

Thurs 3/22 9:00-10:45 E10 The Panel = On the (Re)Death of Radio: Continuities and Changes in Radio in the 21st Century

Contemporary radio includes “new” media in the form of streaming audio that challenges some of the basic principles of traditional broadcasting, principally the idea of live, simultaneous listening. Hangen examines how old time radio enthusiasts and religious broadcasters have engaged with new technologies to create communities centered around non-synchronous listening and accessible archives.

SCMS Spring 2012 "Troubleshooting the Wayback Machine: When Radio Goes Online"

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Internet portals for radio content provide convenient and widely distributed points of access; they bend time and space by extending radio's reach beyond the physical capacity of its signal or the temporal capacity of live broadcasting. Live, simultaneous listening was the hallmark of traditional radio broadcasting, so streaming or archiving radio content online challenges the notion that these are inherent properties to the medium of radio. It also challenges the traditional boundary between radio as a sound-only medium and other kinds of media, which combine sound with still or moving images. Is internet radio, in fact, a fundamentally different kind of radio? Using the internet to access radio content—whether current or vintage—raises new and troublesome issues for radio audiences, collectors or consumers, and scholars. This is especially true for radio programming produced outside the network system or with unpredictable sources of

funding. In this paper I'd like to explore several of those issues and argue that internet radio profoundly alters not only the listening experience, but the possibilities of access to that content for its multiple audiences, including scholars. While the internet seems to make content more available, appearances can be deceiving.

As a way into this topic. I'd like to consider two very different kinds of online radio communities. Both are related by my previous work on radio evangelism in the "golden age" of radio before 1960, and are perhaps not as different as they seem initially. The first is religious radio broadcasting itself, which of course did not die with the advent of television and has warmly adapted itself to the internet. The other is the curious underworld of amateur old-time radio enthusiasts, whose resources I relied upon for my previous study and many of whom now devote themselves to curating online archives of OTR ("Otter") content with near-religious zeal. Although their reasons for being online are very different, as is the kind of content they stream or archive, both of these internet radio communities can help us understand what happens—and what doesn't happen—when radio goes online.

First let's consider the "varieties of religious radio experience" on the internet. Religious broadcasters have long attributed to radio the ability to reach the farthest corner of the globe and draw together far-flung believers in a common faith. This is true no matter what the religion, but radio broadcasting takes on special significance for Christian broadcasters who strive to fulfill the scriptural "Great Commission" to preach the gospel in all the world. For Christians with a strong apocalyptic or end-times bent, radio broadcasting hastens the second coming of Jesus. For Christians who perceive themselves

isolated on islands in a howling wilderness of sin, radio broadcasting demarcates cultural boundaries and serves as both a witness to, and a refuge from, a fallen and immoral world. And for Christians who see life as a great battle between the forces of good and evil, radio broadcasting takes the very institution that seems most to threaten Christian values (i.e. “the media”) and makes it a particularly sharp weapon in that battle. Religious radio broadcasting is as old as the medium, establishing itself even before the network system became entrenched, and can still be found widely on the AM, FM and shortwave dials around the world.

Individual programs, full-blown religious stations, and multinational religious broadcasting networks have a vibrant presence on radio with no sign of diminishing. For Christian radio, one of the oldest is the Moody Broadcasting Network, on the air since 1926. The two largest players in the United States are Dr. James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family* and his affiliated programming, aired on over 2000 radio stations daily,¹ and Salem Communications, which is the 5th-largest owner of radio stations in the country with about 100 stations that together reach a third of the US population.² Salem offers stations in three formats: Christian Teaching and Talk, News/Talk and CCM or Contemporary Christian Music. All three of these leaders in the religious radio industry use the internet extensively to deliver and promote their content. Salem’s stations all have busy, ad-filled webpages with social media networking, live streaming and associated web content like rewards clubs, newsletters, discounts for Christian-owned businesses, and ticket promotions for Christian entertainers. Christian radio programming can also get repackaged as podcasts,

ranging from 60-second news or devotional nuggets, to Bible reading, sermons, magazine-style talk shows and worship services.

