

A Beginner's Guide to Radio Research  
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I've had a number of interesting conversations over the past couple years as I've gotten more into radio research about strategies and methods individuals use for doing this kind of work. I thought I'd highlight ways I've gone about doing my research, what's worked well for me, what hasn't, and things I've learned as a guide to help others get into doing their own research.

I was inspired to begin doing my own research after attending Doug Hopkinson's presentation at the 2009 Cincinnati old time radio convention where he effectively introduced *Cecil and Sally* to the hobby. Having known Doug for many years and somewhat "grown up" in the hobby with him, I began thinking that even us little guys could contribute valuable knowledge to the hobby, if not on the scale and volume of Martin Grams or Jim Cox. He's a regular working joe who doesn't have access to resources beyond what most of us have and I figured if he could do the great work embodied by that presentation then maybe I could do some, too.

The first question anyone interested in doing historical radio research has to answer is "What should I study?" There are different approaches to answering this question and each of you will have to answer based on your own specific circumstances.

### **Publishing**

This question's answer depends to a considerable extent on whether or not you want to publish. Plenty of fans do research to satisfy their own curiosity and have no interest in seeing it published in any sort of venue. This essentially opens up any topic to you, constrained only by your financial ability and hobby contacts to access pertinent documents. If you'd like to publish your work – and I always encourage this – then you've still got some choices to make. Placing your work up on the internet is easy and free and an option for everyone with internet access (or with a friend with access).

The old time radio hobby is blessed to have a number of print outlets considering the hobby's small size. SPERDVAC, REPS, Radio Historical Association of Colorado, the Old Time Radio Club of New York, the Metro Washington Old Time Radio Club and one of the Cincinnati clubs all have newsletters. The online group the Old Time Radio Researchers publishes this ezine, the *Old Radio Times*. Bob Burchett publishes the *Old Time Radio Digest*, an unaffiliated magazine. *The Nostalgia Digest*, edited by Steve Darnell, usually publishes a piece or two focused on old time radio in each of its quarterly issues, and it pays! A huge range of material finds its way into the pages of these publications.

Still, you might not want to choose a topic that is too narrow in focus or too obscure. The *Old Radio Times* published a piece I did on early black radio entertainers from Kansas. That was probably pushing my luck and likely had

very limited appeal to readers. I have a piece on a local Kansas radio station which has not been published as I feel it would have little interest to readers outside the area.

If you're thinking about a book, then you really need to think about and investigate topics as well as potential publishers. In this field McFarland, Bear Manor, and Scarecrow will probably be your first three places to query. For McFarland and Scarecrow, you need to identify topics which are going to have relatively wide appeal and be of interest especially to libraries, the main buyer of books from these houses. One of my proposals was rejected as being too regionally focused; they didn't know how they could market it to a national audience.

Notice that very rarely will McFarland and Scarecrow put out books devoted to a single old time radio series. *Mr. Keen* and *Gunsmoke* are two of the more prominent exceptions. More successful are books like many of Jim Cox's which concentrate on an OTR genre (quiz shows, soap operas, sitcoms, etc.). Bear Manor is open to a wider variety of subjects and puts out more material on individual series (especially if there are film or television cross-overs) and show business personalities. Their books are also much cheaper and aimed at individual buyers, not libraries like the other two publishers.

There is also the self-publishing route which has worked very well for Martin Grams. However, he has invested substantial time and effort into promoting his work and building up a following. He's essentially built himself into a "brand" in the old time radio, television, and film communities. Can you do all the grunt work in selling your own work and are you willing to invest the money upfront for printing?

Regardless of the outlet you choose, if you want to write a book and make a few bucks from your work, then the topic has to be unique and potentially interesting to a fair number of readers. A book on *The Coty Playgirl* (to pick a random short-lived series from Dunning) probably won't arouse much interest assuming you happened to somehow find a book's worth of material on the subject. On the other hand, the odds of getting many sales on a second book on a given topic, like another book on *Suspense* or the *Hummerts*, is slim. The small market is not going to support multiple volumes on a single subject, especially if the existing work is considered authoritative.

Realistically, websites and hobby magazines will be your likely outlet. Nevertheless, be aware of your audience and don't be afraid to let it influence your research choices. If given the choice between two topics, one being more popular than the other, you might as well choose that with the most potential popularity since it will attract more eyeballs. If you're going to the hard work of researching a piece you want to the community to pay attention and read it.

