
Re-created Radio Dramas As Innovative Knowledge Environments

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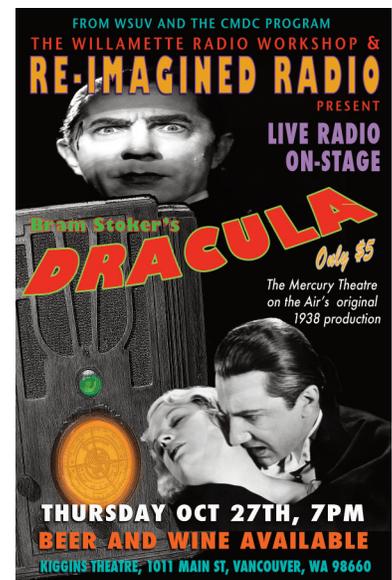
Abstract

Background The author describes his efforts to re-create vintage radio dramas as participatory knowledge environments in which to explore both their context and original production, and to provide engaging listening opportunities for sound, the most ephemeral of all media.

Analysis These efforts promote new knowledge environments for outreach, creative problem solving, rapid prototyping, and the social development of new literacies and skills.

Conclusion and implications Because it is an intensely active experience, listening to sound and engaging directly with the imagination can promote direct listener involvement/engagement in a (re)new(ed) knowledge environment with increased opportunities for pedagogy and scholarship.

Keywords Curation; Sound; Radio drama; Curation by re-creation; Sound-based narrative; Storytelling; Knowledge; Innovative; Environment



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Introduction

This article outlines efforts to re-create vintage radio dramas as participatory knowledge environments in which to explore both the context of original production for these dramas, as well as their continued ability to communicate complex language, images, and narratives to a listening audience.

The story begins in the 1920s–1950s, the so-called “golden age” of American radio. During this time, individuals and families across the country tuned their radio sets to receive their favourite programs, each arriving, as if by magic, though the air. They listened to a range of popular programs: afternoon soap operas and sporting events, early evening news and variety, prime time comedy and drama, and late night mystery and noir.

Gathered separately around their radio sets, listeners were nevertheless connected, part of a shared national experience fostered by the immediacy of the radio medium and its ability to connect them with distant events in the outside world (Schwartz, 2015). Lacking visuals, listeners actively imagined the colourful characters, distant locales, and exotic adventures they heard depicted. These worlds were real, immersive, new knowledge environments listeners could inhabit beyond their familiar lives.

Why did these early radio programs seem so real? Because of their ephemerality. Until the late 1930s, most radio programs were broadcast live, created in the moment, and then disappeared soon after their production. Repeats were seldom an option. The urgency of hearing radio programs as they happened became radio’s defining characteristic (Schwartz 2015). As explained by psychologists Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport (1935), “What is heard on the air is transitory, as fleeting as time itself, and it therefore seems *real*” (p. 259, emphasis in original).

Cantril and Allport (1935) note “this sense of the living present” is important to listeners who resent “broadcasts from electrical transcriptions [recordings].” Even though listeners cannot tell the difference between transcriptions and live performances,

the thought of a whirling disk cannot create the sense of participation in actual events that is radio’s chief psychological characteristic. ... When he [a listener] turns his dial he wants to enter the stream of life as it is actually lived. (p. 259)

With the start of World War II in Europe in the late 1930s, live, remote, and recorded broadcasts became more commonplace. Transcriptions of programs from radio’s golden age were often made for routine reference or later broadcast. Many of these recordings survive today and are frequently heard on “old time radio” stations or are available on demand through websites. Episodes of *Guns Smoke*, *The Shadow*, *Lights Out!*, *The Columbia Workshop*, *CBS Mystery Theatre*, *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, and others still provide compelling listening experiences.

Such recordings, however, provide only a bracketed, incomplete experience of the original performance. They are “acousmatic” sound objects, originating from unseen and unfamiliar sources. Often, contemporary listeners have no experience with the context

of their original production and so cannot fully understand or appreciate the ability of vintage radio dramas, based on sound, to create worlds and ways to inhabit them.

To address this problem, I have developed and maintain an applied creative project, Re-Imagined Radio, where I explore providing a fuller, richer, more engaging experience with vintage radio dramas by re-creating them before live audiences.

