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# Oral history and the radio documentary/feature: introducing the 'COHRD' form

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# **TITLE: Oral History and the Radio Documentary/ Feature: introducing the ‘COHRD’ form.**

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Siobhan McHugh’s radio documentaries and features have been broadcast on RTE (Ireland), ABC (Australia), SBS (Australia), RNZ (New Zealand) and Radio Australia (Asia-Pacific). Her latest series, ‘Marrying Out’, won a gold medal at the New York Radio Festival (2010). The author of six books of social history, she lectures in Journalism at the University of Wollongong. Her doctoral thesis, ‘Oral History and the Radio Documentary/Feature: Intersections and Synergies’ was awarded in 2010, with a commendation from Professor Alessandro Portelli, University of Rome.

## **ABSTRACT:**

In an era when audio is increasingly associated with three-minute digital storytelling, the use of crafted oral history in long-form radio narratives deserves to be recognised as a specific genre: the ‘COHRD’ (Crafted Oral History Radio Documentary), a blend of oral history, art and radio journalism. The author, a long-term practitioner of both disciplines, compares the theory and practice of oral history interviewing and the narrative concerns of the radio documentary/feature producer. The article considers how oral history may be enhanced by imaginative treatment and careful crafting, to yield a hybrid ‘COHRD’ form. This combines the creative scope of the feature, the editorial gravitas of the documentary and the ground-breaking personal narratives at the heart of oral history. Radio benefits from the in-depth primary research provided by oral history, which often records the experiences of the marginalised and overlooked. Oral history benefits through broad dissemination and being made more engaging due to the radio documentary/feature aesthetic. The article suggests that the ‘COHRD’ found a nascent expression in the pioneering work of producers such as Corwin (US 1947), Mitchell (UK 1950s) and Terkel (US 1958) and particularly in the *Radio Ballads* of MacColl, Parker and Seeger (UK 1958-’64). Podcasting has reinvigorated long-form radio narratives, which can now be sourced online as academic research texts. The ‘COHRD’ form is exemplified today in programmes such as *Hindsight* on ABC Radio National (Australia) and *Hearing Voices* and *Radio Diaries* on National Public Radio (USA).

## **KEYWORDS:**

‘oral history’, ‘radio documentary’, ‘radio feature’, ‘oral history on radio’ ‘COHRD’, ‘orality’, ‘radio as academic text’

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**TITLE: Oral History and the Radio Documentary/ Feature: introducing the 'COHRD' form.**

### **1.1 Oral history and radio nexus**

Oral history captures the personal, spoken-word stories behind lived events, not just broadening historical knowledge, but extending our understanding of the human condition by enquiring about the subjective meaning of those experiences. Radio connects its multitude of disparate listeners through the innately intimate qualities of sound. Sound 'envelops us, pouring into us, whether we want it to or not, including us, involving us', notes American author Susan Douglas (Douglas 2004: 30). Radio is strikingly dependent on voice – besides music, its single greatest component. Radio voices engender a response from listeners at both a sensory level (tone, pitch, rhythm, inflection, expressiveness, timbre – what Roland Barthes collectively refers to as the 'grain' of the voice (Barthes 1991: 273)) and a substantive level (language, the meaning of words, and coded information such as accent, age, gender).

Oral history also places great significance on the voice: orality is crucial to the recorded exchange, which the pioneering Italian theorist Alessandro Portelli calls 'history-telling' (Portelli 1997: 6). In 1979, as oral history studies sought academic acceptability, he lamented oral historians' failure to exploit the power of audio: 'Oral sources are oral sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only the transcripts that are published' (Portelli in Perks & Thomson 2006: 33). Portelli explored the aural dimension of oral history in *I Can Almost See the Lights of Home ~ A Field Trip to Harlan County, Kentucky* (Hardy 111, 1999), a two-hour collaboration with US documentary producer and oral historian Charles Hardy 111. Described as an 'essay-in-sound', it combines the radio documentary treatment of

Portelli's oral history interviews (on themes of race, class, coal mining, industrial relations, folklore and culture) with analysis by Portelli (interviewed by Hardy) of the interview methodology and outcomes. It provides an aural academic showcase for oral history, as well as an artistically satisfying listening experience. Hardy describes it as a hybrid that attempts to harness the dual qualities of print and audio:

From the world of print we borrowed the convention of the "chapter," and from the world of music we took the convention of a "movement." Chapter headings would be assigned to sections that tended to be more linear and informational; movement titles to segments that borrowed more of their grammar from musical composition, that layered voices and sounds and communicated meaning more impressionistically or poetically.

(Hardy 111 1999)

Although he has authored books which elegantly explore and extend oral history theory (Portelli 1991, 1997, 2003), Portelli continues to advocate the need to hear, not read, the spoken word. At the 14<sup>th</sup> International Oral History Conference in Sydney in 2006, he described the interview process as 'a performance in search of a text' and pithily declared that in the case of oral history 'audio IS the text' (Portelli 2006a). If we accept both these observations, then radio could surely be considered an obvious stage for the performance. But what exactly does radio gain?