### **Getting Paid**

Though no one does old time radio research to get rich, there can be monetary considerations. Depending on one's topic, research could entail considerable travel, which adds up fast, especially if it's cross-country. Few of us can fly across the country and make hundreds or thousands of copies with no thought to remuneration. All of my overnight research trips

have been reserved for paying (or potentially paying) work, whether articles or books. I do usually pick up material on the trips for non-paying articles but that is secondary. You'll need to scrutinize your own budget and decide your limits for research purposes. If given the choice between two equally interesting topics, begin with the one that will be cheaper to research.

Okay, let's assume you've decided you'd like to get your first piece in a hobby magazine and you don't really want to spend more than the cost of a few photocopies. We still find ourselves right back at the question which started this overview: What should I research?

### **Two Approaches to Research**

The possibilities are almost endless. Here's where strategies can diverge; in fact, it's where Doug and I go our separate ways. Maybe you're really into a series or a specific actor or an event that influenced the history of old time radio. Or maybe, as is the case with Doug, you come across a rare or brand new show that is unknown to the hobby. You decide on a topic of interest and follow where it leads. Of course, it's easiest to stay engaged in a project in which you have a natural interest and curiosity. But there are drawbacks, namely who knows where your information might turn up? Many of Doug's research topics have turned out to be West Coast series which creates some logistical issues when he's based out of the Midwest.

I've chosen a different strategy: look around where you live, see what radio resources are available, and develop your research around those topics. In other words, study what is right at hand. Being a Midwestern researcher and in a smaller market than Doug, I'm likely not going to stumble upon many resources about *Escape*, *Jack Benny*, or *Superman*, all series popular with old time radio fans but none of which had any origination from Kansas City. I have, however, discovered a number of series brand new to the hobby, most of which do not have surviving episodes in circulation. Primarily these programs were only heard in the region but some were picked up by the CBS network. Going my route limits your research options (unless you're in New York, L.A., D.C., or a similar area with a wealth of OTR material), but for those options which remain you're assured up front of a certain amount of source documentation. Naturally, additional information may turn up in scattered places across the country, but that can be added at your leisure to the body of knowledge you construct from local and easily obtained resources.

Neither of these approaches is more right than the other and both have worked well for each of us. For the purposes of this article I'm going to focus on my own approach so you can see if it might work for you. I suspect you'll find that in the end the results of the two strategies are not that different, they just lead to exploring very different subjects.

### **Library Holdings**

I'm a student at the University of Kansas so I started by investigating resources that might be available through the

school. As I mentioned above, start with what's nearby, and the university libraries are just a few blocks from my front door. What could they have in their regular holdings that might be of interest? If you're lucky you might find a run of an industry magazine like *Broadcasting* from the golden age of radio. The issues might be hard copies or they might be on microfilm. KU did not have any of these publications but they do have *Variety* on microfilm. This can be a source for fresh information but you'll devote a lot of time utilizing it. The magazine does not have any sort of index system so you must search each weekly issue page by page for any hits of interest. Outside of *Variety*, searching library holdings was pretty much a bust for me. I found no available historic radio publications.

### **Inter-library Loan**

Don't despair if you don't find much. It's possible to find such material at other libraries which can be obtained via inter-library loan. Usually the loans will be microfilm, not original paper pieces, so be prepared to get well acquainted with microfilm readers. I've gotten scripts of popular series this way but the trick is finding loanable material. I haven't looked for microfiche versions of industry periodicals but if a library has them somewhere there's a good chance I could get them on loan. Keep the loan option in mind as you're searching the resources described below. If it doesn't look like an item is loaned out by an institution, request it anyway. All they can say is "no" and you might be surprised with some "yeses" every now and then.

### **Databases**

My first significant discovery was the ProQuest database, which is the searchable online newspaper database from which the newspaper logs at <http://www.jjonz.us/RadioLogs/> originally came. I believe the public can subscribe but it is very expensive and the choice of newspapers is very limited, although they tend to be the biggest of the biggest metro papers. With full access to the database you can dig through information found in the entire newspaper, not just the radio logs. Really, this strategy is just a more convenient way of pouring through old hard copy newspapers or papers on microfilm, a time-consuming method of OTR research that stretches back to the hobby's earliest days. ProQuest is a wonderful resource, keeping in mind the limitations of newspaper research.

