

# **“Speaking to the Soviets”: Podcasting, Public Diplomacy and the Blinken Open Society Archives’ Radio Liberty Audio Collection**

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## **Abstract**

This article introduces and evaluates the experience of producing the *Speaking to the Soviets* podcast, a six-part audio documentary series which explores the history of transnational broadcasting during the Cold War through a close analysis of the Blinken Open Society Archives’ Radio Liberty Russian Broadcast Collection. I present some preliminary notions on the value of podcasting as a general medium for the presentation and conduct of historical research on radio broadcasting. Next, I discuss the reasons why the OSA’s Radio Liberty Russian Broadcast collection represents a rich and rewarding collection for historians of the Cold War which is particularly suited to being explored and evaluated via podcasting. I describe the conceptual and methodological choices made during the process of the project as a whole, before concluding with an attempt at evaluating the contemporary significance and potential future impact and implications of the project. This question is approached from the point of view of both the sponsoring institutions (Central European University and the Blinken OSA) and the practitioner (myself).

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**Keywords:** Radio Liberty, podcast, Open Society Archives, audio documentary, transnational broadcasting, public diplomacy

## Introduction

Between March and August 2017, along with my collaborative partner Michael Guliaev, I created a six-part historical podcast series, *Speaking to the Soviets*.<sup>2</sup> This series presented and analysed excerpts from the Radio Liberty (RL) Russian Broadcast Collection of the Blinken Open Society Archives in Budapest.

In the following article I will lay out the reasons for undertaking this project, beginning by briefly outlining the status and historical importance of RL as a key transnational broadcaster during the Cold War. Following this, I will evaluate the significance of the podcast or audio documentary as a medium for the pursuit and presentation of historical research, touching upon the possibilities and promises of this form as a new way of thinking about and explaining the importance of Cold War broadcasting. I will then discuss the OSA's Radio Liberty audio collection in greater detail, examining why this collection is particularly suited to being explored, examined, and evaluated via podcasting. The methodological approach that was adopted during the podcast-making process will then be described from both a theoretical and a practical point of view, before focusing on the outcomes and impact of the project. I conclude with some speculations about and suggestions on potential future uses of the podcast format to enliven and extend the work of students and scholars of the history of the Cold War and beyond.

Let us begin, as the first episode of *Speaking to the Soviets* does, with some background information about Radio Liberty. Originally named Radio Liberation, the organization began operating in 1953 as a U.S. government-funded Russian-language transnational broadcaster, providing listeners in the Soviet Union with a range of programming which challenged the Soviet government's monopolistic control over the media within the USSR.<sup>3</sup> RL, along with its sister station Radio Free Europe (RFE), broadcast across the Iron Curtain with the aim of establishing itself as a "surrogate home service"<sup>4</sup> which would provide news and opinions which official media channels might

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://podcasts.ceu.edu/series/speaking-soviets> to access the series in full.

<sup>3</sup> M. Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 56-58.

<sup>4</sup> A. Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2000), 217.

editor or distort. As such, RL was an integral part of US Cold War foreign policy infrastructure, set up with the objective of supporting American efforts to undermine the legitimacy of Communist rule within the USSR. However, the ways in which this objective was understood and actualized over the course of RL's history were by no means constant. It was an organization which relied extensively on a politically, ethnically, and culturally heterogeneous pool of émigrés from across the Soviet Union to make up the bulk of its staff (including program presenters, broadcast desk managers, producers and researchers). Unsurprisingly, the personal ambitions and opinions of these individuals did not necessarily always perfectly match those of their American overseers and paymasters. As such, RL was a site for the existence and expression of many different ideas about the nature and conduct of the Cold War. Moreover, as the conflict between the US and the USSR ebbed and flowed, changes in diplomatic strategies and perceptions of relationship dynamics on both sides of the Cold War profoundly affected the broadcaster. These key historical processes and experiences of change and continuity over time are reflected by and within RL's broadcasting throughout the period, making it a particularly valuable case study for those interested in understanding the role that transnational institutions, particularly media institutions, played in shaping the Cold War.

