

A New Species of Sound Archive? Adapting to Survive and Prosper
Or
How the BBC is learning to love its Archives
and its Archivists

In May 2007, the 'BBC Sound Archivist' disappeared. So did the Television Archivist and the other three. This was no Agatha Christie plot. Hercule Poirot was not called for. We had become Multi-Media Archivists. I didn't feel very different, and the truth is I usually just call myself a 'BBC Archivist'. Although nothing changed overnight, it was a stage in the evolutionary journey we are undertaking to stay relevant and effective within a large broadcasting organisation which is *itself* seeking to adapt and survive in an ever more complex world.

The title 'Sound Archivist', by the way had only existed since 1999: there were many titles before. I was recently introduced on radio as 'Director of the Sound Archive' and once had a letter addressed to the 'Governor-General' (that was my favourite). It might not matter so very much: our primary function is to create and manage an archive to meet the BBC's needs and obligations. It's what *we have* and *if* and *how* it can be *discovered and used* that will really assure our place, rather than how we, or our archives, are labelled.

My intention is to show how, as Archivists managing the broadcast collections, we have been responding to new demands and expectations from the BBC, referring in particular to our sound collections, I will ask whether a new species of sound archive is evolving or is on the verge of extinction?

Evolving Archives in the BBC

The BBC's archives haven't suddenly started to change of course. In 1994, Information & Archives was formed from the hitherto separate library, archive and information services of the BBC. Since then, under numerous banners and initiatives, the journey has been towards the multi-skilling of staff, especially in research, storage operations, and media managers.

Towards a Multi-Media Archive Group

More recently, in the last few years, the BBC's Archivists (one each for New Media, Television, Sound, Records and historic Written Archives) have largely moved from operational and staff management to form a single Archive Group under a Senior Archivist and with a supporting team of six multi-media Archive Consultants. The Group has joint responsibilities for archival functions such as policy development and compliance, retention, selection, metadata, access and preservation. Whilst we still largely work

within our media specialisms, we are *evolving* a cross-media approach as the continuing demands of our own media areas allow. We are able to build on each other's professional skills: for example we have found the established principles of the document and records management world have much to offer the often in-house developed approaches of the TV and radio archives. An example of this is the adoption of the OAIS digital archive model.

What has changed for the BBC's Archivists since the turn of the century is that the new distribution technologies and the proliferation of digital services have caused the BBC to look upon its archives, *and the skills of the people who manage it* anew. Greater attention also brings greater scrutiny. Questions are asked about policy and processes that have rarely troubled people outside the archives. Some issues such as undigitised collections, or incomplete metadata can be hidden in low-level archive use but are exposed when mass public access either by the new DAB stations or web-based services. It can sometimes be an uncomfortable experience as lights are shone into the archive's dark corners. However, knowing our collections, we also should know the problems and, given the support to do so can help to fix them.

The Wider BBC and the "Creative Future"

In 2005, in a move to transform its structure and activities for the future, the BBC embarked on a series of reviews and strategising under the banner "**The Creative Future**" aiming to set the Corporation on course to be "**Creative, Digital, Simple and Open**"

- **Creative:** to stand out with the quality and range of content
- **Digital:** to be able to create and manage digital content and deliver on demand
- **Simple:** making it easier to get things done in the BBC, reducing bureaucracy, improving working between departments and external partners.
- **Open:** understanding our audiences, public consultations, responding to legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act. Even to sharing more of the BBC with the public: here could be the greatest impact on the Archives.

Undoubtedly, the aim was also to keep the BBC relevant to today and tomorrow's audiences, securing and justifying the Licence Fee funding model and to meet the objective to be at the centre of 'Digital Britain'.

A new shape BBC was unveiled in 2006



In the top-level structure of the BBC, Television, Radio, and the big genre-based divisions - have largely disappeared. What this organisational structural trying to communicate is that content production is driven by interacting with and understanding our audiences. Future Media and Technology surrounds content production providing the technology solutions to, in the words of another current motto, "Find, Play, Share, Transform and Enable".

