sunday Morning" and "The House" rather than as separate programs such as "Between Ourselves" and "Identities." Recently, a classic historic documentary, "Art Holmes - Bombchaser," about the CBC's overseas broadcast recording unit's heroics during the London blitz, was broadcast within Peter Gzowski's 21 May 1990 "Morningside."

The CBC's 50th anniversary in 1986 stimulated extensive use of Radio Archives material, including the release of a boxed set of records chronicling the twentieth century. Subsequently, individual stations, radio personalities, and long-running programs have been celebrating anniversaries that call for examples of past programming. The events of World War II are now undergoing their 50th anniversaries and the extensive war recordings held by CBC Radio Archives are being used for this programming. Even CBC television prepared a 50th anniversary documentary on the CBC news service, which was broadcast on 1 January 1991. The end of the 1980s prompted a flurry of requests, and one can expect the end of the century to stimulate even more nostalgic celebrations and critical rethinking of our history.

Archivists are naturally delighted with the growing interest in their holdings. It is understandable that as our society matures and our population grows older the interest in our heritage will broaden and accelerate. Also, radio now has entered its eighth decade and has come to be accepted as part of our history. Radio programming is becoming bolder and more confident in examining its own legacy as part of our twentieth century experience.

However, CBC Radio Archives staff has not increased over the past 20 years with the painful result that resources are being diverted from cataloguing to serving requests for research. A growing proportion of the collection remains uncatalogued, and therefore access relies upon knowledgeable and experienced people who can respond to a producer's needs.

Cooperative Projects with Public Archives:

The CBC made extensive use of the instantaneous disc recording technology from the late thirties through the mid-sixties. The first event that was recorded comprehensively as broadcast was the royal visit in the spring of 1939. The CBC was outfitted with state-of-the-art broadcast recording technology for the occasion and this gave the CBC a head-start in covering World War II. A hastily convened Overseas Broadcast Unit travelled to Britain with the first troop ship. Their recordings of London under-siege during the Blitz became the classic sound recordings of bombs falling and exploding, reappearing in innumerable documentaries, films, and even within reporting by other reporters and news agencies.

The CBC generated many thousands of these disc recordings for time-delay broadcast, as field recordings for subsequent broadcast, and for preservation purposes. A significant proportion were recycled, lost or broken, but some 62,000 survived to represent a broad cross section of network broadcasting from the 1940s through the 1960s. Live programming such as news rarely was recorded, but children's programming and drama more frequently were retained because of their

rebroadcast potential. These soft-cut original recordings constituted the heart of the CBC Radio Archives collection for many years, but their vulnerability was obvious and troubling to staff and sound archivists.

By the mid-seventies a collaborative project had been developed with the National Archives of Canada. Its purpose was the transfer of the disc collection for permanent preservation to the temperature and humidity controlled facilities of the National Archives. The World War II reports were the first to be transferred because of the fragility of the discs, some of which were paper-based and in very real danger of catastrophic failure. These were followed by radio drama programming on disc, largely because of the research interest stimulated by Concordia University's radio drama research project and also because this programming rarely was required urgently for rebroadcast. Subsequently, a tape transfer project was developed and programmes of reuse potential were copied to tape before transfer to the National Archives. By the spring of 1989 the entire disc collection had been transferred to the National Archives in Ottawa.

Acetate 1/4-inch audio tape was in common use throughout the 1950s and 1960s and consequently much of CBC's radio programming from these eras is held on this medium. This tape now has grown brittle with splices often letting go when playback is attempted. Radio Archives has therefore begun a selective copying project whereby programming liable for immediate reuse is transferred to Digital Audio Tape (DAT). The original acetate tape is then transferred to the National Archives.

CBC Radio Archives needs to catalogue its holdings in considerable detail to facilitate ongoing programming use. This level of descriptive cataloguing also can be useful for the researchers in using public archives. Consequently, joint computer cataloguing is being explored between the CBC Radio Archives and the Moving Image and Sound Archives Division of the National Archives. Radio Archives staff are already doing computer description on diskette for tapes being transferred to the National Archives. Ideally, the creation of an interface between the National Archive's Moving Image and Sound Archives database (MISACS) and the Radio Archives' database (RAPIDS) would allow for cataloguing at either institution to be shared, thus making the current duplication of effort unnecessary.

Current Activities:

Radio Archives acquires network radio programming by requisitioning airchecks as network programming is broadcast, or by acquiring program masters, or selected network programming. In the financial year 1988-89, 4,935 programs were acquired. These represent 6,500 hours or 48 percent of all programming broadcast on the CBC Radio and CBC Stereo networks. All news, current affairs, drama and documentary programming is retained in its entirety. Music performance programming usually is acquired, but musical programs which consist of commercially-released recordings are only sampled. All programs on both the Radio (AM) and Stereo (FM) networks are sampled at least once annually to preserve samples of the flavour and rhythm of the total mix of CBC programming.

CBC Radio Archives cataloguing provides for the documenting of all speakers heard and subjects discussed within segments of programs. This computer system, RAPIDS, is still in its final stages of development and already has some 11,000 records in the database, 3,000 of which represent fully catalogued programs. Moreover, approximately 26 percent of the uncatalogued programs are accessible through

program logs which come directly from the production departments and are transferred from the electronic mail system into the database. Also, the CBC Radio network is developing a computer system, PROLOG, to log and monitor all programming. This could make programming selected for permanent retention by Radio Archives immediately accessible for future programming purposes, but final design has not been completed and implementation is at least two years away.

