

Radio Preservation Task Force Conference: Sound History and the Logistics of Social Recognition

Sounding Out! Authors

Blog post published February 26, 2016 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/7fc3k-czf64>

Abstract

Click to download PDF of Program!

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Conferences, Cultural Studies, Curation, Digital Media

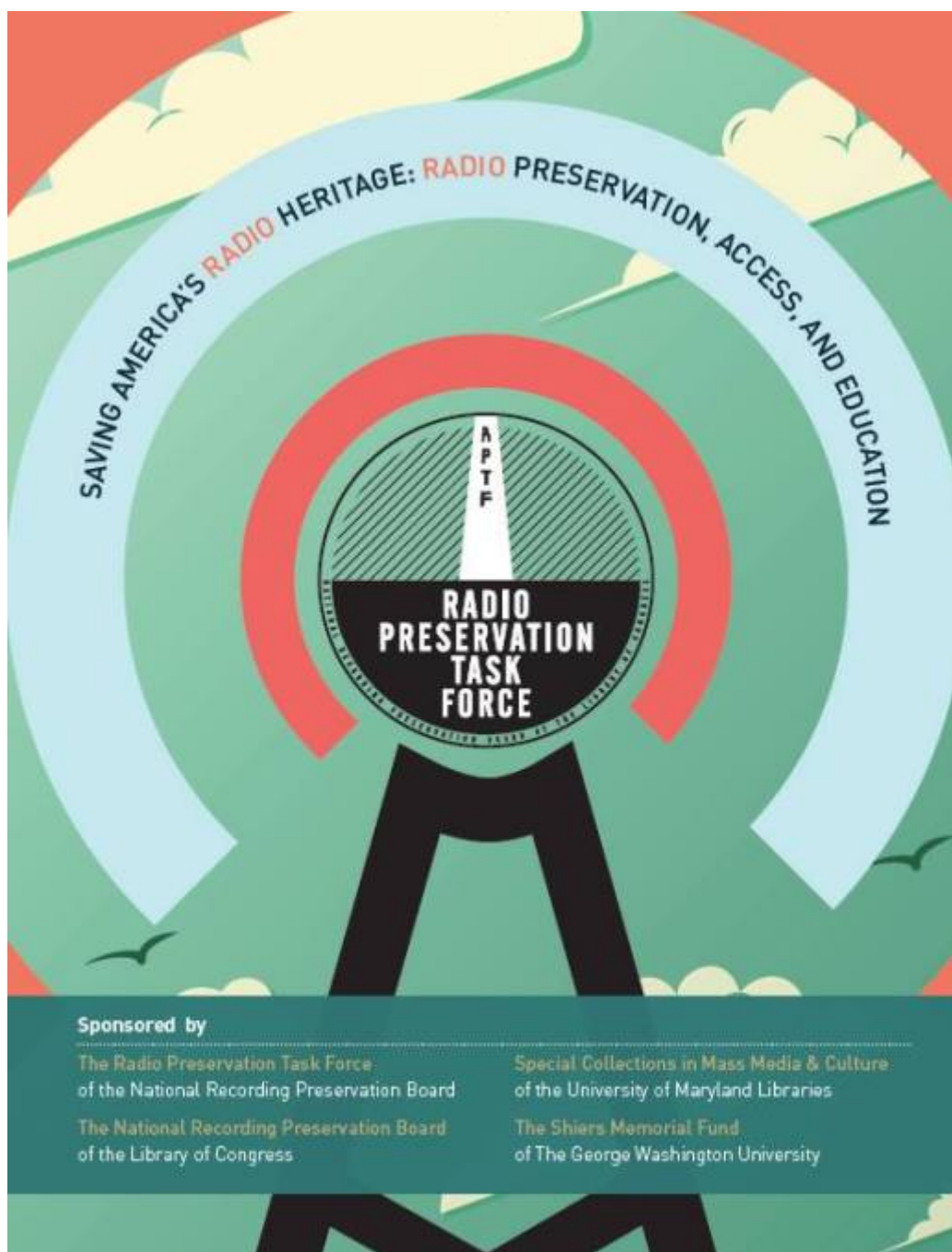


Recommended citation

Authors, S. O. (2016, February 26). Radio Preservation Task Force Conference: Sound History and the Logistics of Social Recognition. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/7fc3k-czf64>

Copyright

Copyright © Sounding Out! Authors 2016. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Click to download PDF of Program!

Radio Preservation Task Force Conference Information

Friday: Library of Congress, Washington, DC 9-5pm

Saturday: University of Maryland- College Park, 9-5pm

Schedule at: www.radiopreservation.org,

RPTF Federal Page (associate list linked at the left tab): <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-plan/about-this-program/radio-preservation-task-force/>

Hashtag: [#RTPF](#) ([@soundingoutblog](#) will livetweet the conference)

This conference is free and open to those in the academic/archival/curatorial/preservation community who would like to attend.