The often-trivial dialogue on radio can easily pall: inane phone-ins, inept or sycophantic interviews with local identities, multiple presenters vying to deliver not-so-witty riffs. Such radio would benefit from the interviewing rigour and empathy commonly shown by oral historians, who seek to tap into what legendary American broadcaster and oral historian Studs Terkel called the 'precious metal' in an individual (Terkel in Perks & Thomson 2006: 127). At its best, the oral history interview can elucidate and inspire, inform and entertain; it provides an endlessly shifting framing of history and insights into human frailties and triumphs, and shows the subjective and selective nature of memory itself. But (whisper it), oral history can

also be laborious, lengthy and sometimes dull. In a typical two-hour interview, there will be light and shade, filling in of biographical detail and routines, pedestrian accounts that fail to interest the listener as much as the teller. ‘Filleting’ the interview for broadcast purposes to showcase its more cogent sections, and cut out digressions and repetition will, I contend, enhance its listenability and increase its likely dissemination, thereby fulfilling the democratising role envisaged by the radical English historian Paul Thompson (Thompson 1978:7).

To a contemporary radio producer, this treatment of speech is so standard it does not warrant discussion, but academic oral historians argue trenchantly about the protocols of mediating interview content. Seminal American theorist Michael Frisch acknowledges the documentary, in all its forms, as traditionally the most ‘useful’ vehicle for publishing oral history, noting that it involves ‘the inevitability and indeed... the indispensability of editorial intervention...’. Frisch sees value in both ‘raw’ (unexpurgated) and ‘cooked’ (creatively edited for publication) oral history, although his preferred future model is to digitally index an oral history archive so that browsers can endlessly configure and reconfigure its content to suit their particular interests – a sort of citizen ‘remix’ version of oral history (Frisch in Perks & Thomson 2006: 110-14). At the other end of the theoretical oral history spectrum, academics vigorously debate any modifying of interview content, agonising over the removal of ‘crutch words’ (‘um’, ‘y’know’) in a printed transcript, and insisting that any published work be produced collaboratively (Wilmsen 2001). Even the radio journalist’s impulse to keep the interviewee ‘on track’ is anathema to such oral historians, as evidenced by a recent post to the H-Oralhist electronic studies list asking for advice on how to deal graciously with ‘a long irrelevant aside’.<sup>1</sup> Numerous responses roundly rejected the very notion of an ‘irrelevant aside’. Some postulated

that what seemed irrelevant might have a hidden meaning which might only become apparent to other researchers; one spoke of metaphorical import in seeming digressions, another suggested that they might illuminate the relationship between interviewer and informant/narrator. While I concur with the feminist oral historian Luisa Passerini's dictum (1989: 197) that 'all autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, [and] for which purpose', I do not believe that every word uttered in an oral history interview is sacred; nor is it always autobiographical memory. Informants get distracted. As I postulated to the H-Oralhist list, 'if I'm interviewing someone on the theme of say, their life as a coal miner... and the cat walks across the room and they go off into an extended description of said cat's allergies and history of disease, I do not think it is my duty to search for meaning in this display of concern for their pet. I think it is indeed a Long, Irrelevant Aside.' I suggested the pragmatic solution of pressing pause till the hypothetical cat's allergies had been exhausted, thereby not undermining the relationship with the informant, but saving on transcription budgets and obtaining a more focused interview for posterity. But while several people agreed heartily with me in private emails, the official list consensus was to reverently record and retain whatever the narrator said.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach may comply with ethical protocols for institutional oral historians, but according all parts of a spoken word interview equal 'status' does not foment engaging or effective radio: for oral history to be broadcast, selections have to be made, if only due to constraints of programme duration. But far from being distorted or devalued, I contend that oral history benefits aesthetically from being creatively treated for radio, and is thereby made more accessible - and surely a major purpose of the recording of oral history is to have hitherto forgotten or marginalised voices *heard*, rather than languishing in library vaults to be perused mainly by scholars. In

short, while there is clearly a place for unexpurgated oral history as archive, in order for it to have maximum public resonance, it needs skilful editing and shaping as an acoustic narrative form.