Interestingly, Christian broadcasters and media commentators have not only taken notice of these possibilities, but have reflected on them from theological perspectives. The CEO of Dr. D. James Kennedy's Minnesota-based Coral Ridge Ministries (CRM, now called "Truth in Action" ministries³) outlined his organization's media strategy in a 2008 book, *Media Revolution: A Battle Plan to Defeat Mass Deception in America*. Taking note of increasing consolidation in the broadcasting industry, and concluding that mainstream media are overwhelmingly controlled by secularists hostile to Christian fundamentalism who force religious broadcaster into a "ghetto," Brian Fisher writes that the internet can be an important tool for the dissemination of religiously-oriented media content out into the broader culture. Much of this rhetoric is framed in terms of "spreading truth," or "enlightening the world," often with a highly politicized bent that seems intent on mobilizing the political right. CRM's daily half-hour radio program, "Truth That Transforms," features co-host Carmen Pate, the former president of Concerned Women for America and claims to reach 30 million listeners. Recent programs (available online in March 2012) include "Death of the Constitution," "ERA: Alive and Well at the UN," "Atheists in the Classroom," and "Cultural Mandate for God's People"—interspersed with advertisements for the ministry's print publications and opportunities to donate funds to the ministry.⁴

Individual churches, particularly large urban and suburban megachurches, often offer media content online.⁵ To take one example, Briarwood Presbyterian, a megachurch

in Birmingham, Alabama, only produces one or two radio programs of its own (sermons and talks featuring the senior pastor), but it airs round-the-clock programming on its FM station WLJR (Where the Lord Jesus Reigns) from no fewer than 40 different Christian media ministries.⁶ More often, though, the slicker megachurches have created “internet campuses” or .tv channels offering podcasts, video sermons, online services, live chat, and other “Ministry 2.0” features.⁷ Their audio content, whether streamed or “godcasted,” is embedded in richly textured multimedia environments, just as The Word in contemporary, tech-savvy church services is embedded in richly textured multimedia environments including digital screens, Broadway-style voice mikes, multiple cameras, seamlessly produced music and light shows, and mobile connectivity.

Archiving of these highly professional productions is spotty, however. For example, when the Moody Broadcasting Network discontinued its political program “Primetime America” it only archived a few of its shows online, and then only for one year—this, for a program which had been a 2-hour daily drivetime show for 28 years.⁸ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints produces 20 hours of sacred music and sermons in its twice-yearly General Conferences and has been broadcasting them on radio since 1924 (and on television since 1949⁹), but only archives its audio back to the mid-1990s on the Church’s official website. An unofficial Youtube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/LDSGeneralConference>) takes the audio archives back to 1975; before that, recordings exist but are unavailable online.¹⁰ To take another example, the Southern Baptist Convention archives merely a description of the proceedings of its annual meeting and only back to 2000 (the SBC has had an annual meeting since 1845, and

their Historical Library has audiotape recordings back to 1954). The meeting was webcast starting in 2001, but the video links are broken until the 2004 meeting. Leadership balloting and voting, motions from the floor, musical selections, and prayers—all would tell us much about Southern Baptists’ concerns, values, and modes of governance if we had access to recordings and could study them longitudinally.¹¹

Religious radio captures not only the words, which can be represented in a text transcript, but also the subtle and ephemeral linguistic cues like intonation, emphasis, and accent as well as the ambient sound, congregational responses, music and all the elements that enliven a religious community. It is an invaluable window onto religious thought and practice. Access to streaming content and recordings allows scholars to reconstitute worlds of religious meaning. The vast amount of religious audio available online is but a tantalizing hint at what could be, especially as digital storage technology improves and grows less expensive; unlike conventional archiving, digital archiving requires no climate control, takes up no physical space and needs no special playback equipment. Digital media does require conversion to new formats and periodic upgrades so it can be accessed using new browsers and operating systems. The lack of consistent archiving of religious media, despite the increasing use of internet by religious organizations, creates a gap that may leave scholars of religion dying of thirst in an ocean of content.