The Blinken Open Society Archives' Radio Liberty Russian Broadcast Collection represents one of the finest resources available to scholars and students of Cold War broadcasting, containing over 26,000 audio files and over 10,000 hours of recordings produced by RL's Russian Service between 1953 and 1995. The original open-reel tapes containing these recordings have not only been painstakingly preserved, archived, and systematized, but have now been fully digitized, meaning that the audio is freely available to anybody who wishes to listen to it via the OSA's website.<sup>5</sup> The broadcast archive includes various genres of programming, including newsreels, talk shows, literary readings, music programmes, and reviews of samizdat (self-published or unpublished material created within the USSR). This collection is a treasure trove for historians of the period interested in a range of different topics during the Cold War: human rights; literature; religion; and science, to name but a few. However, since the audio is only available in its original Russian, and the availability and accessibility of the collection to researchers around the world (it is freely available online) is not widely known about

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<sup>5</sup> Radio Liberty (Radio Svoboda) Russian Broadcast Recordings, Blinken Open Society Archives website. Accessed online at <http://www.osaarchivum.org/digital-repository/osa:89898864-78b7-4cf9-b4f7-aaf218f85599> on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

outside of a relatively small circle of Cold War academics, the potential of this remarkable collection has hereto remained underexploited. It is in this context that the value of a podcast project designed to highlight and make more widely accessible the content of the OSA's RL Russian Broadcast collection becomes clear.

Numerous excellent written works outlining and exploring the history of RL exist, ranging from comprehensive histories and memoirs written by former RFE/RL employees to collections of critical articles on different aspects of life within the organization.<sup>6</sup> Many of these textual sources examining the history and legacy of RL (and of transnational broadcasting, the changes to the relationship between media and politics, and the Cold War more generally) were used as primary sources to assist in the production of *Speaking to the Soviets*, and were explicitly referenced within the podcast so that listeners who wished to learn more might know where to turn to. However, for those interested in understanding the nature of Radio Liberty's programming, there is no substitution for actually listening to the broadcasts themselves. Having attended a number of different conferences on the history of radio over the last 18 months, I gradually became aware of the noteworthy and somewhat ironic fact that the overwhelming majority of sources used in the composition of historical works written about radio are textual, and not aural, and that the opportunity to actually listen to the original audio recordings of a radio broadcaster's programming, rather than relying solely on transcripts or archival documents to try and piece together the historical meaning of a programme or specific broadcast, was a rare and invaluable one.

Before the creation of the *Speaking to the Soviets* podcast, there were two qualifying standards which had to be met before any scholar or member of the public interested in listening to audio recordings of Radio Liberty broadcasts. Firstly, they had to be aware of the existence of the Blinken OSA's collection, and that the OSA had made that collection available to listen to for free via their website. Secondly, they would have to be able to understand the Russian language, since all of the audio material contained

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of some of the scholarship used during the creation of the podcast, see J. Critchlow, *Radio Hole-In-The-Head: Radio Liberty, An Insider's Story of Cold War Broadcasting* (Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1995); R. Cummings, "The Ether War: Hostile Intelligence Activities Directed Against Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and the Émigré Community in Munich during the Cold War", *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 6, 2008, Issue 2, 168-182; A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, eds, *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010 ); S. Mikkonen, "Radio Liberty – The Enemy Within? The Dissemination of Western Values through U.S. Cold War Broadcasts" in *Europe – Evropa: Cross-cultural Dialogues between the West, Russia, and Southeastern Europe* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2010), 243-257; G. Sosin, *Sparks of Liberty: An Insider's Memoir of Radio Liberty* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999).

within the collection, as well as a large proportion of the metadata attached to these files which might help an interested scholar determine each individual file's contents and relevance, was in Russian. These two facts helped shape the eventual format and content of the podcast series. Firstly, the series should be available in a format that was widely accessible, both in terms of the practical and technological form in which the podcast was made available, but also with regards to the ease with which its content might be understood so it prove valuable and interesting in the eyes (or ears) of a non-specialist listener. Put simply, the aim of this project was to create an audio product that made a greater number of people aware of, and enthusiastic about, the richness and potential of the OSA's RL audio collection, at the same time exploring some of the hidden gems within the collection for what they might reveal about RL as an institution and its changing status and conduct throughout the Cold War.

After some early experimentation with format, I settled on producing six episodes of roughly 25 minutes each, with each episode focusing on the presentation and subsequent analysis of RL broadcasts which focused on a particular Cold War topic or event. The six chosen topics were as follows: The Death of Stalin; The Space Race; The Vietnam War; Human Rights and the Helsinki Accords; The Chernobyl Disaster; and the Collapse of the Soviet Union. These topics were chosen due to the richness and variety of the RL audio material produced on those subjects held within the OSA's collection, allowing for in-depth discussion not only of the *content* of these broadcasts (i.e. *what* was broadcast by RL on these key events and/or processes within Cold War history), but also an evaluation of the *form* and *frame* adopted by RL in presenting that content (*how* specific forms of information were conveyed in reaction to different situations and contexts across the Cold War).

