RadioDoc Review

The article you're looking for doesn't exist: An interview with Eleanor McDowall and Kalli Anderson

Abigail Wincott (Editor), Falmouth University, abigail.wincott@falmouth.ac.uk

Abstract

In this interview with Kalli Anderson and Eleanor McDowall, they explain the reason for their new project called A Library out of Air. Through a mass Wikipedia edit they are asking the radio and podcast community to inscribe a history and vocabulary of the medium, which has so long gone been ephemeral and under-recognised. Wikipedia is one of the most consulted sources on the internet and often comes top of search results and AI queries on any topic. Yet some of the most important genres and influential figures in the history of audio media have no Wikipedia page. In this conversation, they describe the origins of the project, the importance of citations for demonstrating notability, of hyperlinks for discoverability and name some of the most surprising gaps in radio and podcasting on Wikipedia - the search terms that result in the error message 'The article you're looking for doesn't exist'.

Keywords

radio, podcasting, industry, history, vocabulary

Recommended Citation

Wincott, A., (Editor), "The article you're looking for doesn't exist: An interview with Eleanor McDowall and Kalli Anderson", *RadioDoc Review* . doi: https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.2694

Introduction

Sitting under a tree on a hot autumn day on the south coast of England, **Eleanor McDowall** (documentary-maker, co-Director of Falling Tree and the founder of Radio Atlas) and **Kalli Anderson** (audio and film documentarian, editor of *Sound Fields* and associate professor at the City University of New York) whip out a big bag of booklets or zines and start handing them out. We are at a one-day symposium on sustainable futures for creative audio, part of the XMTR festival in St Leonards on Sea, UK. Our group has been discussing the under-developed and often disputed vocabulary to talk about audio. We have lamented that radio and podcasting are often assumed to lack creativity, complexity and diversity. That there is a lack of awareness, even within the sector, of a creative heritage. And this was the moment when the bag of booklets came out. This turned out to be a sneak peak of a project called A Library Out of Air, which was properly launched later in the festival.

Despite its modest opening, its organisers want to persuade people across the world to join them in writing the history of the audio medium. A medium which, as the project name implies, has sometimes seemed ephemeral, and failed to make a mark on the collective cultural memory. The site of this library is to be Wikipedia. They're asking people to create new pages where one doesn't yet exist and to edit and expand on pages that are lacking detail or range. For example, at the time of writing, if you search for 'radio feature' in Wikipedia, the result is 'The article you're looking for doesn't exist[1].'

The radio feature is one of the audio forms that is held in the highest regard and, together with drama, has probably been written about the most by radio historians and other scholars. These are walled gardens, though: the industry festivals and prizes, the academic books and journals. You won't find them unless you go looking and they're out of casual reach of most people, including radio and podcast producers. Wikipedia pages, which cite sources such as these festival competitions and academic works, offer a chance to bring awareness of the diversity and heritage of audio to a wider audience.

The project zines are illustrated, written in a beautiful, slightly lyrical style, and include a guide to how to take part in the mass wikipedia edit – how to write, edit and cite within wikipedia's guidelines. It's also available online on the *Sound Fields* website. In other words, though it was literally pulled out of the bag at XMTR, this feels like something that's been a long time in the making. In this interview, recorded over Teams, I asked them how long they'd been planning this intervention in our collective memory.

You can listen to this interview online on the *RadioDoc Review* SoundCloud

[1] This article *does* now exist (see below): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_feature

Interview

KA: I think in the spring we were talking about, as we always do, the audio industry and opportunities… feeling like they're disappearing and our favourite shows disappearing and all those things that we often talk about when we all get together, when radio and podcast people get together. And we wanted to do something that was *doing something* to address this feeling of kind of being unmoored a little bit and feeling like we're constantly fighting just to assert that our field that we love and that we have devoted our careers to actually exists and is worthy of existing and of being supported and of being celebrated.

And this came out of that desire, I think, to actually come up with a way that was accessible and quite simple that we could start rectifying some of the absence that we were feeling was only contributing to this current sense of who are we? Where are we going?

EM: I should say as well that around that time, Kalli is one of the founders of an amazing project called *Sound Fields*, which is where our online Wikipedia guide is hosted and *Sound Fields* had just released their Archives issue[2]. And around that time I was working on this doc called *Into the Ether*[3] that was about radio's evaporating memory that's kind of built into the fundamentals of the form itself, that lots of our past just literally has evaporated into the ether, doesn't exist, has been taped over, was never recorded. Which is part of the magic of what we do, that it is this sort of slightly weird, dreamlike haunting of something going collectively into the air and then disappearing.