The problem with old-time radio is somewhat different. Instead of an expanding body of content, the “golden age” of radio is over and its sources are not only finite but were captured with now-obsolete technology or preserved in fragile formats subject to physical disintegration. Migrating old radio content to newer formats, including digital,

rescues them for future enjoyment. Luckily, the community of OTR enthusiasts is large and, in general, lightly commercialized. Archiving old programs online and creating virtual hubs for sharing and selling radio recordings has the curious effect of cataloging and promoting radio itself, the very thing whose transformation (although not disappearance) the internet has hastened.

Popular hubs for OTR enthusiasts include OTRCat, RUSC (“R U Sitting Comfortably?”), The Nostalgia League, and Old-Time.com. All of these collect, archive and sell vintage radio recordings (usually not as original artifacts but as reproductions on cassette tape or CD, or as MP3 downloads). However, they are a part of market-oriented niche online, subject to the laws of supply and demand, and they tend to reflect the idiosyncrasies of their creators and their collections. RUSC is a good example, with a folksy message from founders Ned and Joy Norris who portray their compilation site (no doubt accurately) as a 2-person labor of love and a huge time sink. Their model includes some free access to shows, but relies primarily on a subscription model with unlimited downloads for subscribers. The Nostalgia League’s website is a masterpiece of vintage-1990s animated gifs and Web 1.0 design, and includes an embedded Macromedia flash player radio station “KWTNL” featuring free program streaming in popular categories but no downloading. Old-Time.com is even more cobbled together, offering, several pages deep into the site, only OTR audio “snippets” (<http://www.old-time.com/sndsnp.html>) as either Windows Media Player files or .ram files, necessitating frequent format changes with incongruous pop-up digital screen-savers instead of a seamless listening experience. In addition, when audio-only is displayed online in a player or uploaded to interactive sites

like YouTube, radio content can be altered or shaped by the addition of accompanying visual images (since users expect to "see something" while listening). Such creations offer a sometimes-dissonant listening/viewing experience which provides opportunities for critical reading of the resultant hybrid cultural products.

In the case of religious radio, portals like ChristianRadio.com, Islam Radio, and the Mormon Channel help internet listeners experience global faith communities or even cross denominational lines. Nodes for OTR enthusiasts bring together collectors, listeners and self-proclaimed radio geeks while potentially introducing new generations of listeners to the sounds of the nation's past. The internet provides remarkably cheap and accessible avenues for delivering radio content and allows users to create digital-only stations with no need for FCC licenses or special broadcasting equipment. The products of internet radio broadcasters may be, ironically, as poorly archived and difficult to study as live radio was in the pre-internet era. New pages erase old; updates and upgrades push old content offline; digital content holds the illusion of permanence but in reality degrades rather unpredictably. Online markets help OTR fans find each other and their favorites, and crowdsourcing will help improve both searching and documentation, but radio doesn't receive the attention that either book or film preservation and digitization projects have.

What might these somewhat scattered examples suggest about the state, or the future, of internet radio, either for its producers, its consumers, or its scholars? For one thing, as David Hendy suggests in *Radio in the Global Age*, the broadcasting industry's categories (microbroadcaster, "national" radio, "format" radio) are complicated and undercut by internet radio. The rule of scarcity has long governed the number of

broadcasters and stations in a market, although radio has had the long tail of low-power and pirate stations on its side. But with internet radio, the number of outlets is not limited by the electromagnetic spectrum; it is infinite and very imperfectly regulated. Hendy also notes that while the *promise* of internet radio is the triumph of digital Davids over megacorporate Goliaths, the *reality* already favors larger players and the internet may yet become more consolidated, echoing what has happened in broadcasting more generally.¹²

This raises both exciting opportunities and worrying outlooks for scholars and listeners scouring the online “airwaves.” There is no easy way to search for audio content online (images and video get their own Google categories, along with Books, Shopping, and Patents), although audio and video are (somewhat indiscriminately) both collated on video-sharing sites like YouTube. There is also no standard format for online audio content; .mpeg, .wav, .mp3, .wma, .ogg and others all coexist and sometimes require the user to download or install special playback software. There’s no clear crowdsourcing spot. Video is to YouTube as images are to Flickr as radio is to, what?? Perhaps we need, and digital humanists or the proposed SCMS Radio Studies scholars group may yet do something towards creating, a digital audio commons.

