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Lending an Ear: Podcasts, Archives, and How We Can Help Each Other

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Up-and-Comers: News for Student Archivists

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Lending an Ear: Podcasts, Archives, and How We Can Help Each Other

by Dana Gerber-Margie, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, and *Writer*, *The Audio Signal*

Radio and archives have always been linked for me; when I shelved manuscripts and books at my first job as an undergraduate, I tempered the monotony not with music but with radio shows. I kept listening through graduate school, and I kept listening through the job search, and still I kept listening as I began a career as an audio archivist. Today I'm an archivist at the Wisconsin Historical Society, digitizing audio to publish in an online Wisconsin Sound Archive collection, and my ears are seemingly always listening in on either an oral history captured in the 1960s or an informal radio piece done yesterday.

On a Saturday morning in February of last year, all of this listening culminated in an idea: to share with others what I listen to in a newsletter format, to design a logo in silhouette, and to call it *The Audio Signal*. I brought it all together, began writing that weekend, and it's still going strong. *The Audio Signal* is a weekly newsletter for the curious featuring recommendations for podcasts, radio, audiobooks, oral histories, and archival audio.



The Audio Signal logo.
Courtesy of Dana Gerber-Margie.

Adding oral histories, archival audio, and news items about sound archives is an important aspect of the newsletter, as most subscribers are not actually archivists or in the library field at all but instead radio producers and general podcast fans. In each issue, I open with the following line: "I am an audio archivist,

which means I organize, preserve, digitize, and manage sound recordings for a large historical institution." To be a voice for archivists while also engaging with creators is both a joy and an honor. This unique vantage point also provides space for me to pose questions I may have otherwise not considered, including examining how as archivists we can help each other and collaborate.

Podcasts have been around for nearly 20 years but took the spotlight in 2014 with the exceptionally popular *Serial*, a

spinoff of radio giant *This American Life*. In its first season, *Serial*, like its title suggests, serialized a true crime story. While its popularity never reached *Serial* levels, in 2012, while in graduate school, I started a podcast called *Sound of the Archives*. The goal was to create something to appeal to both archivists and nonarchivists alike. With help from my talented classmates, we pushed out 10 episodes in one year. The process taught me what it takes to make a podcast, which led to the opportunity to speak at the MAC 2013 Annual Meeting during a session titled "Using Podcasts to Reach Your Patrons."¹

The presentation was well received, with many eager archivists approaching us afterward with more questions about how to make their own podcasts. And, while the idea of creating an archives-based podcast is tantalizing for many of us, the amount of hidden labor and time is significant. Not many podcasts produced by institutions with archives exist, which isn't a shock as most archives do not have enough funding to support the functions and positions fundamental to the production of a podcast. All this is not to say that I discourage podcast creation, rather I encourage archivists to think about how their collections could support an existing podcast. Among thousands of podcasts, each with a growing audience, to choose from, certainly one could use your collections. Many extremely talented people love to make audio for entertainment and journalism, and this poses the question: is your labor better used being a helpful, on-hand researcher for these talented people, or teaching yourself special audio editing techniques? I argue the former.

In February of 2016, the first Radio Preservation Task Force meeting was held in Washington, DC. The best part of the task force is its goal of bringing together archivists as well as voices from the community, including scholars, collectors, and creators. Along with a group of incredibly intelligent archivists, I had the opportunity to begin the discussion on how to best manage the preservation of radio history, which not only includes preserving unique analog discs but also streamlining the metadata input for current community radio creators. The only mention of independently produced podcasts without any kind of digital curation support came from me, speaking up

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at the very end of the meeting. So, in an effort to avoid postponing a Podcast Preservation Task Force until 2066, I've started taking the baby steps necessary to help independent podcasters manage and preserve their own files. The plan is to have a short, readable guide up online for free within the year. In the meantime, I encourage more institutions to consider adding podcast materials into their appraisal discussions.

Both the archival and radio fields share a problem with discoverability: archives and libraries devote an ever-increasing amount of time to outreach and marketing for community building, impact, and awareness. We preserve so that our materials can be accessed and used, and we recognize that depending on scholars isn't always enough and only involves a small portion of our potential patrons. But our most reliable way to reach the general public is through our catalog and then our finding aids. While we're doing some really innovative things to bring our finding aids and collections together to make access even easier, our titles, subject headings, and descriptions matter as people search. Similarly, podcasters have traditionally relied on iTunes for discovery, which means that to climb the charts, they rely heavily on fans to rate and review the shows. Discussion of improved metadata, like more controlled vocabulary, description, or titles, is rare at best. Strides are being made to change these habits: *audiosearch*, part of the media startup *Pop Up Archive* and founded by two women with backgrounds in information science, is attempting to keep up by using transcription, tags, and

indexing. We, as archivists, are experts in wrangling data. And, as archivists, we can help.

The most challenging part of *The Audio Signal* has been keeping up with the number of podcasts. Public radio stations are devoting more support to podcasts; independent radio producers are finding a voice through podcasts; celebrities are starting their own interview shows; communities are forming around specific podcasts; and the format is revitalizing investigative journalism. Most of the hours of my day are taken up by listening. So, archivists, I need you. I need your favorite pieces of audio from your collections. My only criteria are as follows: they're online and publicly accessible. I have not been able to share as much as I would like, but I have had the chance to share oral histories, speeches, lectures, poetry, and recorded roundtables.

For more information about *The Audio Signal* and to read past issues, check out tinyletter.com/theaudiosignal.

To recommend archival audio, please e-mail me at theaudiosignal@gmail.com. Feel free to contact me for any other questions or to pick my brain for a podcast that may be suited to your collections!

Note

1. Resources and slides from "Using Podcasts to Reach Your Patrons" are available online at soundofthearchives.wordpress.com/2013/04/22/midwest-archives-conference-2013, accessed June 7, 2016.

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