—

On Feb. 26 and 27, the Radio Preservation Task Force ([RPTF](#)) of the National Recording Preservation Board ([NRPB](#)) will hold the first national digital humanities media history conference at the Library of Congress on Friday and the University of Maryland on Saturday. The schedule can be found [here](#). Eminent sound historian [Michele Hilmes](#) (Wisconsin) directs the conference program with [Christopher Sterling](#) (GWU), Chair of the National Recording Preservation Board. Distinguished historian of British broadcasting [Paddy Scannell](#) (Michigan) commences the conference as academic keynote. I write this update as national research director for the project.

The RPTF is tasked with preserving local, noncommercial, and otherwise unprocessed recordings stored at local radio stations, libraries, archives, and garages, and identifying strategies to process and facilitate engagement with these materials. Scholars, curators, sound preservationists, and archivists from more than 100 universities, museums and libraries will converge on Capitol Hill to discuss steps toward preserving radio's aural history, including the many historical events captured by nontheatrical broadcasts such as news, town hall meetings, public forums, sporting events, and community outreach programs.

The conference is a culmination of roughly 18 months of initial work (largely built out of service labor by academic media historians), and contributes a new dimension to the emergent discipline of sound studies with its focus on the history of mass media storytelling, sound art, and for the first time, the nontheatrical sounds of radio history. Participants have been confirmed from NPR, the Smithsonian, Pacifica, the Library of Congress, and multiple academic research groups. National presses, blogs, and magazines will also be present to cover the RPTF. Our conference Twitter hashtag is [#RPTF](#). Presenters will discuss the common goal of how to best assess, protect, preserve, and implement current and future findings, with reference to conventional history work, museum curation, classroom pedagogy, and material preservation actions. Tours for scholars and archivists began yesterday at NPR and the Library of Congress's Packard Campus.

Radio nerd nirvana at Library of Congress Packard campus [#RPTF](#) [#loc](#) [#radiohistory](#)
pic.twitter.com/ObmX8NjDy2

— Jennifer Waits (@SpinningIndie) [February 25, 2016](#)

The RPTF was formed thanks to a mandate by sound preservation pioneer and former NRPB Chair [Sam Brylawski](#), practitioner keynote for the conference. The mandate was issued to identify what, where, and how many recordings might still be extant from radio history. Our early findings have been both compelling and disappointing. Over the RPTF's first two aggregation cycles, the consortium turned up 350,000 recordings spread over roughly 350 participating archives. We expect that number to reach well over one million after our next search cycle, and for our affiliate

archive list to increase to over 1000 with the inclusion of radio stations. Enormous numbers to be sure.

NPR's Research, Archives, Data Strategy team is working to ensure that historic radio stories are accessible in perpetuity #RPTF #nprchives

— *nprchives (@nprchives)* February 26, 2016

However, if one conducts a thought experiment about how many recordings might have aired between the mid-1920s and the mid-1980s, the number seems meager at best. I'm terrible at math, but if one begins with a low-ball assumption (very low for some markets) that there have been 25 stations per median market, producing daily content between 1925 and 1985, it's not hyperbole to speculate that our findings, while not total or comprehensive, reveal that only a fraction of content has survived. Most materials have been incinerated or trashed thanks to "consolidation" of the media market after the Telecommunications Act of 1996. As stations changed hands, moved sites, and reorganized spaces, station archives were the first to go. Protecting and storing records, DATs, reel-to-reels, and internal documents, simply haven't made sense for bottom lines. It's safe to anecdotally contend that we've certainly already lost over 75% of radio history, and perhaps as high as 90%.

Most radio recordings are stored on fragile formats #AVpreservation #AVarchives #RPTF <https://t.co/zTibP1Kg9c>

— *NPR RAD (@npr_rad)* February 25, 2016

Why is this important? The short answer is that radio has held a unique and important position in U.S. cultural history. Radio has been a media industry that developed a mature art form through storytelling and entertainment, while acting as a communications technology that has been utilized for community building and public discourse. After print media, the history of radio provides an unmatched reflection of the historical development, experience, and reception of cultural and political events. And as I've written previously at [FlowTV](#), radio sometimes contains the only remaining historical expression of specific moments and social movements.