Indulge me in a thought experiment to close my comments today, as I move from manifesto to pure futuristic fantasy. The media scholar of the future searches for digital sound files with the ease of text or image searching. Radio content, whether live-streamed or asynchronous, is consistently formatted and thoughtfully archived either on the open web or in the equivalent of scholarly databases, with some reasonable payment model. And wouldn’t it be lovely if those sources could be data-mined like you can with text? I would

love to use the equivalent of Google's N-gram to search across vast swaths of the spoken and sung word. These are promising times for media scholarship, and those of us with an interest in the communities that develop around radio should also take an interest in making sure that the digitized source base is expanding and that we find ways to curate it sustainably online.

¹ *Focus on the Family* is the flagship half-hour broadcast, but FOTF produces a whole lineup of Christian & family-themed programming, including shows for children, singles, pastors, married couples, and a news program "which sheds light on pressing moral and social issues that have an impact on the home." All of them are broadcast on radio and available as podcasts. See "Focus on the Family Shows," http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/broadcasts.aspx, accessed 3/6/12.

² Mariah Blake, "Stations of the Cross: The Rise of Faith-Based News," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 2005, 35; Madison Trammel, "Dollars and Sense: How Salem Communications Makes Its Money," *Christianity Today*, January 26, 2007, 1, <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2007/february/21.32.html>; Adam Piore, "A Higher Frequency: How the Rise of Salem Communications' Radio Empire Reveals the Evangelical Master Plan," *Mother Jones*, December 2005, <http://motherjones.com/print/16286>. See also Salem Communications website, <http://www.salem.cc/RadioFormat.aspx>, accessed 3/6/12. Note, this webpage hasn't been updated since 2007.

³ See <http://www.truthinaction.org/>, accessed 21 March 2012. Their mission statement is a miniature masterpiece of business jargon "Truth in Action Ministries has stepped forward into a bold and passionate direction in order to make biblical worldview actionable."

⁴ See <http://www.truthinaction.org/index.php/radio-new>, accessed 21 March 2012. Robert Glenn Howard, "The Vernacular Ideology of Christian Fundamentalism on the World Wide Web," in *Fundamentalisms and the Media*, ed. Stewart M Hoover and Nadia Kaneva, Religious Studies (New York: Continuum, 2009), 126–141; Brian E. Fisher, *Media Revolution: A Battle Plan to Defeat Mass Deception in America* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Coral Ridge Ministries, 2008). For a more nuanced perspective, see Robert H. Jr. Woods and Paul D. Patton, *Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism* (Brazos Press, 2010).

⁵ With the development of these "internet campuses," to what extent might churches be replicating (or influencing?) online learning environments in for-profit higher education?

⁶ WLJR, "Where the Lord Jesus Reigns" 88.5 FM, <http://briarwood.org/templates/System/details.asp?id=37045&PID=406213>, accessed 3/6/12.

⁷ Examples include West Angeles Church of God in Christ, North Point, Lifeway, Saddleback, Willow Creek, and (the granddaddy of them all) Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church. For a list of megachurches in the US by size, see http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*&sb=3&so=descend, accessed 3/6/12.

⁸ See "Primetime America," http://www.moodyradio.org/brd_ProgramToday.aspx?id=11694, accessed 3/6/12.

⁹ General Conference History, <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/37451/General-Conference-history.html>, accessed 19 March 2012.

¹⁰ Search "AudioVisual" resources of the Church History Library, <http://churchhistorycatalog.lds.org>

¹¹ See <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc01/webcast.asp>, accessed 19 March 2012. Southern Baptist Convention Historical Library and Archives, "AudioVisual Materials: Recordings of oral history interviews with denominational leaders, proceedings of meetings and conventions, sermons, and music are available in this collection. Audiotapes of Southern Baptist Convention meetings date back to 1954." <http://www.sbhla.org/hold.htm>, accessed 19 March 2012.

¹² David Hendy, *Radio in the Global Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 49, 59.