Oral history needs the radio producer's skill in honing and sequencing a long interview so that it unfolds as compelling narrative, minus the waffling blind alleys. It acquires narrative complexity (and broader historical scope) from the bringing of several informants into 'dialogue' by juxtaposition of similar or opposing views – an approach favoured as far back as the mid-1940s by BBC features producer W. R. Rodgers, in his *Radio Portraits* series.<sup>3</sup> In the early fifties, this 'montage' production style would be adopted by another pioneering BBC producer, Denis Mitchell, whose *People Talking* series (1953-'58) featured startlingly authentic voices at a time when most broadcast speech was carefully pre-scripted. Although the remarkable BBC Manchester producer Olive Shapley had broadcast working men's voices live in the 1930s (Cardiff & Scannell 1991: 345), Mitchell's programmes went further. They featured the outcast and forgotten, speaking directly to listeners, unmediated by a formal BBC presenter. *Lorry Harbour* (1952) focused on long distance lorry drivers and their all night transport cafes, *The Drifter Sort* (1953) featured tramps, buskers and the homeless, while *In Prison* (1957) allowed the voices of prisoners to reach the airwaves (Franklin 2009: 98-9). As broadcaster Val Clery observed, Mitchell showcased 'the unembarrassed vital voices of ordinary people talking about themselves and their lives, without the nannyish corrective interruptions of a narrator' (Clery, quoted in Franklin 2009:113). Interestingly, Mitchell, like Shapley, took a collaborative approach to his programme-making, more redolent of the oral historian than the journalist. This protected them against accusations of prurience and

exploitation (Franklin 2009:117). But at an aesthetic level, Mitchell was captivated by the aural aspects of his interviews.

I try to listen to people on two levels: to what they say and – more importantly – to how they say it. It's in the rhythms and falls of everyday speech that people reveal their truth, their quality and strength. If you like, you listen for the poetry behind the prose.

(Mitchell 1974, quoted in Franklin 2009: 99)

Techniques such as editing and montage are only the start of oral history's romance with radio. The courtship continues with the judicious introduction of music, that other emotive pillar of radio, which can enhance or counterpoint the power of the spoken word, or be used diegetically to advance the narrative, as in the *Radio Ballads* (BBC 1958-'64) discussed below, and used also in my own recent series on interfaith marriage, *Marrying Out* (ABC 2009). The interview themes may suggest other elements: use of archival sound, re-enactments, sound manipulation such as echo or reverb effects, or spatial contouring. Other sounds - 'ambient' or 'wild' sound - can be layered in, triggered by the interview content: birdsong, a river, urban street noise, a school scene, a domestic moment. This use of ambient sound, later associated with the 1960s renaissance of European feature producers led by Peter Leonard Braun in Germany, was extensively used in the 1940s by the legendary American broadcaster, Norman Corwin. His 1947 CBS radio documentary series *One World Flight*, comprising 13 programmes recorded in 16 countries, included a significant oral history element, as he sought to depict the post-war era:

He took with him CBS Recorder Lee Bland and 225 pounds of magnetic wire-recording equipment. The trip lasted four months, covered 42,000 miles and... produced 100 hours of recorded interviews. He interviewed heads of state and common people, people of all types regardless of status or walks of life. The transcript alone produced 3700 typed pages.

(Old Time Radio Researchers' Group 2011).



Besides such diverse interviewees, the series features evocative actuality - Italian demonstrators demanding work, Australian shearers and a sheep auction, Aboriginal traditional singing, traffic on a Prague street - the sonic elements anchored by Corwin's informed analysis and poetic scripting. Studs Terkel greatly admired Corwin, whom he termed the 'bard of radio'; Terkel also acknowledged a debt to Mitchell (Terkel 2001). Their production elements – the montage use of carefully edited oral history interviews enhanced with actuality – were employed by Terkel and his producer/collaborator Jim Unrath in their Prix Italia -winning programme, *Born To Live* (1958). 'I was influenced by Dennis [sic] Mitchell as well as by Norman Corwin. Sounds need not have a narrator. I got that from Mitchell. Just let the ideas flow from one to the other' (Terkel 2001). It was hardly surprising that these pioneering radio feature producers in the UK and the US influenced each other: D.W. Bridson, the noted BBC producer of imaginative sound panoramas and 'industrial folk operas' from the 1930s, mentored Denis Mitchell (Franklin 2009: 96), while Mitchell used folksinger Ewan MacColl's song *Dirty Old Town* for his radio feature *Night in the City* (1955), and Mitchell's innovative approach to actuality clearly presaged the montage masterpieces that would be created by BBC producer Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and musician/composer Peggy Seeger, the eight *Radio Ballads* of 1958-64.

## **1.2 Crafted Oral History Radio Documentary: identifying the genre**

I have labelled this marriage of oral history content and sophisticated radio production techniques a 'COHRD', Crafted Oral History Radio Documentary, because from its prototype beginnings with Corwin, Mitchell, and Terkel, through the *Radio Ballads* and subsequent programs in the US and Australia, it stands out as a distinct genre.