Particular and sustained efforts were made to ensure that the podcast was accessible to a broad audience, and demonstrated an awareness of the possibilities and limitations of the podcast medium with regard to maintaining and respecting the listener's attention span and engagement. This was achieved through the pursuit of the following measures during the writing, editing, and producing process: focusing each episode on events or processes which non-experts on Cold War broadcasting were likely to have at least some knowledge of or curiosity about; adopting a particular narrative tone (somewhat modelled on that of BBC Radio 4, aiming to locate the listener as an intelligent, curious, and educated non-expert), deliberately avoiding the over-use of scholarly terms; and providing a musical interval at the half-way point of each podcast to

“break up” the information-loaded narrative, which oscillated between the presentation of original audio (overlaid with English translation provided by voice actors) and the presenter’s contextual, narrative and evaluative input. These musical selections often provided the opportunity for the development of an “interlude” or “relief” from the main thrust of the episode’s focus on Radio Liberty, which nevertheless provided the listener with historical information about cultural output created under the conditions of the Cold War: for example, the opening episode on the Death of Stalin features a short clip of Maria Yudina’s rendition of Mozart’s Concerto No. 23, after telling the (apocryphal) story of the night that Stalin supposedly demanded that the Soviet Radio Committee send him a copy of Mozart’s Concerto number 23 played by Yudina. Not wishing to disturb Stalin with the news that no such recording existed, according to some accounts, officials within the Radio department rushed to arrange for Comrade Yudina to record a version of the concerto, with orchestra, that very night, rather than tell Stalin the truth.<sup>7</sup> As it has also been said that the record may have been the last thing Stalin listened to before he died, the piece was an apposite addition to the episode.<sup>8</sup>

The podcast’s heavy reliance on excerpts from RL Russian language broadcasts, which were overlaid with English translations provided by voice actors, meant that non-Russian speakers could for the first time gain a sense of exactly what was said by RL on a range of different topics, as well as *how* RL presented information on a range of controversial issues. Those interested in finding out more about the specific content of each episode are encouraged to download and subscribe to the series, which has been made easy thanks to the series’ inclusion and prominent placement on the newly launched CEU podcast library website.<sup>9</sup> Featuring on this portal, which brings together audio material produced by scholars and students from a wide range of different academic disciplines in a visually attractive and academically credible format, means that the podcast and the OSA audio archival collection that it promotes and engages with are made visible and accessible to a far wider potential audience. This augments my own personal efforts to publicize the existence of the podcast and the RL Russian Broadcast collection at a number of different conferences and through my personal and professional social media profiles.

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed account of this story, see J. Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* (New York: Orbis, 1999), 99-103. This story was also featured prominently in the recent film *The Death of Stalin* (2017, Dir. Armando Iannucci), released after the completion of the *Speaking to the Soviets* podcast.

<sup>8</sup> Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*, 100.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://podcasts.ceu.edu/series/speaking-soviets>.

These attempts to make the podcast as widely accessible and attractive as possible are part of a wider aim with regard to the significance and potential impact of the project: that of encouraging other students and scholars in the field of Cold War history and beyond to consider the benefits of podcasting as a method of engaging with the wider public and finding a new, and potentially far larger, audience for their research outputs, as well as offering opportunities for experimenting with new ways of knowing and different conceptual approaches to their topics. With regards to the history of radio in particular, I found that conceptualizing a podcast series and planning, writing, recording, editing, and producing each episode led me to new thoughts and reflections about the nature of audio programming which affected my conceptualization of the work of Radio Liberty itself. There are clear differences between the podcast and live radio formats, and the pressures of putting together a six-episode historical audio documentary clearly pale in comparison to those of mounting a large-scale, long-term broadcasting campaign designed to buttress and support the foreign policy aims of a Cold War superpower. I nevertheless felt that the experience of thinking about my own audience, and how best to grab and maintain their attention and persuade them of the validity of my arguments on the importance and meaning of RL broadcasts, helped me to imagine and empathize with those responsible for organizing and producing RL's programming. I could better appreciate the extent to which choices about format and framing, as well as content, contributed to these broadcasters' perceptions of their own work, and potentially to their overall effectiveness as organs of public diplomacy.

### **Conclusion**

As well as the RL Russian Broadcast collection, the Blinken OSA is in possession of a variety of other audio collections, many of which are ripe for revision or reappraisal, whether that be through the use of podcasting as a medium for presenting or conducting original research or not. It is my hope that my project might contribute to the emerging trend which positions academic podcasting at the forefront of new forms of research activity and provides an example of the benefits of pursuing such an approach. I intend to continue to experiment with the podcast form during my Ph.D. studies, not only as a medium for the presentation of research findings but also as a tool for capturing the origin and development of my ideas over time, engaging with different and potentially non-academic audiences, and continuing to hone my audio editing and production skills (which were non-existent at the beginning of the *Speaking to the Soviets* project).

Whatever the future uses and developments of the podcast as a form for the expression of historical research may be, I am satisfied that the project was a worthwhile and valuable one, for both the RL audio collection and myself as a researcher in the early years of my academic career, looking towards the future.

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