This article positions these re-created radio dramas and associated listening experience(s) as new knowledge environments. It begins by describing my evolving conceptual framework for Re-Imagined Radio. Then, it outlines associated theoretical and practical considerations. In conclusion, it contends that re-creating vintage radio dramas for live audiences may promote viable contexts in which to explore and experience the conditions under which the originals might have been created. Additionally, there is opportunity for listeners to talk among themselves regarding the meaning(s) of the experience, an opportunity not found in more traditional sound archival and curatorial situations. In such discussion, explicit knowledge is created (Weinberger, 2007). In this regard, it is suggested that re-created vintage radio dramas can promote (re)new(ed) knowledge environments for scholarship and pedagogy.

What might happen in such environments is my primary interest, and so my focus throughout this article is more on my applied practice, which I call “curation by re-creation,” than on broad analysis or critique. My tone in discussing this project is conversational, commenting on an ongoing experiment, hoping for engagement from you, the listener.

Conceptual framework

The choice of radio and sound-based dramas is purposeful. Sound, a physical, subjective experience of acoustic energy – a sequence of pressure variations that travels through a medium such as air, gas, or water to our ears – is primal, the earliest sensory stimulus available to humans, “switched on, four-and-a-half months after we are conceived” (Murch, 2005, n.p.). Most humans, says Bruce R. Smith (2013), live the rest of their lives “immersed in a world of sound” (p. 217) and knowing the world through sound is fundamentally different from knowing the world through vision. Stephen Feld (2003) concurs, noting “the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world” (p. 226).

Michael Bull and Les Beck (2003) suggest sound provides new ways of thinking about and appreciating the social experience, memory, time, and place of our auditory culture. They argue sound makes us rethink: our social experience, its meaning, nature, and significance; our relationship to community; our relationship to others, ourselves, and the spaces and places we inhabit; and our relationship to power.

Specifically, sound provides a place in which embodied social and cultural traces can be carried (Schafer, 1977). As a primary sensory input, sound is a communication channel for human culture capable of conveying deep, rich information, which we can extract through careful listening. Sound provided the first frame of reference through which humankind attempted to create and communicate a worldview (Levinson, 1999).

Human speech (the expression of abstract thoughts and feelings by articulate sounds) may be the first medium – alphabets, writing, and printing all incorporated speech by visualizing its sounds. Visualization continued with film, television, and the World Wide Web. Thus, speech (as sound), with its origins in abstract thought and presentation, is the most prevalent form of human communication, claiming a presence in most all media that follow (Levinson, 1999, 1981). In this regard, it follows that sound is the central component of narrative, the driver of storytelling, and the basis of literature. As such, sound provides immersive, interactive contexts for listeners.

Radio is a culture, a medium, and a technology based on sound(s) consciously collected (curated) and broadcast for the purpose of interpreting and distributing information to a broad base of listeners. Radio amplifies and extends oral communication across time and distance. Radio retrieves some of the prominence of myth, ritual, and participatory drama from preliterate (pre-writing and reading) times (McLuhan, 1977, 1975; McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988; McLuhan & Powers, 1989). In doing this, radio, as an extension of the human nervous system, affords tremendous power as “a subliminal echo chamber” in which to evoke memories/associations long forgotten or ignored (McLuhan, 1964). As a “fast hot medium” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 265), radio provides accelerated information transfer. Combining these attributes and features, radio provides a context for curating sound not available in more traditional curatorial venues.

Combining sound and radio, recall the opening moments of an episode of *The Lone Ranger* radio drama series. Announcer Fred Foy boomed, “Return with us now, to those thrilling days of yesteryear,” and listeners thrilled at the prospect of hearing a new adventure of the masked former Texas Ranger. Each episode progressed as Foy and other unseen actors voiced scripted narratives and dialogues (sometimes augmented by sound effects and music) carefully crafted to promote immersive storytelling experiences. To radio listeners, the Lone Ranger, his faithful Native American friend Tonto, their horses Silver and Scout, and their fight against outlaws in the American Old West were entertaining, but more importantly, real, and believable.

Radio dramas were special favourites and there are numerous examples, such as *The Lone Ranger*, that even today, in an age of visual spectacle, can light up the imaginations of audiences with the power and immediacy of their stories. This ability to communicate complex, flexible language, and mental images through sound-based stories to a listening audience is interesting to me. To pursue this interest, I developed and maintain Radio Nospace, an interactive installation/performance work/virtual gallery and practice-based research and production site where I archive and curate examples of radio/audio drama, sound poetry, and radio/sound art that explore sound and listening as primary components of narrative and storytelling.¹

This endeavour presents interesting challenges. With a medium defined by its transitory urgency, its content disappearing soon after its creation, how to promote listening to radio programs? How to provide engaging listening opportunities for sound, the most ephemeral of all media? Additionally, audio recordings of radio programs provide a bracketed, incomplete presentation of the original source and the time of their original

broadcast. As a result, a recording is not an authentic presentation of either the original sound or the original temporality, but rather a bracketed representation/intervention of the original, an echo if you will, set apart, separate from its original context providing only a partial narrative regarding its creation and consumption.