I also perused a dissertation search tool. One might be surprised what kind of radio-related dissertations have been completed since the mid-1970s, the time covered by this database. And the dissertations are fully retrievable in pdf format. KU also provides access to a number of other databases which search smaller newspapers and academic journals. There's even a database of databases. These have been of less value but still, nuggets of information have been mined from them. These tools have provided the basis for much of my first couple years of researching.

If there is a college or university near you, visit the library to see what kind of privileges you can get as a member of the community. It may not be full access to all their resources but some would be better than none.

After getting a feel for the school's holdings and online tools, I searched all their special collections.

### **Special Collections**

A note about special collections if you've never worked in them. Most libraries have some sort of special collections. It usually refers to material that is not available to circulate so must be examined in the library under the supervision of library staff. For public city libraries these collections usually consist of local historical items such as censuses, letters, business correspondence, genealogical records, etc. Larger urban libraries will have the resources to put together more diverse special collections that expand beyond local history. The Thousand Oaks library in California has an enviable collection of scripts. With municipal libraries you often have to dig to find these collections. They are infrequently used so staff do not devote a lot of resources to publicizing them.

It's easier to find these collections at colleges and universities. Go to an institution's library webpage and there will very likely be a page dedicated to special collections. They may be a part of the university archives (generally documents from the school's history) or separate. These collections are a source of pride for universities so they're promoted more than in public library systems. Schools actively seek out unique collections of documents and historical artifacts so the items may or may not have a direct connection to the school. This is why Wyoming has such a massive selection of radio material: they have actively pursued the material over the last three or four decades. Often, though, there will be a link to the person or organization donating the collection and the college. These archives attract scholars (and prestige) so university librarians make every attempt to amass interesting collections, whether directly related to the institution or not.

### **Finding Aids**

To effectively access archives and special collections you must become familiar with finding aids; they're your best friends. The contents of library and archive special collections frequently are not included in the institution's regular database. Usually the finding aid is a pdf document which lists the contents of the collection by box and by folder. Quality of finding aids varies widely and plenty of special collections are not cataloged and do not have such aids. I asked the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, a major repository of OTR documentation, about the papers of a particular actor. Unfortunately, there is no finding aid for the collection nor has it really been organized. Some finding aids will be online but if you don't see one, ask. Sometimes the aids are just not on a website but can be attached in an email. I just recently did this with the Gene Autry library in California.

Fortunately, my university (and most universities I've used) has a fairly user-friendly online finding aid so I could search all their special collections for key terms like "radio" and "broadcast." Most of their radio-related special collections documentation dated to the 1960s and later which is past my era of interest. Still, I found the papers for a former student who had gone on to study at an acting workshop in Los Angeles in the 1940s. Part of this workshop focused on radio acting

– Bingo! I turned this into one of my first articles. It wasn't too long and it was not a topic of riveting interest to many readers but it was original research. No one had really written about the radio training provided by the Max Reinhardt Workshop for Stage, Screen and Radio. SPERDVAC's *Radiogram* took it and I was off and running. I'd made an original contribution to the hobby's body of knowledge and I was hooked on digging up more!

If you don't have a college in your town, there's likely one nearby. Search their special collections. Then gradually expand your search. I searched the special collections of schools within one hour, then three hours, etc. Your geography will make a big difference. Not a lot of radio history grew out of Kansas and the surrounding area. If you're on the coasts or Great Lakes region you'll likely come across much more.

### **Finding Primary Sources**

Where else could a budding research start? Peruse the special collections of the public library systems around you. Of course the nearer you are to a major metropolitan area the better chance of finding material about the larger stations which were more likely to produce and be involved in the radio drama we're all interested in.

Check any museums near you. I found a stash of wonderful information at a Kansas City museum. They didn't put any emphasis on the archive; it was not advertised on their website and they don't have any rooms open to the general public. I had to set up a special time to visit and I worked right at a rickety table in the room where everything is stored.