But it's also built in a lot of structural problems for us, because I think unlike lots of other artistic fields, it's really hard to get to know your own past and your own memory and the creative scope of a field. Which is why I think we were probably, when we were having this chat in Kalli's garden, peak in the moment of the word 'podcasting' just not meaning listening to something anymore. It meant watching a video of two celebrities chatting in a wood-panelled room with very prominent microphones, you know, suddenly. And you feel how our language is so malleable and shape-shifting all the time because these concepts are very inaccessible to us.

We often borrow language from other fields. We borrow language from film and we borrow language from theatre and music, but we don't necessarily share our own terminology, which you can see in things like if you talk about a radio documentary or you talk about a radio feature, you know, those mean really, really different things in different places, but we don't necessarily understand

[2] https://www.soundfields.org/announcing-the-archives-issue

[3] Falling Tree for BBC Radio 4, 21 March 2026, Eleanor McDowall 57 minutes https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002fvbx

that. Even the word editor is going to mean a different thing in a North American context or a UK context.

So I think Wikipedia is right at the heart of how a search engine works, how an AI query works. And so you can genuinely have a really concrete impact on how many people can access information about something. I think that's quite exciting.

AW: On the web page for the project, you've written 'Radio has a long history of vanishing into thin air. Our imaginative past rarely resurfaces. And if an art form can't remember its own creative past, it's at risk of allowing its future to be written by those who would shrink its creative scope or disregard the labour rights and skills of the people making the work'. So that comes back to - if it keeps disappearing, then the other things, the respect won't be there. But that's kind of written as a kind of an Us problem, collectively. So people who create audio or radio, *we* are not recording our history and *we* are ephemeral.

But I was thinking about how not everyone is so forgiving of something like Wikipedia. A few weeks ago, Sandy Toksvig, who's kind of a celebrity in the UK, she recently launched an alternative to it, called Mappa Mundi. Because she just says people keep writing entries for women and then the Wikipedia editors get back and go, 'No, that woman's not notable enough' and then delete them. And have you thought about whether, what if this happens to radio? What if people go like, 'Well, that's just radio, so that's not notable'. Do you think that might happen? And what will we do?

EM: I mean, I would say she's citing this specific example of the Nobel Prize winner. Someone had set up a Wikipedia page and then they had been taken down. And the reason why it was, is basically to do with the way that - essentially like a kind of fact checking, citation, a sense of verifying the information that's on Wikipedia, where this woman actually hadn't had a lot of coverage in mainstream media, in all these sites. So it's like a mirror that's held up to the way that our media documents stuff. So it's like, what she's saying is true. And also, that we are sort of existing within this media landscape that tends not to cover women in the same way. And lots of people, basically anyone who's not a sort of cisgendered, white, middle-aged man.

What's interesting with radio and podcasting is because we have this issue with how little it gets documented other than in wonderful spaces like *RadioDoc Review*, there are very few places that are writing critically and thoughtfully about our medium. So that does mean it can be harder to cite things. Which is why in a sense we're so excited to be talking to you and talking to the audience of *RadioDoc Review*, because I think you do have this very well-informed audience who's going to have some good books in their libraries and are going

to have things to cite and are going know about academic journals, and what can be kind of drawn in. And I think that makes a really, really big difference to a page.

KA: If *RadioDoc Review* and *Sound Fields* are commissioning brilliant essays, but we're not linking to them from the site that is the most searched, read site in the world, then that's a loss as well, right? So I think that for me, it's not like, oh, we should all stop writing anywhere else and we should only write on Wikipedia. It's more like, this is another place that we are arguing is incredibly simple and accessible to add that citation, add that link, just add that little drop in the sort of discoverable knowledge bucket.

AW: Yeah, and it makes a lot of sense with what you're saying about needing to cite other sources in order for it to seem like a robust Wikipedia entry. Obviously, there are other journals that are unfortunately behind a paywall, but *Radio Journal*, *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, for example. And then I guess all the radio historians. They, I think, were the earliest people to develop radio and audio as a serious academic field and to teach it. And those are an amazing resource that I think we're going to have to draw on quite a lot to write these entries.