By way of example, a performance by a blues musician in a club is different from a performance by that same musician in a concert hall. How? Different sonic, social, and/or cultural experiences might occur at both locations over the time frame of the performance. A recording of either, or both, does not provide a direct listening experience. Anything that *might happen* while listening to a recording is different from what *might have been possible* at the time and in the context of the original sounding.

Despite these limitations, there is a sense of authenticity to vocal recordings, according to French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2001), who says:

If one holds the voice to be an auto-effective medium (a medium that presents itself as being auto-effective, even if it isn't), an element of absolute presence, then the fact of being able to keep the voice of someone who is dead or radically absent, of being able to record, I mean reproduce and transmit, the voice of the dead or absent-living, is an unheard of possibility, unique and without precedent. Whatever comes to us through the voice thus reproduced in its originary [sic] production is marked by a seal of authenticity and of presence that no image could ever equal. ... I am always overwhelmed when I hear the voice of someone who is dead, as I am not when I see an image or a photograph of the dead person. ... I can also be touched, presently, by the recorded speech of someone who is dead. I can, here and now, be affected by a voice from beyond the grave. ... A miracle of technology. (pp. 70-72)

Why is this so? Derrida (2001) explains:

[Recording] is reproduction as *re-production*, of life itself, and the production is archived as the source, not as an image. ... Life itself can be archived and spectralized in its self-affection, because one knows that when someone speaks he affects himself, whereas when someone presents himself to be seen he does not necessarily see himself. In the voice, self-affection itself is (supposedly) recorded and communicated. And this supposition forms the essential thread of our listening. (p. 71)

We might unpack these statements by Derrida (2001) as follows. Listening to a recording helps create a space in which something can happen – engagement and/or physical action, for example. In hearing the recorded voices of dead or absent individuals, we do not hear spectral voices. Rather, through recordings, authentic past events and people come to life, to presence, to the present and present themselves as authentic.

Application

Might Derrida's (2001) ideas move listening to recorded sound-based sources beyond the limitations of bracketing? Might archival efforts shake up perception, encourage one to consider sound as a memory media art experience, and promote knowledge construction in dedicated, perhaps repurposed spaces?

I have sought answers by re-creating vintage radio dramas before live audiences. I am also inspired in these efforts by Pauline Minevich and Ellen Waterman (2013) who note that re-creation affords many opportunities to overlay former meanings with new correlations and significances. To my thinking, augmenting re-creations of radio dramas with curatorial information/activities positions the ephemeral aural experience in relation to changing interpretations fostered by the passage of time.

How, then, to foreground the original radio broadcast as the centre of more contemporary work, and so facilitate careful listening? I apply the following solution. Start with a 1936 movie theatre. Collaborate with voice actors and Foley sound artists. Re-enact radio dramas. Garnish with digital sound effects, music, and visual backdrops. Invite a live audience to watch, listen, eat popcorn, and share their thoughts and impressions via social media. And throughout, provide access to archival and curatorial information about the history and cultural impact of the radio drama being performed. In short, provide a new knowledge environment for better understanding the contexts for creation and consumption of the original. Or, to follow Derrida (2001), reproduce the authenticity and presence of the original.

In this manner, I have re-created *A Radio Christmas Carol*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Dracula*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, *The Fall of the City*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, *The Hitchhiker*, and episodes from *Gunsmoke* and *The Shadow*.

By removing the acousmatic nature of the radio broadcast, and allowing the audience to see the source of the sounds they are hearing, do they enjoy a more rewarding understanding of the power of sound as the basis for narrative experiences? Anecdotal and ethnographical information collected from participants at each of these re-created performances suggests a high level of listener engagement and increased awareness of how the original voice actors and Foley sound artists might have created the imaginative and immersive worlds of these vintage radio dramas. As Derrida (2001) noted, self-affection is recorded and communicated in the voice, and is essential to our listening. Directing attention to the sounds forces the audience to think about the space of listening and what is heard.²

Discussion

There are some theoretical considerations to support these anecdotal findings. Charles Smith (1989) suggests performance heightens “awareness of the means of representation, involving the spectator in the process of display” (p. 20). An upshot of such practices, according to Vince Dziekan (2012), is that the viewer is better prepared to understand artwork as the outcome of some performed process, “(both in the sense of simulated, read ‘staged,’ and lived, read ‘experienced’), rather than as a fixed, consolidated artefact” (p. 34).