Contact any radio stations in your area that date back to the golden age. Probably they have not held on to historical papers (the station has surely changed ownership multiple times if it has such a long history) but staff might know if such papers exist and where they might be. Find out who's been at the station forever and pry them for information and sources (politely).

Similarly, contact businesses in your area which were around back in the 1930s and 40s. Perhaps they've held on to material related to radio advertising which would be of interest. The chances are slim a company would hold on to such old paperwork with no relevance to their contemporary business needs, former employees or owners may have documents in their personal possession.

Tell everyone you know you enjoy researching radio history. Friends and acquaintances will pass on references and contacts.

Just making a few simple contacts to sources outlined above and I didn't have to go any further than Kansas City, about 45 minutes away, and I now have sufficient research topics and material to keep me busy for the next couple years. I'm also aware of material in other libraries within an easy day's drive which I'll hopefully be able to explore down the road. In short, make yourself aware of resources around you, become an expert about those resources, and get your name familiar to those who could put you in touch with new resources.

### **Distance Access**

If you do find interesting material which is simply too far away to access but will add real value to your work, find out about the copy policies of the holding institution. Some libraries will copy and mail documents for you. It's not cheap, but it can be considerably less expensive than a road trip. I discovered a script I really wanted in an Atlanta library. Being halfway across the country I could not access it and I didn't have friends who could easily copy it for me in a timely manner. At about \$0.50 per page plus shipping the library staff copied it for me. One wouldn't want to spend \$20 for one script too often, but for that special piece of information the price is well justified.

### **Lay the Groundwork**

Let's say that by now you've explored nearby libraries and come across some scripts and correspondence about a radio show you've never heard of. We'll call it *The Awesome Show*. It probably represents a small, local program which has received minimal attention in old time radio publications. Before going to look at the material, however, dig up everything you can find on the topic in the established literature. Begin with the hobby's standard references: Dunning, Hickerson, Barnouw, and any Cox and Grams books you have or which are available in local libraries. While not infalliable, they're very dependable and will give you a base of knowledge from which to start. Early in the process I'll do a basic Google search to see what else has been written about the topic as well. Keep in mind that none of this is research per se, this is just reviewing the literature that exists so far.

Since Google now searches the back issues of some magazines such as *Billboard*, you may actually find a nugget or two that way that is not included in the print sources. The database of major newspaper radio schedules (<http://www.jjonz.us/RadioLogs/>, mentioned earlier) is a good starter resource. Just keep in mind, those schedules were not set in stone and the information provided in the preview blurbs can be suspect. Recognize the limitations of these internet resources but by all means use them.

What you really want to watch for in those Google searches are archive or library websites that pop up. It's possible the institution has a collection of pertinent documents available to the public. This is gold and where you're going to find your best research opportunities. Unfortunately, in my experience this rarely happens. I've only come across such finds a handful of times, and only one was a collection that I could readily access (see financial limitations above). Still, I visited the archive and got material for a great presentation. That presentation will eventually get turned into an article and, who knows, maybe even a book chapter way down the line. But it was a fluke that I used a couple particular search terms which brought up the collection's online finding aid.

It's possible, though, that another library has its own collection of material on *The Awesome Show*. Even if you can't get to that collection any time soon you want to be aware of its existence.

Another online resource is the Old Time Radio Researchers' online back issue collection of golden age radio periodicals ([http://www.otrr.org/pg06b\\_magazines.htm](http://www.otrr.org/pg06b_magazines.htm)). The pdf search function does not work very well with them so you'll have the best luck browsing through them page by page. A lot of the material found in these was also provided by publicists or station officials who obviously had motives which biased their information. David Gleason is putting together a similar online archive ([http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Radio\\_Archives.htm](http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Radio_Archives.htm)) that will keep you busy for endless hours. Like the Radio Researchers pdfs, Gleason's do not respond well to the pdf search engine so you'll have the best results manually scrolling through each magazine.

Please realize that the amount of research (i.e. uncovering brand new information) you can truly do with free resources online is very limited. In most cases it lets you put together a body of known facts about a topic. Logs (which I don't do much with) seem to be one of the more popular products of radio log and Google searches. In some cases, especially small shows that didn't last long, such logs may be about all that we will ever know about the broadcasts.

