

## Radio Studies Network (UK) report 2017 – 2018

The Radio Studies Network (RSN) was originally founded in December 1998 by UK radio studies academics to encourage sustained, lively and critical study and research in radio, and to seek ways to improve its academic and cultural status. The Network became a network in the UK-based Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA) in January 2010. This report was prepared for the *Radio Journal* by Josephine Coleman (Chair) and Helen Gubbins (Deputy Chair).

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There was a buzz in the room at January 2018's meeting of the MeCCSA Radio Studies Network (RSN). Not the incessant crackling that indicates mis-tuning to a frequency or some interference in transmission. Rather, the positive surge of energy experienced when there is a meeting of minds, a reveling in shared passions and the tangible excitement of making plans for the future.

The MeCCSA RSN, led by the chair Josephine Coleman (Birkbeck College, London) and deputy chair Helen Gubbins (University of Sheffield), has embarked on a series of initiatives during the past year to support the development of radio studies. The Facebook page has been revitalized and a new Twitter account launched. A survey of local and international members and affiliates conducted in 2017 generated a better understanding of the profiles of members, their respective affiliations and interest in the network, and attitudes towards its mission statement and development strategies. The survey showed overwhelming support for the MeCCSA RSN to continue with its aims of encouraging sustained research and scholarship in the field of radio in the UK, facilitating dialogue with international radio studies academics, as well as seeking ways to enhance the academic and cultural status of the discipline. Several other suggestions were made, including inviting industry practitioners to engage with RSN and promoting interdisciplinary dialogue.

Several radio studies events were organized in the UK during 2017. In June, Josephine Coleman organized a panel for the University of Westminster's interdisciplinary conference *Rights and Might: Cultural Counter-narratives of the Migrant and Refugee Experience*. The four panelists presented research exploring four themes: the comfort radio offers to diasporic and displaced communities; how radio can support and inform refugees in conflict-affected and occupied zones; the setting up of a digital community station in 'The Jungle' at Calais; and how Desi Radio serves Panjabi communities in West London and beyond. Each thought-provoking presentation demonstrated the power of radio to touch people's lives through its mix of sound, music and the spoken word.

The panel combined perspectives from scholars and radio practitioners. It is noteworthy that many

of the radio scholars involved in the Radio Studies Network have significant connections with the industry. When putting on academic events, such links can prove invaluable, as demonstrated by the network's two symposiums to mark the 50th Anniversary of BBC Local Radio.

The first event, coordinated by Gurvinder Aujla-Sidhu was *Reaching Out: the past, present and future of local radio audiences*, held at De Montfort University in Leicester, on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2017. The programme was focused around three panels of radio practitioners and experts speaking on diversity, news, and sport. Strong opinions and passionate principles led to some fiery but informative exchanges over questions of agency, authority and access to the airwaves. In addition, there were five academic presentations on how radio serves specific audiences.

With a more pronounced historical emphasis, Matthew Linfoot's symposium at the University of Westminster on 18<sup>th</sup> November attracted panelists with prominent BBC credentials. These included high-profile radio practitioner-executives, discussing not only the legacy of BBC local radio but also its future.<sup>1</sup> Bookending this panel were fourteen papers presented by a mix of academics, BBC alumni, local radio practitioners, researchers and archivists. The talks were divided thematically: diversity, competition, interactivity, the history of news and sport production, and audio archiving at the British Library.

These BBC Local Radio-focused events involved scholars and industry experts, illustrating RSN's fruitful, ongoing relationship with institutional and other radio industry bodies.

The MeCCSA RSN has launched an online reading group via Skype to support early career researchers in the field. Helen Gubbins manages the group, posting reading lists on the WordPress site and arranging weekly Skype conference calls for the participants who join in from several different countries and time zones. Further plans to nurture early career researchers include the organization of workshops and panels on the research practices and methodologies for studying and teaching radio, funding for which will be sought from MeCCSA.

In summary, the RSN has this past year consolidated its position as one of the most active networks in MeCCSA. This association funds academic and networking events amongst its membership and holds a conference each January, hosted in 2018 by London South Bank University. It was for that occasion that Helen Gubbins convened two radio-themed panels on the theme of agency and creativity, which were well-attended and enthusiastically received. A third radio studies panel from a Northern Ireland perspective was equally impactful, and its convener, Portia Ellis-Woods (Queen's University, Belfast) has since joined the RSN steering group as Social Media and Marketing Officer.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Director-General, Tony Hall, delivered a speech at the Gillard Awards, at Coventry Cathedral on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2017, during which he announced a halt to planned funding cuts for Local Radio.

Looking forward to a busy year ahead, MeCCSA RSN is well equipped to thrive in the international field of radio studies, and we are optimistic that radio studies will continue to resonate not only within academia but across wider fields of cultural production.

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