The COHRD format can be defined as a creatively produced non-fiction radio narrative, based on a core of ground-breaking oral history research (OH). The term phonetically evokes the idea of striking a “chord” with the listener through the nuanced aesthetic of long-form radio. The COHRD format sits somewhere on the shifting creative continuum between the modern radio “documentary” and “feature” forms which elude precise differentiation. Current practitioners opt for one label or the other according to their own preference and/or the traditional nomenclature of a specific broadcasting outlet or region. British radio studies academic David Hendy describes the radio documentary as a ‘fascinating paradox’ which ‘offers authenticity’ but ‘also denotes artifice’:

It is sometimes made by journalists, who regard it as a form of extended current-affairs reportage. Yet it is also practised by producers who have more aesthetic concerns, who might stress the creative dimensions of the form, who will look for reality in less informational ways and through the expressive or dramatic dimensions of a programme.

(Hendy in Crisell 2009: 220)

As Hendy (in Crisell 2009) and Nichols (1991) point out, “documentary” is often seen as an informationalist form, characterised as sober, educational and cerebral, seeking to persuade through evidence and argument. “Placing evidence before others in order to convey a particular viewpoint, forms the organizational backbone of documentary” (Nichols 1991: 125). But John Grierson, the so-called father of British documentary, did not rule art out when he espoused documentary as ‘the creative interpretation of actuality.’ He noted: ‘The only way in which documentary can hope to achieve the ordinary virtues of an art is through arrangements, rearrangements and creative shapings’ of the natural material, or reality, at its heart (Grierson in Hardy 1979: 20). Thus Grierson sets out the authorial role of the documentary maker. He/she is not merely to reproduce or record reality, but to give it meaning through selective editing

and artful presentation: the craft of studio production. Madsen (2005) traces the “radio feature” from its provenance as a strong literary/dramatic form in Britain from the 1930s to its European renaissance in the 1960s, when it exuberantly broke free of the studio, as Peter Leonhard Braun, who was to found the International [Radio] Feature Conference (IFC) in 1974, recalls:

The portable tape recorder allowed us to give up our sedentary existence and become nomads and hunters once more – with the microphone as our weapon. My God, what a feeling of liberation! We no longer wrote about a subject, we recorded the subject itself. We were acoustic cameras, shooting our sound material in the wild, then combining it into productions. We called these documentary works “acoustic films”.  
(Braun 2004: 4)

But Corner (1996) notes that documentary also concerns itself with the “fly-on-the-wall” presenting of lived experience: in radio terms, a form of *audio verite*. The lines blur further with what contemporary British practitioner Alan Hall calls the “documentary feature”, which he describes as “tending to apply the techniques of fiction to fact-based stories” (Hall in Biewen & Dilworth 2010: 96). While “features” are today, in Europe and Australia at least, associated with imaginative and often complex audio production techniques and a creative treatment of narrative, in the US, similar formats can be described as “documentary”. Audio studies academic John Biewen notes how the radio documentary label has moved from denoting a worthy, turgid form which he memorably describes as “sonic Brussels sprouts” (Biewen & Dilworth 2010: 3), to encompass an energetic and eclectic range. His anthology *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound* (2010) locates diverse audio journalists/artists “inside the big stretchy tent that is documentary radio. By which I mean they use sound to tell *true* stories artfully” (Biewen & Dilworth 2010: 5).

In sum, what mutually distinguishes both documentary and feature forms is the authorial shaping of the producer, who – apart altogether from any presence as

narrator of the program - creates meaning through the combined effect of the audio elements he chooses to record or include and the manner of their incorporation (sequence, layering, pacing, interpolation of other elements etcetera). This ‘creative combustion’ (Hall in Biewen & Dilworth 2010: 101) elevates the raw interview to a more affective state, allowing the listener to engage with it more readily, at an emotional as well as a cognitive level (McHugh 2010: 123-8). At one end of the narrative spectrum the feature maker crosses over to ‘sound artist’; at the other, the documentary maker is grounded in reportage. Somewhere in between, anchored in revelatory oral history, sits the COHRD. The oral history at its core confers purpose and meaning through its mixture of original substantive content and accompanying personal interpretation. Documentary crafting techniques are employed to distil an unwieldy body of interviews into a coherent, balanced and pleasing narrative.

Creative production raises the stakes and heightens the mood so as to illuminate every tiny nuance the oral history offers. However complex the format, the relationship between radio and oral history should remain mutually respectful, each mindful of the other’s guiding principles. Thus, interview excerpts will not skew the perspective of the full interview, and radio production razzle-dazzle will not be an end in itself; the marriage of oral history and crafted radio should be a symbiotic pairing, in which the needs of each partner are balanced. It is worth reviewing the twin roads oral history and radio production have taken to reach this crossover point.

### **1.3 Origins of oral history as academic practice**

The noted American theorist and practitioner Ronald Grele describes oral history as ‘the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction’ (Grele 1996: 63). <sup>4</sup>Portelli distinguishes oral history from

other academic disciplines on two grounds (both of which lend themselves to the medium of radio): its orality and the shaping influence of the interviewing process, which by its nature brings forth history-as-narrative.