Find out everything you can about the imaginary *The Awesome Show* before taking a trip. It's easy to waste time and money looking at and copying material which is readily available in published sources. It's good to formulate questions to give your research direction. Who was involved with the show's production? Who were the sponsors? What were the costs? When did it air? If it's an unknown program, what is the show's premise? Who are the characters and what are the plot lines? How does it fit in the broader old time radio context? Big questions can help prevent your getting lost in the minutia of details that some archive collections contain.

### **Planning Your Trip**

Once you find interesting archival sources, plan out a trip. Your first one might be intimidating, at least it was for me. Do as much leg work up front as possible to make the most of your time with the documents. Contact them for hours and days their open, don't just go by what's on a website. Special collections are quirky places and often have hours different from those of the library in which their located and may not be open the same days, either. Check if they close for lunch as that could cost you precious time.

Get as detailed a finding aid as possible ahead of time. Take your time looking through the collections' contents, taking notes of specific boxes and folders that are of interest. Archival boxes are roughly 18 inches by 12 inches, and often they are bigger. This means they hold a lot of documents, easily hundreds or even thousands of memos, letters, and contracts. Be prepared to spend a long time looking through a box, especially on your first visit. If you make follow-up trips you'll have an idea of the contents and can more quickly find documents of greatest interest.

Find out the copy policies of the special collections library, too. Can you make copies? I've never been to a library without copy facilities but I know some archives do not allow it. Only notes may be taken. If they allow copies, how much

are they? My experience has generally been \$0.15 to \$0.20. Martin Grams has seen \$0.25 at some places. This adds up quickly. Can you charge the fees? Do they take checks? Or is it cash only? Do they allow scanning or photographing materials? This could save on copy costs but is rare in my experience. It sure doesn't hurt to ask. Do you make the copies or do staff make the copies? This slows you down if you have to wait for someone else to do the copying. In that case you'd want to get batches of papers copied at a time whereas if you make your own you can copy a single document right away. One library I used had scanning machines with which you'd scan documents or pages and email them to yourself. No cost at all! Does the collections room allow laptops? The more research I do the less I actually use my laptop. Time is precious and I find myself copying more and more and taking fewer and fewer notes. But you still want to have that computer with you if at all possible.

Check out the parking situation beforehand. Parking in larger cities and especially on university campuses can be aggravating. Find the nearest long-term parking but be aware it probably won't be right by the library. I've had luck getting spots in nearby residential neighborhoods but be careful to notice signs that limit parking during certain hours or on certain days. A good day of research will be spoiled by a parking ticket. Just in case you have to park in a metered lot, always have a healthy pocketful of change readily available. Since you've already looked into copy machine prices you surely have a bountiful stash of silver jingling on your person anyway.

Print out campus and library maps. Don't waste time wandering around trying to find the library. Once in the library, don't waste time trying to find the special collections room; it's probably going to be in one of the most inaccessible spots in the library. Have your maps ready.

### **The Big Day**

Go to the bathroom before you start and eat a hearty breakfast. On my most recent research trip I worked in the special collections room for seven hours straight each day, the full time it was open. One day I had to take a three minute restroom break and another day I had to run down three flights of stairs to get more change for the copier. Otherwise I didn't stop reading and copying. It's so exciting looking at each new document you won't notice the strain on your body until you finish and then you'll be exhausted! If you're traveling, though, you want to make use of every single minute. While you're at it, pray the copy machine doesn't break down. I've spent maddening amounts of time waiting for copiers to be unjammed or even serviced. Mark stuff to copy but keep looking through material, don't sit and twiddle your thumbs.

After your trip, get busy processing the information you've collected. You'll be surprised how quickly things get muddled in your head. I made an out-of-state research trip in the summer of 2010. When I made a follow-up trip in the summer of 2011, I hadn't even quite finished writing up the material I had copied the previous year! Granted, it was a lot of material and I completed a lot of other projects, but I surely lost track of some details which never got written down or

expanded upon in print while the trip was fresh in my mind.

Other aspects of researching take time and cannot be completed in a few days like a research trip. Let's look at some of those and some other miscellaneous tips from one new beginner to another.