CBC Radio has made a commitment to the DAT format for broadcasting and is equipping every facility across the country with this technology. Radio Archives therefore acquires most of its current acquisitions on digital cassettes. The advantages of the digital format for Radio Archives are dramatic with respect to:

- space savings: 12 DAT cassettes each with two hours of broadcast quality recording occupying the same space as a single hour on a 10 1/2-inch reel).
- reduced costs: a two hour DAT cassette cost \$15 versus the \$50 cost for the equivalent quantity of analogue tape.
- improved access to extracts within a recording: provided through coding of DAT cassettes.
- no loss in audio quality when copying from generation to generation and elimination of the potential of print-through.

CBC Radio Archives has fewer apprehensions about the longevity of the digital formats than conventional sound archives. CBC is a broadcaster that must respond quickly to changing technological realities, and Radio Archives have fought long and hard to be outfitted with the state-of-the-art digital technology.

Reference or production copies requested from older formats are made onto DAT, although the original always is retained. Radio Archives also has invested in the Sonic Solutions audio restoration to be used for frequently requested archival extracts such as Matthew Halton's World War II reports, the 1927 Diamond Jubilee broadcast, the Hindenberg disaster, and the Moose River Mine disaster. The Sonic Solutions process also is being used as required by producers for their particular programming purposes. The original recording is always retained, either at Radio Archives or transferred to the National Archives of Canada for permanent preservation.

Current Challenges:

Regional Radio —

In addition to its AM and FM networks, CBC Radio also provides regional programming through 33 English regional radio production centres across Canada. Many do seven hours per day of information programming in the 6-9 a.m., 12-2, and 4-6 p.m. time periods, as well as weekly performing arts programming. This programming reflects life in communities across Canada and discusses issues and events that commercial radio never broaches. Very little of this programming is systematically retained. Individual producers often retain the programming that they want to reuse and are proudest of but this is very random and inconsistent. Stations CBO in Ottawa and CBE in Windsor have developed systematic acquisition processes, but most retain very little of their programming. The CBC Radio Archives is open to receiving such collections, but has no resources to keep abreast of all such programming or to actively solicit programming which warrants preservation.

Provincial and regional archives in St. John's, Halifax, Fredericton, and Regina systematically have been selecting regional programming for permanent preservation in recent years. Also, archives in Victoria, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Yellowknife, Ottawa, Halifax, and St. John's have acquired substantial collections from specific CBC producers.

The archival preservation of CBC regional programming remains an important challenge for sound archivists in Canada. The limited resources of CBC regional facilities, as well as of the sound archives units in provincial and regional archives, severely limit any comprehensive and systematic archival program. Moreover, the quantity of regional programming (52,482 hours of programming in 1988-89) can easily paralyse and overwhelm archival selection efforts. Steps now are being taken to develop policies and procedures so that some regional programming survives and eventually finds its way into archival repositories. This programming documents a fascinating aspect of contemporary society that is not being represented in other media or other documents.

Conservation of audiotape —

The 143,514 1/4-inch audiotapes accumulated by CBC Radio Archives will constitute the next conservation challenge for CBC Radio Archives. Acetate tape has been identified as the immediate priority, but all 1/4-inch tape will become vulnerable as the broadcast industry moves into the digital era and equipment suppliers abandon analogue formats for the new technologies. To address this inevitability, CBC Radio Archives' strategy is to make DAT copies whenever items are requested so that both analogue and digital copies are held for future purposes.

Cataloguing at Radio Archives —


CBC Radio Archives has taken a variety of remedial measures over recent years to redress their lack of cataloguing. They have accumulated program schedules, cue sheets, and any other ancillary documentation that will facilitate accessing the uncatalogued portions of their collections. Also, they have trained regular users of Radio Archives to make efficient use of the variety of finding aids they have accumulated. Moreover, the staff of Radio Archives has remained relatively constant over the years and their impressive knowledge and experience is increasingly being relied upon by programmers. All of these are recognized as stop-gap measures and will not lead to long-term solutions. Cataloguing of a significant proportion of the collection is essential to its long-term utility to programming, as well as for effective public access in public archives.

Conclusion:

CBC Radio Archives and the Moving Image and Sound Archives of the National Archives of Canada have developed a strong working relationship which serves both broadcasters and the public researcher. More resources are needed on both sides and archivists in both institutions will have to be imaginative and assertive in gaining those resources.

Access to the Canadian sound heritage held by CBC Radio Archives and the National Archives of Canada needs to be improved. Partially, this is a function of resources and cooperation between the two institutions. But access is also a function of copyright legislation and the legal uncertainties of Canadian law can inhibit

public access. Copyright legislation is being revised in Canada and will enhance the rights of creators. This tendency does not have to frustrate access, but it could.

CBC network radio production is being relatively well preserved in Canada. We still lament the losses of the past and have to be vigilant that they do not happen in our own time. Nonetheless, we can be relatively confident that future generations will be able to listen to the leading Canadian performers and public figures of the 1990s and to reconstitute the public issues of the day as reflected on CBC Radio. The reflection of Canadian communities as represented by regional CBC Radio, and is not being similarly documented. The preservation of this programming must be one of our most immediate priorities. 

Research Note:

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