In theory (and in practice) oral history can be about almost anything; open-endedness at all levels is one of its distinctive formal characteristics. I believe, however, that at the core of oral history, in epistemological and in practical terms, lies one deep thematic focus, which distinguishes it from other approaches and disciplines, also based on interviewing and fieldwork, such as anthropology, sociology and folklore: the combination of the prevalence of the narrative form on the one hand, and the search for a connection between biography and history, between individual experience and the transformations of society, on the other.

(Portelli 1997: 6)

Oral history is closely linked to long-form feature journalism and creative non-fiction, informing the work of such acclaimed and diverse authors as Philip Gourevitch on the Rwanda genocide (*We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families* (1998)) Truman Capote's novelistic re-telling of a family's murder reconstructed from interviews with protagonists and eye-witnesses (*In Cold Blood* (1967)), John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946), featuring the retold stories of survivors of the atomic blast and Anna Funder's penetrating analysis of the East German Communist state (*Stasiland* (2002)). Besides inverting the telescope of history to provide a closer framing, oral history from the 1960s on has been widely used to 'reclaim' history for marginalised groups. As Portelli reiterated at the International Oral History Conference in Sydney in 2006, 'oral history is contestative, against the grain. It is speaking truth to power'. But what is 'truth'? Traditional academic historians have often criticised oral history on the grounds that human memory is fallible and subjective. Australian historian Patrick O'Farrell unleashed a turbulent debate in 1979 with this provocative put-down, embedded in a review in *Quadrant*

magazine, of Wendy Lowenstein's oral history of Australian wharfies in the Depression, *Under the Hook*:

The basic problem with oral testimony about the past is that its truth (when it is true) is not primarily about what happened or how things were, but about how the past has been recollected ... we move straight away into the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity.

(O'Farrell 1979: 5)

But oral historians are actively interested in the 'emotional truth' of what happened, the meaning it holds for the person who experienced it, the way he or she has selectively remembered certain details and not others. 'Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did' (Portelli 2006: 36). Subjectivity, he argues, is implicit, whether we like it or not: 'To ignore and exorcise subjectivity as if it were only a noxious interference in the pure data, is ultimately to distort and falsify the nature of the data themselves', he warned (Portelli 1997: 80).

Whereas news journalism eschews subjectivity and strives for the dispassionate presenter, radio features increasingly include the personal perspective of the narrator/producer. In Australia, recent winners of Best Radio Documentary in the prestigious Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism have interwoven the narrator's personal quest with the programme theme: Eurydice Aroney seeking to understand the circumstances of her grandmother's death in a backyard abortion (Aroney and Davis 2007) and Colm McNaughton disclosing his troubled childhood in Belfast as he returns to Northern Ireland to explore the sectarian divide (McNaughton et al 2008).

Power dynamics inform every interview, whether acknowledged or not. In pre-recorded media interviews, the interviewee is asked to respond to a set of

questions not of his choice; he usually has no control over how his answers will be edited or published. Oral history interviews seek to involve the interviewee (informant/narrator) in a more equal way: informants are usually given a release form which allows them to specify access conditions to the interview, and ethical best practice recommends giving the informant an opportunity to 'review, correct and/or withdraw material' (Oral History Association of Australia 2011). Portelli suggests that the most realistic approach to dealing with the myriad of interviewer-interviewee dynamics is to accept and acknowledge the differences:

Power and hierarchy are real presences in personal relationships, and while they cannot be wished away, they cannot prevent us from doing our work either. Democracy is not to pretend these unequal differences are not there; democracy is to face them squarely and to take responsibility for them in the process of working to deconstruct them.

(Portelli 1997: 78)

#### ***1.4 Evolution of the 'COHRD' via the Radio Ballads***

In 1957, the radical folksinger Ewan MacColl began a collaboration with BBC producer Charles Parker and American folk musician Peggy Seeger that would create eight one-hour 'Radio Ballads', broadcast between 1958 and 1964. Though loosely documentary, the series was groundbreaking in theme and technique. It dealt with the lives and preoccupations of 'ordinary people', speaking directly to listeners: fishermen, coal miners, railway workers and navvies, and previously unconsidered groups such as polio sufferers, Travellers (Britain's nomadic peoples), boxers, and teenagers. In the sleeve notes to the CD series (Topic 2008), Laurence Aston notes how writer Albert Casey described the radio ballads in 1964: 'the imaginative recreation of experience... about the way we live now, attempting to give this life the quality of epic – "to make", as John Grierson once said, "the everyday significant".'