### **Networking**

Let other researchers know what you're studying. Don't broadcast it; there are unscrupulous individuals who will run with your ideas. But don't be afraid to contact folks like Jim Cox, Martin Grams, or Jack French with questions. They're scholars and gentleman who will not berate you. However, be considerate and do your homework first. Don't ask them where to start searching; it's not their job to look up something in Dunning for you or give you basic suggestions on where to begin. That's what this article is for! Even if your fellow researchers can't help you immediately, it lets them know what you're working on. In the course of research it's very common to come across a tidbit that may be of interest to someone you know so you make an extra copy.

Don't expect too much too soon. Pay attention to your reputation; be collegial and respectful and build trust. It's a small hobby and the number of individuals doing research is even smaller. As folks get to know you they'll suggest sources and contacts and even send you items of interest. Not infrequently these will be “off the grid” resources; private collections and materials not available to the general public, stuff that would never show up on internet searches. Relationships are key and you can't shortcut the process.

Respect work others have done. One of my first projects was to create descriptions of uncirculating episodes from a very popular program. I mentioned it offhandedly to another researcher who happened to know of a book being written on the series. Brief exchanges with the author and publisher confirmed this book would probably include this same information. I easily could have finished the descriptions and made a few bucks selling them. There would have been nothing illegal about doing so but don't think it wouldn't have raised some eyebrows. That work is now gathering digital dust on my hard drive. If the book never comes to fruition I can always revisit the project. There is an abundance of riches so-to-speak in the world of OTR research. So much to study, so little time. Don't step on someone else's toes or shoulder in on another's turf; Don't be a jerk.

### **For-Fee Resources**

A starting point for a lot of new researchers is the online database Newspaper Archive. It's a reasonably priced service similar to ProQuest but with different newspapers. ProQuest – at least the version to which I have access – includes the largest papers of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. plus a variety of African American newspapers. Newspaper Archive, however, is built on smaller local and regional papers. You will not find many large metropolitan papers included in their search engine. It's much cheaper than ProQuest and several individuals use it as a

primary or supplementary tool in their work.

Ebay offers rare gems to the patient researcher. Radio premiums are popular collector pieces but researchers will be focusing on scripts, magazines, and station-related items that come up for sale. One 1950s-era cookbook I won included background information on a Kansas City broadcaster and a multi-page station advertisement booklet gave me nice pictures and some details on other performers. Runs of scripts come up occasionally, though be prepared to pay out the nose for them. Radio magazines of the time go for \$10 to \$20 a pop, at least, so it's an expensive way to do research, especially if you don't know an issue's contents. Obscure records can be had for small amounts if the performers are of interest to you and no one else. Those records can be a source for brand new material as well as leads to recording companies and individuals behind the productions. Sometimes they'll come with cue sheets or other paperwork that is more informative than the recording.

Register with genealogical sites. Some of these are free so this resource could perhaps have been placed elsewhere. Many, though, will have levels of service which require membership fees. Using message boards on such sites I've gotten in touch with a number of family members of old time radio performers and even made contact with a 103-year-old musician and writer who was active in the 1930s and 1940s. This leads to some advice about interacting with individuals and families connected to old time radio.

Maintain a healthy skepticism about anyone's memories of the old time radio era, and be doubly skeptical of stories related by family members. There's nothing like first-hand accounts but remember that their memories are 60 or 70 years old. Even the most sharp-minded will confuse events, mix up dates, and misremember facts. Think about how much of your day-to-day work experiences you vividly remember (very little if you're like me) and consider that you're asking former radio professionals or their families to do the same decades after the fact.

The interviewed will have opinions and biases, generally in favor of themselves or their relatives, whoever is the subject of interest. Even if it's accurate, you'll only get part of any story. Pretty much forget about hearing anything that might portray the person in a negative light.

### **Get Started**

I hope that among these tips and suggestions you can get started on your first research project. This paper represents just the tip of the iceberg. I'm sure veteran writer/researchers could easily come with four or five times as many hints as I've included here. But these have worked for me, a guy who started out from scratch with absolutely zero radio researching knowledge. I was very intimidated by the process until I took the plunge, jumped in and just started.

Your work won't be perfect and there will be information you can't find and questions you can't answer. Some of your information might even be (unintentionally) incorrect. Don't be scared, this is the nature of scholarship. Writers make

assertions and theories and draw conclusions and others come along and build on, correct, and refine the earlier work. All you can do is strive for the greatest accuracy possible with the material you have to work with. We're all in this together so get started today!