By extension, curating the sound(s) of a vintage radio drama by re-creating it allows the listener to live within and more fully experience the ability of those sounds to add information and explication to their experience, as well as an appreciation for

immersion and interaction. The result: a heightened, more engaged sense of narrative and storytelling.

But, what is the significance of radio sound (something not normally seen) as a live performance in a movie theatre, a place focused on visual representation? With movies we have expectations. We see a screen and expect to see visual tropes. The chances are good that when we see expected tropes we do not pay deep attention. Instead, we passively accept what is portrayed on the screen. Sound, relegated to an augmentative role, is often overlooked.

However, when we display sound more prominently it challenges people's comfort levels in two ways: time and attention. Visit a piece of visual art in a gallery and you determine the amount of time you spend with that work. You have the ability to explore the work on your own time. Experiencing a work of sound art is fundamentally different because we experience that work on its time, not ours. In order to experience the full work, we must listen through its duration. This requires attention, a perhaps onerous requirement in a world of overabundant visual stimulation.

At the centre of curation by re-creation is interaction between time and space and the affordances that may be produced. Dziekan (2012) says the design of a curatorial effort makes a connection between artworks and the space in which they are displayed emphatic, "supplanting the self-contained artwork through techniques of assemblage, arrangement and spatial composition" (p. 33).

Peter Vergo (1989) proposes a spectrum of curatorial efforts. At one end of this spectrum are those curated exhibitions one may call aesthetic. At the other end is contextual. The aesthetic promotes understanding through communion with the artwork, the audience listening privately to sound files using headphones, for example. Contextual exhibitions might place more emphasis on the ability of sound(s) to represent their association with other objects and resources that add information, comparison, and explication.

In between are public outreach, sharing, scholarship, and the desire to protect/preserve a sound experience. Whatever the curatorial focus, there are multiple display opportunities, says Smith (1989), each "a system of theatrical artifice" (p. 20). Put another way, Peter Wollen (1995) says visual display allows one to experience the production rather than consumption. And, as noted previously, an upshot of such practices, according to Dziekan (2012), is that the viewer is better prepared to understand artwork as the outcome of some performed process "rather than as a fixed, consolidated artefact" (p. 34).

The Re-Imagined Radio project, as briefly outlined here, provides content and context for teaching and learning opportunities not available in more traditional venues. Consider that, in addition to engaging with each other through question and answer discussions after each performance, audience members can engage with distant others through social media during each performance. By sharing their understanding of the process of creating a radio drama, listeners are better positioned to appreciate the

cultural, historical, and experiential contexts of the sounds to which they are listening. Additionally, listeners can more fully experience the ability of those sounds to add information and explication to their listening experience, and thus better appreciate the meaning(s) and importance associated with what they hear.

For example, the audience sees the voice actors in front of their microphones, intent, in the context of the original performance, on reaching a distant, invisible audience with vocalizations rather than physical actions. How do these actors accomplish this goal? The audience can also see the Foley artists creating absolutely believable sounds using improbable objects, such as boxing gloves, ratchet wrenches, and balloons filled with dried peas. As noted previously, removing the acousmatic nature of the radio broadcast, and allowing the audience to see the source of the sounds they are hearing, can promote a more rewarding understanding of the power of sound as the basis for narrative experiences.

What about the “curation” part of “curation by re-creation”? According to Mark Tribe (2002), the curator’s role is to make curated objects communicable, mediative, and manageable, to help the intended audience become more knowledgeable of the layers of meaning associated with the object(s) under curation.

Curated sound works will benefit from context, an understanding of the historical, social, and cultural considerations of the time and place of the production of the original sound(s), their process(es) of production, distribution, and reception. Additional opportunities for educating listeners may be through curatorial information/activities that position the ephemeral aural experience in relation to changing interpretations fostered by the passage of time.

Following each re-created radio drama the audience is invited to linger and talk about what they experienced with each other and members of the cast. These discussions sometimes continue in dedicated social media sites.