As Gillian Reynolds, radio critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, observed decades on: ‘They broke the mould of radio programmes. And if you look at the duty log, the BBC archive, people were ringing up and saying “what is this? Never heard anything like this before.” They invented that whole genre of people talking for themselves, using their own vocal rhythms, not written speech’ (Reynolds 2006).<sup>5</sup>

The *Sunday Times* described the first radio ballad, *The Ballad of John Axon*, as "as remarkable a piece of radio as I have ever listened to", while the *Observer* enthused: "Last week a technique and subject got married and nothing in radio kaleidoscopy, or whatever you like to call it, will ever be the same again" (MacColl 1981). For his second *Radio Ballad*, MacColl chose the building of Britain’s first major motorway, the M1, a subject replete with riches for the oral historian. But Parker’s focus on the construction process itself made for underwhelming radio in MacColl’s view. He echoed oral history’s concern with the subject’s *interpretation* of his lived experience:

Radio Ballads should not be concerned with processes but with people's attitudes to those processes; not with things but with people's relationships to those things; and with the way in which those attitudes and relationships were expressed in words.

(MacColl 1981)

Though the interviews and music are bridged and inflected by construction sound effects (drilling, earth-moving), the programme includes turgid descriptions of culverts, gradients and drainage interspersed with song lyrics whose attempts to enthuse about ‘minimum sightline’ and ‘super elevation’ would not be amiss in a Monty Python satire (*We are the consulting engineers*). MacColl considered the programme ‘a complete debacle’.

The third radio ballad, *Singing the Fishing* (BBC 1960), an exploration of British herring fishing communities in East Anglia and Scotland, was a happier



marriage of song and story, with seabirds, storms and shipboard effects providing an evocative sound matrix. In the collaborative spirit of oral history, MacColl played the songs written by him based on the interviews back to the informants for comment. To his delight, the line between history and art occasionally became blurred:

Occasionally they would criticise a word or a phrase or question a point of information, whereupon I would rewrite the offending line or phrase and go on rewriting it until it met with approval. There were rare and wonderful occasions when Sam, or one of the other fishermen, would claim to have known all his life a song I had just written. When that happened, we knew we had come close to capturing the spirit of the fishing.

(MacColl 1981)

The fourth programme, *The Big Hewer* (1961) showcased Britain's coal miners. Going down the pits into 'hellish places' and 'impossibly narrow passages' to record the actuality helped MacColl and Parker to feel the connection with history:

We stumbled and crawled mile after mile through black, stinking water to reach the workings – to suddenly see a putter loom up with his pony and loaded tram. Almost naked he was and black, and uttering the near animal noises of a man in the grip of extreme frustration and discomfort... you're suddenly brought back to the time of the bell pits... and little kids working... the whole thing builds up inside you and you feel this is what we've got to say!

(Parker/MacColl Topic 2008)

Ever since, it has become standard practice to share and record the daily routines and tribulations of a documentary subject, to record wild sound along with separately staged interviews, and to add pace and texture by blending sound effect, music and actuality over voice.

### **1.5 Transferring Oral History to Radio - Reflections**

To be allowed to speak is one thing; to be truly heard is another. When oral history is broadcast on radio, the speaker's audience goes from one (the interviewer) to many

thousands, even millions. Studs Terkel, the veteran Chicago radio interviewer (his show on WFMT radio ran from 1952-1997) and Pulitzer-prizewinning author of numerous books of oral history, identified the crucial importance for people of low social status of simply being heard. He often recounted an incident about a poor American woman he impulsively recorded one day. As he told British broadcaster Tony Parker, he saw a black woman with two or three children staring into an empty shop window. Terkel politely asked what she was looking at.

‘Oh, dreams, I’m just looking at dreams.’ So I’ve got my tape recorder and I switch it on and I say ‘Good dreams, bad dreams?’ And she starts to talk... and when she stops talking after eight, maybe ten minutes or so, one of them [her children] says, ‘Hey mom, can we listen to what you said?’... so I play it back and she listens to it too. And when it’s over, she gives a little shake of her head and she looks at me and she says, ‘Well until I heard that, I never knew I felt that way.’

(Terkel in Perks & Thomson 2006: 126-7)

This anecdote illustrates two salient aspects of oral history: (i) the informant feels validated by being listened to and recorded and (ii) she credits even this short spontaneous interview process with triggering hitherto unarticulated ideas and thoughts. Hearing them played back - ‘proof’ – she registers and accepts her own newly formulated attitudes. This example supports Portelli’s contention that the recording of oral history helps people ‘make sense of the past and give a form to their lives’ (Portelli in Perks & Thomson 2006: 38).