So coming on to the project itself then, it's both quite a poetic cry for the 'let's not forget this' kind of 'danger of the evaporating field'. –And then it's a really practical like, okay, now roll up your sleeves, stop moaning as a field and we need to do something about this. You've started with a call to people to propose things that they might want to write an entry about or that they think should be written. And we're presuming that they would be one of the people that would do it. And you've pointed out that a really good page is probably collaborative. What's the range of things that you've had in so far?

EM: It's in three sections at the moment. We've pages that we've noticed that could do with some edits. So things like the radio documentary page is our kind of bête noire because it's so bad. And it just like comes from a very, very narrow stream of American radio and then has basically one paragraph that's like rest of world. So we think something like that, compared to the film documentary page, for example. And if you type documentary into Wikipedia, it will automatically redirect you to film documentary, which already feels…

AW: That just represents the way everyone else thinks about it.

KA: Exactly,

EM: Yeah, pretty much. But yeah, looking at like that page, the radio art page… I found a really interesting page last night actually that's just called 'audio documentary', that when you can look at it, it's got relatively few edits. It sort of reads like it's really written by one person. And I really admire the way it's

written. I think it's written by someone, looking at their user page, someone based in Tehran, who just has an interest in the sort of overlap of different mediums and the link between documentary and sound design. But that page has a flag at the top basically saying this doesn't have enough citations. So like that's a really interesting page to look at because I think lots of the ideas can be deepened and bolstered.

But yeah, so people like - the Canadian feature maker, Chris Brookes doesn't have a page. Susanne Björkman doesn't have a page. Harri Huhtamäki, the International Features Conference, Hearing Voices, New American Radio, the concept of montage audio... There's been some amazing work done already by a man called Tony Macaluso, who used to be involved with the Studs Terkel archive in the States and now works with Chapel FM over here in the UK. And he has transformed, in the last couple of weeks, the page for sound archives – which used to be three sentences long – into a multi sort of paragraph… it's got different kind of debates, ideas, lists of archives. He taught himself how to embed audio on a Wikipedia page, which just makes me want to weep with joy. It's already just become this incredible resource where you don't just go and read three sentences and be like 'a sound archive is an archive for sound' or whatever. It's like suddenly, you find all these resources, you find links, it's interconnected with different pages.

AW: I think there's so many gaps that when I was thinking, what should I put in? I immediately came up with a list of about 20 things. And I thought, that's ridiculous because if you put it down, if you ask for it to go on the spreadsheet, you're saying you want people to write it. You know, when you don't have time to write 20 pages, you can't ask other people to.

EM: You know, Wikipedia can feel quite daunting from the outside. You can feel like, oh, I don't have time to write this like long, complicated essay. But most good pages are a tangle of multiple imaginations, and they're all doing different roles. And maybe someone's saying, if you look at Piers Plowright's Wikipedia page, for example, it doesn't really name any of his work, what kind of features you might try and seek out. So something like that's really useful just to name some things and link to them, if there are places to listen.

You know, I was editing the Between the Ears page the other day and all I've done is I've just put in what the first series of Between the Ears commissions were. And it was really nice chatting to someone the other day about *The Dreams*, from the Inventions for Radio, which gets repeated in that first ever series of Between the Ears. And this person hadn't heard it. And I was sort of saying, oh, well, you can find it here. And I was like, oh, no, no, I'll just send you this link. Click on Wikipedia and it will just take you there. So I think it's letting

people tumble from thing to thing and discover stuff, which feels very hard to do at the moment.

KA: I think the nice thing about Wikipedia is that you don't have to start something new, right? Like the very first easiest thing to do is search for what's already there. It is almost always in need of more links, more audio, more citations. And I've done quite a bit of that, where I've just gone to places that I know I've searched before. I added that one for one of my favourite radio pioneers, Olive Shapley. And there's this piece of hers that I was trying to send someone. And same thing as Eleanor. I said, oh, where does it live again? I said, oh, it's in the links on Wikipedia now for her page. Thanks to me, I remembered! And it's so much simpler to explain to someone, oh, you can find it there. And if you find more, just put them there too.