Archivists have been saying for years, not least at IASA, that *where we are placed* in an organisation is crucial to our ability to be effective within it. The BBC, like many organisations has often never quite known where to put the archives. Less than a year ago we were still in the **Finance, Property and Business Affairs Division**.

To me, this says "Archives cost a lot to store, need big buildings, need too many people to deliver, catalogue and preserve them and we can never make enough money out of them" Sometimes those who have the power and influence have trouble thinking beyond that.

And there's a good chance they are. The new structure saw us move to **Future Media & Technology (FM&T)**. This was more like it! And very strange things started to happen: The Director-General, our CEO, and the head of FM&T started talking about "*Archives*", not for the first time, but much more often. And they said "*Metadata*" and Ashleigh Highfield, the person charged with enabling the BBC to deliver its content said things like:

"Unlocking the Archive is one of our biggest challenges [and] could be one of the richest gifts we can give to this country"

And this

"...we're going to need some awesome metadata"

And this

"I think the time has finally come for metadata... it's always been important, critical even, but poorly understood and appreciated...without great metadata, our programmes simply won't get found in Google...won't get downloaded on iTunes or the BBC's iPlayer."

The man's a metadata maniac! This is the BBC environment to which the Archives must adapt to survive and prosper.

The programme of work to provide the BBC with an enabling infrastructure for the digital environment is the **Digital Media Initiative** (DMI) in which Information & Archives is a key stakeholder and supplier of expertise. DMI aims to join up and integrate the separate activities of audio, video and web content production, re-versioning and distribution. DMI will deliver functionality supporting the lifecycle management of assets, systems for metadata collection and storage to help us identify, search, document and report assets. Not least a very long awaited Digital Archive. Much initial work by the Archive Group focussed on policies and standards, the foundation upon which requirements and technology solutions must be based. It's not an easy ride: technologists and project managers from internal and external partners can demand quick answers to complex issues. Some colleagues are calling DMI 'Don't Mention It'.

Outside the BBC: Getting it Out There

All media organisations, and we as consumers are faced with a bewildering growth in media content. Content is available on many platforms, consumable on many devices outside the constraints of the scheduled broadcast. Choice is apparently infinite - even if quality is not - and the ease of distribution is bringing new competitors to the market: you may be able to *listen* to your favourite *newspaper* via their podcast. I do, and I don't buy the newspaper so often.

The rather over-used mantra was always "content is king". That's true, but it's not the whole story: in the multi-channel world, still relatively new to some of us, we can lose hours of our lives, channel surfing and finding there's nothing there. Life is too short that and I'm not that patient. No wonder TV viewing is declining. To put it another way, **content**, **quality** and **functionality** must go together. The BBC thinks it's got the first two, but it's Google, eBay and Amazon that have the functionality. Ashleigh Highfield again:

"[The BBC] must be experts in functionality, context, navigation and search."

That sounds familiar: databases, cataloguing, classification and indexing. These are all things we have been doing quietly in the BBC for 80 years and are now being discovered at last: we *have* been a patient people!

The Long Tail and BBC Archives

Chris Anderson's 'Long Tail'¹ theory will be familiar to most of us as the *zeitgeist*-capturing model for the internet economy. **Content** *plus* the **means of distribution** *plus* **effective metadata** means the market in music or books is no longer about a few popular 'hit' items or about how much a store can keep on its shelves- but the millions of minority interest and ex-hits than can remain endlessly available as digital objects (or even as physical ones) if they can be discovered and moreover *brought to the attention of the consumer*. It's the Amazon model: Others who bought this, also bought this; if you liked this, you might like this; would you like to see more like this?

¹ Anderson, Chris. *The Long Tail*. Random House. 2006. ISBN 9781844138517

Anderson's "Three Forces of the Long Tail" are an inspiring model for unlocking the archive.