The live radio journalist on a magazine or current affairs show would be unlikely to garner such philosophical insights as Terkel obtained, for many reasons – interview duration, location, and choice of interviewee, to name a few. The pressure on live interviewees to deliver snappy, articulate sound ‘bites’ militates against reflection, while a studio setting makes most non-media professionals or habitués nervous. But the woman’s cogitations would most likely have been missed simply

because she may not have been deemed ‘interesting’ enough to interview. Producers of radio features and documentaries take a different interviewing approach from their live/news colleagues. Like oral historians, they have the luxury of time – the pre-recorded interview can be open-ended, or take place over several sessions, allowing thoughts and ideas to unfold and develop. The celebrated US radio feature makers Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva, known as The Kitchen Sisters, record up to 16 hours of interview with one person – relatively long even for oral historians. Although they acknowledge that it ‘isn’t always the most efficient way to go time-wise’, they believe strongly in the value of time, not just to give space for stories to be told, but crucially, to allow trust to develop:

Life is short. Tape is cheap. Really compelling radio doesn’t usually come from tiny slivers of sound. It comes because people got comfortable and spilled the beans or told a long, involved story. Good radio often takes more time than you think it should. We ask people to sing, let them laugh, and we sit quietly through their pauses. You never know.

(The Kitchen Sisters in Biewen & Dilworth 2010: 39-40)

Oral historians and seasoned radio documentary/feature makers know the benefits of silence. It can presage the most precious moments of interview: a deeply felt belief, a newly recognised understanding, a long-suppressed admission. Silence is the compost of deep conversation.

A combination of inclusive oral history interviewing principles and the audio aesthetic of the radio documentary/feature should yield rich broadcast dividends – and indeed broadcasting organisations are probably the biggest source of online oral history today. Some formats, such as the massive *StoryCorps* project launched on NPR in the US in 2003, have abandoned the idea of ‘detached’ or ‘expert’ interviewer. Instead, both parties are ‘ordinary’ people, who not only know each other, but whose relationship is critical to the process.

The heart of *StoryCorps* is the conversation between two people who are important to each other: a son asking his mother about her childhood, an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America, or a couple reminiscing on their 50th wedding anniversary.

(*StoryCorps* 2010)

An independent non-profit project whose mission is ‘to honor and celebrate one another’s lives through listening’, *StoryCorps* is set to become the biggest oral history project in the world, with 30,000 stories already recorded in all fifty states from more than 60,000 participants. Selected interviews are broadcast – to an audience of millions - on NPR’s *Morning Edition* and associated public radio, as well as being podcast, while the entire archive is deposited at the US Library of Congress.<sup>5</sup>

### **1.6 The reinvention of oral history on radio: Australia and the US**

In 1985, a Social History Unit (SHU) was established at ABC Radio National (Australia) to occupy a position between the staid Education Department and the more hard-edged current affairs/investigative Talks Unit. This small unit, with just five or six fulltime producers, would develop major documentary series on hitherto neglected themes, using oral history as their mainstay. The SHU output featured voices rarely heard before on the national airwaves: Aboriginal people recalling ruptured families and battles for decent wages, land rights and equality; bush pioneers and slum dwellers; miners, wharfies, foresters, survivors of cyclones, floods and droughts, and of war in myriad guises. Although not conceived as such, these programmes can perhaps be considered versions of the COHRD, currently represented by ABC’s *Hindsight* programme (Hindsight 2011).

A seminal oral history series on ABC Radio National pre-dated and perhaps helped foment the SHU. Begun in 1979, *Taim Blong Masta* explored Australia’s

colonial role in Papua New Guinea (Bowden and Nelson 1981). It was a collaboration between radio producer Tim Bowden and Pacific historian Dr Hank Nelson of the Australian National University, inspired by a BBC series about the British experience in India, called *Plain Tales from the Raj* (Ramsey 2008). Bowden recorded 350 hours of oral history, the content informed by Nelson. ‘He gave me the academic rigour I needed, and I did what I do best – capture voices on tape’ (Ramsey 2008). Those tapes, full of what Nelson described as ‘the confetti of stumbling lips’, were crafted by Bowden into 24 episodes of 45 minutes, broadcast in 1981 (Ramsey 2008). The duo repeated their collaboration for a second series of 16 programmes, also involving 350 hours of recorded oral history, on the experiences of Australian prisoners-of-war in Japan. That series, *Australia under Nippon* (Bowden and Nelson 1984), revealed the power of oral history to uncover aspects of events that conventional academic scholarship had failed to document. ‘Hank was adamant we had to find material not in the literature. And we did,’ Bowden recalled. ‘Suddenly the lid was off a whole lot of things. Things like, not all the officer POWs behaved well... Some – some! – were what the blokes called White Japs and collaborated....’ (Ramsey 2008). Bowden believes it was the empathetic and informed interview process so typical of oral history that facilitated the revelation of this new material in *Australians Under Nippon*. ‘Because we had an interest and a knowledge, these blokes started to talk’ (Ramsey 2008).

In a paper delivered at a conference in honour of Charles Parker, Bournemouth poet and radio studies academic Sean Street drew together the common impetus behind the work of oral history-on-radio pioneers Parker, Terkel and David Isay, mastermind and founder of *StoryCorps*.