And when you're editing a page that already exists, it really looks like just editing a Word document. It's not a complicated process. There's no HTML or coding and that's some of the beauty of the structure of it. I've gone into other pages where I've just said, oh, I'm going to add the name of the producer of this programme that they mention the host. There's almost always the host mentioned. And that can be a fun little give yourself 20 minutes and see how many places you can find where the people who actually made the programme, the producers, are not mentioned at all. And it's usually quite easy to cite that their names are mentioned somewhere. So that's just like these little bite-sized things are also a nice way for people to just try it.

And I mean, with the warning that it can become kind of thrilling because you do see yourself changing search results in real time, so you will want to do more after you start. But you don't have to come up with an idea for a brand new page and give yourself hours to figure out how to start one. You can really just start by adding, adding, adding and that's just as important as new ones.

AW: No, that's a really good point. You did mention you were starting to write a page about radio documentary or to improve it because it was very basic. So how has that gone? What's it like at the moment?

EM: I'm trying to create something for the radio feature. I have a big stack of books. It's going to be my guarantee that by the time this interview goes live, I will have a link that I can give you so that people can just look at it. But I know that will need to be improved and complicated by people because the books and the texts that I have approach it from within certain European frameworks. So I've got quite a lot on the BBC features department in a certain era. I found some sort of sources about the link between Australian feature making and European feature making.

The radio feature is a concept I'm so excited by, because it feels so difficult to Google anyway because it's such a sort of open term used in lots of different ways. And that's part of the creative excitement and the beauty of it, but also is part of what makes it very easy to lose and to evaporate because you can't easily say to someone, oh, well, we have to look after where radio features are being funded or supported. Whereas you look at shrinking funding within public service institutions, the disappearance of certain kind of arts grants that are happening for political reasons… You know, it matters that we can establish, oh, there's an artistic history here. This is an art form that is worth funding and can exist in these different ways.

KA: I do also have a goal for specifically the radio documentary page, just to add more notable works, because right now there just aren't many. And I think a way that I've decided I might do that is to add ones that have won prominent awards, which is not the only way to measure these things, but it is one of the ways our field has. So that's something that I welcome any help with, and any contributions. And you don't have to ask, you can just do it. So that's the beauty of it.

But I also wanted to say about asserting our ourselves and the field. Sometimes people are, I think, a bit nervous, as radio people themselves, to be asserting themselves as an art form. And maybe that's because some of us come out of journalistic traditions that are quite just like… just it's a craft, perhaps, you know, it's a job. We don't want to be relegated to the field of arts and non-professionalism. And I think that we can learn from our parallel fields. Film, for example, has really strong unionised labour. It has a history of really valuing the different levels of craft and of skill and also is okay with asserting itself as an art form. We can do both. We can really assert that we are an art form and we are also worthy of being paid as professionals.

AW: And also that a medium can be sometimes more artistic than others and sometimes more journalistic than others. And we understand that about film and about music, not that music's journalistic, but that there's different sorts of music for different purposes and with different subcultures. But for some reason, people are quite fixed in what they have in their mind when they hear a word like radio or audio or podcast. So if you say to me radio, I'll probably think of speech radio because that's what I listen to and that's what my professional background is in. But for some people they think music radio, but I guess it's part of a lack of talking about it a lot. That means that perhaps we don't come into contact with these other versions of it.

KA: Yeah, and I think also You know, I think this podcast crisis, our current crisis of language is useful in this one sense, right? That even people who are like, oh, I

don't really think about it. I make podcasts. I'm a narrative podcast producer at most, I might say, or I'm a podcast maker. I think that includes people that maybe came into the medium like since podcasting, right? They are suddenly joining our forever problem, which is those words do not stay steady, right? And now the fact that a podcast does not automatically mean *for your ears* is forcing people to really define, even within their own industry terms, what is it that I'm saying I'm doing? And oh, actually, no, I'm not interested in making a TV talk show that goes on the internet, actually. You know, I'm an audio producer, I'm a radio maker. And I think that these moments of transition and slight crises can be actually an interesting time to say, okay, we have no choice. We can't get lazy about our terms. We have to be able to talk about it and we have to be able to point to something to say, this is what I do or this is the type of thing that I do. And it's not a great sign, I don't think, for a field to not easily be able to do that.

EM: That's our hope, is this feeling – not of narrowing something down to a really singular definition, I think that's been the problem of what you're saying, Abigail, these words to people often evoke really singular and specific things – Just saying this is such a vast, exciting, expansive medium that's held so many different definitions, different ways of making, different traditions. And the more of us engage, the deeper, more complex, more interesting and more accessible we can make that to people.