

## Sounding off: British local radio and the spoken word

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### Summary:

This CDP will involve the study of the spoken word in present-day British radio broadcasting, particularly local radio phone-ins. It will use digital humanities and computational analysis to explore areas such as identity, place, and the relationship of audio broadcasting to social media.

The research project is designed to complement the British Library's development of a National Radio Archive, as part of the [Save our Sounds programme](#). The archive will be built up by recording selectively from radio channels across the UK, starting in 2018, greatly augmenting the Library's existing radio archive of around quarter of a million recordings. A major element of this work will be the use of speech-to-text technology, enabling large-scale radio archives to be searched and analysed in a similar way to print archives.

The CDP will help enable the Library to develop its digital radio archive, by understanding how the capture of speech-based programmes can be presented in a form that best serves researchers across a range of disciplines. Specifically, it will encourage the Library to develop relevant tools, testing and developing these through the opportunity of working closely with a significant research project.

Our hope in developing a National Radio Archive is to tailor what we archive, and the service delivery supporting this, to reach out to audiences beyond visitors to the physical British Library, using licensing arrangements to deliver off-air recordings to educational organisations, and potentially beyond. This CDP will help us shape this medium to long-term vision.

The PhD student will have the rare opportunity not simply to work with an existing archive, but to help build up that archive, with their research findings helping to contribute towards the archive's shape and content.

### Areas of Study:

As discussed above, this CDP will help to the Library to develop and augment its existing radio archive. The current archive contains around 250,000 recordings, from the 1920s to the present day, but the planned expansion would see approximately 250,000 hours added per year, recorded from current radio broadcasts across the UK. The student would also have access to the back archives of some commercial radio stations (e.g. LBC) held by the British Library, and privileged access to BBC radio archives and catalogue records, onsite at the British Library.

The research questions and findings should help the BL's archivists select channels and programmes for recording, establishing patterns of scheduling suitable for a selective archive tailored to research needs.

In developing the research theme, the range of options open to the BL, the HEI partner and the PhD student is broad, but we are particularly interested in research questions that would focus on issues of identity, locality and the position of radio (particularly local radio) as a forum for debate. The focus should be on how and in what ways radio enables its listeners to speak out in this public space.

Potential questions to explore through the CDP could include:

- How does the use of language in UK local radio help shape the national discourse?
- How is UK local radio changing in the era of social media?

- How has the phone-in influenced UK radio broadcasting?
- How diverse, socio-linguistically, are the voices of contributors (e.g. accents, age, gender, ethnicity) compared with other forms of programming?
- How is the ongoing 'Brexit' debate being reflected in radio phone-ins that aim to represent the diverse communities of the UK?

However, in general, the Library is as interested in the methodology as in the specific research findings. The research method would be primarily empiricist, grounded in analysis of archive radio recordings and the data derived from such recordings by use of speech recognition technologies. The approach taken could be based as much on form as content. For example, the Library is keen on understanding more about innovation in local radio and changes in local radio formats at a time of considerable change within the UK media industry.

Talk radio and phone-ins have been the subjects of research before now, though primarily from an American perspective. Examples of relevant and recent published research with a UK focus include Andrew Dubber, *Radio in the Digital Age* (Polity Press, 2013), Hugh Chignell, *Public Issue Radio: Talks, News and Current Affairs in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and Ian Hutchby, *Media Talk: Conversation Analysis and the Study of Broadcasting* (Open University Press, 2005). The originality of this research would lie in the focus on UK local radio broadcasting, the use of a digital humanities approach for textual and thematic analysis, and the engagement with the archiving process.

Please note that the research must fall with the AHRC's subject coverage.

#### **Benefits and training opportunities for the student:**

The PhD student would have the opportunity of sharing knowledge with curators (Radio Curator, Lead Curator News & Moving Image) and IT developers. Advice or support in computational analysis could be provided by the British Library's Digital Scholarship team.

The student would need to have a good knowledge of radio broadcasting in the sector or geographical area that may define their research topic. They should also have an understanding of the regulatory background to UK broadcasting. Enhanced knowledge and understanding of these areas may be acquired by the student once the project starts through the expertise and supervision of the HEI academic partner.

The student will benefit from the experience of being involved in the development of a new kind of radio archive, helping to shape its content selection policies and development of discovery tools. They will gain expertise in particular of local radio broadcasting, and will help pioneer the use of speech recognition technology for scholarly analysis. They will therefore gain strong practical experience of audio archiving in a digital environment.

Other benefits for the student will include:

- First-hand exposure to and engagement with the curatorial and collection development work of a national library, expanding their career opportunities
- Opportunities to contribute to British Library blogs to communicate research findings
- Advice or support in computational analysis provided by Digital Scholarship, helping them to develop strong digital humanities research skills
- Involvement in the BL's *Save our Sounds* programme, gaining insight into the operation of a major strategic programme.

Both the selected HEI supervisor and PhD student themselves would be expected to join the research network group of external academics and radio practitioners that is being established to advise on the development of the National Radio Archive.