Projects like *StoryCorps*... demonstrate how vital, in both senses of the word, spoken language can be... Which all goes to prove just how crucial it is to *do* the interview, to make the programme, partly because it makes wonderful radio but probably more importantly because these things, these people, everything, is so fragile and there's a time limit to all things mortal. We should do it because we can. It's the lesson of the archivist. It's a responsibility. Charles Parker, I think, would agree.

(Street 2008)

*This American Life (TAL)*, produced by Chicago Public Radio, could be considered a whimsical contemporary example of the COHRD genre (while *Hearing Voices* and *Radio Diaries* on NPR follow a more conventional format). *TAL* describes itself, tongue-in-cheek, as 'a documentary show for people who hate documentaries'. It applies artistic production techniques from layered soundtrack to actuality, blended with edited interview, often with a quirky narrator presence. Since its premiere in 1995 on WBEZ public radio in Chicago, *TAL* has provided moving, off-beat and intimate portraits of ordinary American lives: stories about mundane-seeming topics like babysitting, sissies or summer camps, or transformative events like being a transplant recipient, or the subject of a police chase, show the scope and range of the COHRD. Echoing Portelli's credo that oral history is transformative, linking life to times, the stories on *TAL* collectively showcase the character, concerns and foibles of the nation, just as Terkel's massive tomes highlighted his era's preoccupations with race, work and class - but with the enhanced accessibility on *TAL* of hearing the speakers directly, rather than reading edited transcript.

We're not really formatted like other radio shows at all. Instead, we do these stories that are like movies for radio. There are people in dramatic situations. Things happen to them. There are funny moments and emotional moments and—hopefully—moments where the people in the story say interesting, surprising things about it all. It has to be surprising. It has to be fun... What we like are stories that are both funny and sad. Personal and sort of epic at the same time.

(This American Life 2010)

## **1.7 Conclusion:**

Whether it is *TAL*'s 'movies for radio' approach or the *Hindsight* (ABC) dictum that 'the memories of ordinary Australians are woven into complex, credible and satisfying documentaries' (Hindsight 2011), both these radio formats evince the blend of art, journalism and history (recent or otherwise) that is at the heart of the particular form of radio I have labelled the COHRD. Its aim, in sum, is to harness the listenability of crafted radio and showcase the content that oral history can provide; to employ the feature maker's art, while keeping faith with the documentarist's concern with fairness and authenticity. Because of the gravitas of its research and the aesthetic appeal of its presentation, the oral history/crafted-radio genre makes an enduring contribution, which can sustain more than one listening. Thus, while 1.7 million people listen to *This American Life* each week, a further half a million sign up for its podcasts. Whereas radio pioneers in the 1940s and '50s were subject to what BBC features producer Lance Sieveking called the 'ghastly impermanence' of broadcasting (Sieveking 1934: 15), podcasting has liberated the producers of today's COHRD programmes from 'real time' airing, which curtailed accessibility and therefore restricted the scholarly use of this valuable aural social history. Following its broadcast, usually on public radio, today's COHRDs can be accessed any time online and used as an academic text in the same way as journal articles and library books – the competitive, peer-reviewed process of being aired on a reputable broadcaster conferring 'publication status' equivalent to print publication. In order to legitimise oral-history-as-crafted-radio as an identifiable genre on the oral history/radio continuum, I propose the adoption of the term 'COHRD' to describe this hybrid radio form, which has much to offer as an academic research text. At a creative level, if the

disparate forms of COHRD radio programmes have a common purpose, it can be summed up thus: to move, to inform and to delight and in so doing, to connect past and present lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Post on 13 October 2011 by William S. Walker Ph.D. to H-ORALHIST@H-NET.MSU.EDU

<sup>2</sup> The thread, from 13-18 October 2011, contained over twenty public posts to H-ORALHIST@H-NET.MSU.EDU

<sup>3</sup> Franklin provides a useful 1952 quote from Rodgers: 'Since it was clearly undesirable to sieve, and thereby arbitrarily to shape, their piecemeal memories beforehand, these were recorded at length and at random. In this way a great snowball

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of haphazard desultory talk was amassed, and in the light of after-study it was strictly edited, drastically cut, re-formed and linked together. Sentences, and even single words, were lifted into new contexts, fragmentary collections were dovetailed, viewpoints that were distractingly far removed were married in argument or agreement, people who in life had neither met nor known one another were made to meet on disc, were juxtaposed by accord or by contrast.’ (Rodgers, quoted in Franklin 2009: 80.

<sup>4</sup>Other significant theorists such as Baum and Ritchie emphasize a key characteristic of oral history as the placement of the unexpurgated interviews in a public archive for scrutiny and research – a departure from radio journalism practice (Ritchie 2003; Wilmsen 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Some oral historians contend that StoryCorps is not in fact ‘oral history’, since it relies on a shorter interview format (40 minutes) and usually has a pre-determined focus for the conversation.