Seeing some of the earliest radio recordings at Library of Congress' Packard campus #RPTF pic.twitter.com/vtODDZULEG

— *Jennifer Waits (@SpinningIndie)* February 25, 2016

As the task force has progressed since late 2014, it's become conspicuously apparent to our consortium that a core goal of cultural research – increasing the visibility of marginalized histories – is well served by exhuming and studying the artifacts of radio history. By increasing the nontheatrical radio archive in particular, we increase and build continuity lines for histories that simply haven't been told due to lack of primary sources. It's very much a nuts and bolts, trial and error process. A lot of the project will culminate around a sprawling big data interface in 2017 – a collaboration between the RPTF, ARSC, and Indiana University. This potentially makes the RPTF the

largest digital humanities project in Film and Media. And we plan for the interface to feature syllabi, lesson plans for all educational ages, and recordings that fall under the domain of “fair use.”

To make invisible histories *audible* turns out to consist of quite a few steps, and a careful study of the conditions necessary to conduct preservation work, which requires an understanding of the regulatory, historical, and organizational precedents and restrictions by which materials can be shared. In this way, the RPTF also represents an emergent research path for media and sound studies – dedication to the study and implementation of *logistics for social recognition*. Actively studying the contemporary political economy of *how* hidden information might come to be circulated, and devising strategies to protect and circulate voices for the first time, makes a strong contribution to social justice work.

Packed house! @RadioTaskForce #rptf pic.twitter.com/8p9RIKnn6q

— Monica De La Torre (@digitalxicanafm) [February 26, 2016](#)

There’s still much to learn about these processes, and that’s the purpose of the conference. We’re putting together experts in multiple spheres for the first time to begin a conversation about how a national infrastructure might be organized to address the mechanics that comprise the ethics we associate with the study of sound history. Participants will present historical research, while panels and workshops discuss everything from material sound preservation methods, to educational approaches to teaching sound in film and media classrooms, to contemporary curatorial methods regarding presentation of media art.

[**Ed note:** *SO!* Ed. in Chief **J. Stoeve** will be speaking in as part of a Radio Pedagogy Workshop this afternoon at 1:30 (along with Special Ed. **Neil Verma** and *SO!* writers **Amanda Keeler** and **Kathy Battles**; other *SO!* fam in the house include **Inés Casillas**, **Monica de la Torre**, **Alex Russo**, **Shawn VanCour**, **Suzanne Smith**, **Alejandra Bronfman**, **Christine Ehrick**, **Bill Kirkpatrick**, **Josh Sheppherd** and **Andrew Bottomley**. It’s an *SO!* fam reunion over here!]

Among projects commencing immediately after the conference, the RPTF will be applying for preservation and curation grants with our partners at multiple universities, as well as with [Pacifica Radio Archives](#), considered by many to be the great collection of postwar local and community radio history in the U.S. Since there are so many recordings to process, the RPTF has organized eight content-based caucuses in which faculty experts will be working with archivists to unite split collections, and determine which recordings are most in need of research and circulation. Caucuses will meet for the first time at the conference, as horizontally organized research units that will act as grant-writing bodies. The results of their preservation actions will be linked or shared at the RPTF big data site. Here is a list of the caucus chairs and their themes:

- Kathleen Battles, Oakland University – **LGBT Radio**
- Mary Beth Haralovich, University of Arizona – **Gender and Feminist Radio**

- Laura Schnitker, University of Maryland and Jennifer Waits, Radio Survivor – **College, Community, and Educational Radio**
- Sonja Williams, Howard University – **African American and Civil Rights Radio**
- Jon Nathan Anderson, CUNY-Brooklyn – **Labor Radio**
- Michael Stamm, Michigan State – **Radio Journalism**
- Inés Casillas, UC-Santa Barbara – **Spanish Language and Bilingual Radio**
- David Jenemann, University of Vermont – **Sports Radio**

In collaboration with the National Recording Preservation Foundation, the RPTF has already distributed its first grant: to the [Lily Library at Indiana University](#) to digitally process, preserve, and distribute the complete Orson Welles radio broadcasts. This will be the first time these recordings — which are all now in the public domain — have been made available in completion. We expect to build a special website with these materials sometime in 2017.

And it begins! [#RPTF](#) excited to present this morning with [@npr_rad](#) coworker [@AydaPour](#) [pic.twitter.com/JCt7HVIXMa](#)

— Jane Gilvin (@jg88354) [February 26, 2016](#)

—

Josh Shepperd is Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Catholic University in Washington D.C. He teaches courses related to critical, conceptual, and methodological approaches to media studies. He is also actively involved in digital humanities media preservation, and currently serve as the National Research Director of the [Radio Preservation Task Force](#) for the [National Recording Preservation Board](#) of the Library of Congress.

—



REWIND!...If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[The New Wave: On Radio Arts in the UK](#)—Magz Hall

[SO! Amplifies: Ian Rawes and the London Sound Survey](#)—Ian Rawes

[SO! Amplifies: Carleton Gholz and the Detroit Sound Conservancy](#)—Carleton Gholz