I have also linked classroom activities to these performances, encouraging students to demonstrate their connections with the radio drama’s overarching narrative through digital media projects. Students have responded with websites, online games, social media campaigns, augmented reality, and multimedia gallery showings. Students were involved in a community production of *Superman* with the mayor in the title role. Both our classroom and the performance stage became new knowledge environments prompting outreach, creative problem solving, rapid prototyping, and developing new literacies and skills just before showtime.

Conclusion

I undertake the curation by re-creation of vintage radio dramas for several reasons: for sharing scholarship, to archive and curate a sound experience, and to promote public outreach. But perhaps more fundamentally, because sound is an agent of change, capable of inspiring active engagement and association by listeners.

Historically, radio has functioned as a culture and a medium based on sound(s) consciously curated and broadcast as related knowledge modalities (i.e., programs) for the purpose of interpreting and distributing information to a broad public. Despite a current cultural emphasis on visualization, sound remains a strong sensory input. And narrative is, perhaps, hardwired into the human psyche. We still want to listen to a good story and consider the knowledge imparted. Through the re-creation of vintage radio dramas, we can better understand the ability of sounds associated with them to communicate complex language, images, and narratives to a listening audience.

Curating the sound(s) of a radio drama by re-creating them as a performance heightens the “awareness of the means of representation, involving the spectator in the process of display” (Smith, 1989, p. 20). The upshot: multidisciplinary dialogue between artistic practices and technological affordances regarding sound as a means for communication as well as the consumption of knowledge. This new knowledge model is sustained by the act of listening. It is a site for scholarship and pedagogy with several benefits.

First, curation by re-creation provides ways and means to communicate ideas behind vintage radio drama sounds through the medium of their exhibition. As Tomas Banovich (2002) argues, “space and arrangement of work and its presentation is fundamental in influencing how it is received and understood” (p. 47).

Curation by re-creation may subvert the *a priori* bracketing of recordings by allowing listeners to appreciate content and context not available in acousmatic archival listening experiences.

Curation by re-creation allows listeners to more fully experience the ability of archived sound objects to convey information and explication along with meaning(s) and importance, all of which heightens experience and appreciation for the narrative.

Through direct experience of the curation by re-creation effort, listeners have the opportunity to consider how radio writers adapted literary techniques to an acoustic medium with great effect.

Finally, by understanding the process of re-creating a vintage radio drama, listeners are better positioned to appreciate the cultural, historical, and experiential contexts of the archived (bracketed) sounds to which they are listening.³

So, in conclusion, the curation by re-creation of vintage radio dramas fosters a fertile context for the curation of ephemeral sound experiences, as well as a system of dissemination/communication to wider publics/audiences/listeners/participants. Furthermore, curation by re-creation may provide a viable methodology for curating a sound culture where participants can explore and experience the conditions under which the original sounds were created. Through its ability to directly involve the audience, curation by re-creation may promote opportunities and affordances for collaboration and communication not found in more traditional sound archival and curatorial situations, including the opportunity for sound to be both a curated and interactive activity, archived yet constantly in play through re-creation. Because it is

an intensely active experience, listening to sound and engaging directly with the imagination can promote direct listener involvement/engagement in a (re)new(ed) knowledge environment with increased opportunities for public outreach, sharing, and scholarship.

Notes

1. The name Radio Nouspace is derived from “radio” (ecology of related but different phenomena [Dubber, 2014]) and “nouspace” (wordplay between “nous” [French for “we,” referring to collaboration and sharing as key attributes], “new” [from English, as in a fresh concept], and “noos” [from Greek, pointing to mind and essence]) (Grigar, 2012).
2. Regarding radio as an ecology, Andrew Dubber (2013) argues that the term “radio” refers to a number of different, though related, phenomena. For example, radio is an institution; an organizational structure; a category of media content with its own characteristics, conventions, and tropes; a series of professional practices and relationships, etc. As a result, radio work, content, technologies, or cultures cannot be considered as single subjects or processes, but rather must be considered as an “ecology.”
3. My preliminary efforts also raise questions about best practices for moving forward. For example ...

What further results might curation by re-creation hold for archival and curatorial efforts associated with sound-based literary artefacts?

Can curation by re-creation promote multidisciplinary dialogue between artistic practices and technological affordances?

Can curation by re-creation contribute to the creation of spaces for collective critical thought, as well as engagement with past literary events through the act of listening?

What does curation by re-creation mean to our knowledge of history, culture, and human experience, as heard through the lens of sound-based literary artefacts?

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