Make it

Get it out there

Help me find it

Unlocking the Archive I: The Catalogue

We may have been cataloguing for many decades, but our catalogues were created for internal BBC use only, and initially for our own librarians. Web interfaces have made our central archive catalogue accessible throughout the BBC, but it took a new attitude to make the decision to make it public. There were reservations: was there any confidential personal information, had a republican cataloguer once written rude comments about the Queen? There was no way of knowing 100%, but it is a sign of a new attitude that it was decided to "publish and be damned", although quietly by a soft launch and spread by word of mouth. Were we even sure there was a public demand for 'just' the metadata? One of the first 'outsiders' to get his hands on the catalogue's raw data was the developer asked to produce a prototype public form. He was so excited he swiftly blogged about it:

Ever wondered what's in that archive? Who looks after it? It turns out there's a huge database that's been carefully tended by a gang of crack BBC librarians for decades. Nearly a million programmes are catalogued, with descriptions, contributor details and annotations drawn from a wonderfully detailed controlled vocabulary. ²

You can find the prototype public version of the BBC's Radio and TV archive catalogue here <http://open.bbc.co.uk/catalogue/infax/>

It is a prototype. It's not pretty, has limited functionality and some data consistency issues in some areas of the collection, but the ethos is "get it out there" and get feedback. We have received thousands of feedback emails, including a number pointing out errors and offering corrections. We must find a way of exploiting, by which I mean *harnessing*, the interest and passion of our audiences.

² Matt Biddulph, www.hackdiary.com (with permission)

Unlocking the Archive II: The BBC Archive Trial

The next stage, currently undergoing a trial is to make large quantities of the Archive available via a web service: the vision is like the BBC's 7-day catch-up services, but more like an 85 *year* catch-up. The trial is making 1000 hours of television and radio content available and enabling discovery. There's BBC context too: even videos of Archivists explaining some the collection histories.

Because of the regulations around launching new BBC services which take into account the value for (public) money and impact on the commercial market, the BBC must operate the trial in a controlled way and undergo a formal 'Public Value Test' at the end. A trial group of 20,000 were selected from many more volunteers the trial will run until December 2007. If it goes ahead as a full service, (and it is a considerable rights and funding '*IF*' to say the least) it will be a major new service from the BBC and a new existence for the BBC's archives, for too long far too inaccessible. Although the major part of the trial is restricted to the 20,000, a section is publicly available at www.bbc.co.uk/archive

Conclusion

Radio is a very successful medium. It is doing well in the digital age so far: DAB in the UK has enabled more services, including two from the BBC based heavily on archive re-use³, and more are listening to streaming audio, and catch-up up services. They are listening through pcs, mp3 players, digital televisions and mobile phones. Radio is strong and the archives are playing their role. And its potential highly valued. I am optimistic for its archives.

So, before we forget the question, if you haven't already, is there a new species of sound archive? Not yet, but we are going there. Multi-media Archivists applying common approaches to the management of digital content is a response to a converging digital world. A broadcasting archive must above all respond to the needs of its parent organisation.

But I am not suggesting we abandon the idea or existence of the Sound Archive. It may not exist in a named building, department or job title, but as a discoverable resource for producers and public alike. It should be found by those actually looking for the Sound Archive, and those falling upon content through serendipity, accident, searching or suggestion. As we have tentatively tried in the Archive Trial, we should surround our content with

³ BBC7 90% of whose schedule comprises archive comedy, drama, readings and panel games; and BBC 6Music which has a remit to exploit the BBC's archive of pop and rock sessions, concerts and related music documentaries and interviews.

context, the story of the Archive – how and why the collection exists, honour its pioneers. Include their voices.

Finally, I want to recall a recording in the Archive of a programme made in 1941 about the work of the Recorded Programmes Department. It features the pioneers of the sound archive. They imagine a visit in 2041 to the World Institute of Recorded History. They arrive by personal helicopter; they walk past the 'Recordings from Mars' section and through the 20th Century Gallery, pausing to remind themselves who that man Hitler was. We are beginning to see elements of that resource now, and should realise that vision – hopefully well before 2041 – but not as a single monumental building, but a monumental resource...perhaps truly "one of the richest gifts we can give to this country." It is not an exaggeration to say it could also be a gift to the world. Rights Clearance permitting, of course.

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IASA Conference, Riga, Latvia. 17th September 2007