

WNYC broadcast for the day of 9/11 (9/11/2001)

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Essay by Andy Lanset (guest post)*



The jerry-rigged system that kept WNYC on the air on 9/11

For those who were in the New York area that day, the weather could not have been more pleasant on September 11, 2001. The sky was clear, the humidity comfortable, and the temperature slightly crisp. So, what began to unfold at 8:46am that morning was, at first, a surreal disaster movie to those of us watching and listening at a distance. But it was all too real to those close at hand in lower Manhattan.

WNYC was then located on the upper floors of New York City's historic Municipal Building next to the Brooklyn Bridge. Only six blocks from the World Trade Center, the western views from our windows featured the Twin Towers and the iconic Woolworth building.

Thankfully, no one at WNYC was killed or injured. When the north tower was hit, WNYC lost its FM signal. Our 93.9 FM transmitter was located on the 110th floor of that building, its highest physical floor. The 820 AM signal was soon to go since it received content from our Municipal Building studios via a microwave link on top of the north World Trade Center tower. From there, the signal was sent via microwave to the AM transmitter in the New Jersey meadowlands.

With some quick thinking before being evacuated, master control engineer George Edwards switched the AM studio feed from the microwave transponder on top of the WTC to a backup 15-kHz leased telephone landline. The AM signal was off the air briefly but returned at about 9:30am. Chief Engineer Steve Shultis, meanwhile, called NPR to arrange for programming via satellite from Washington, DC, so WNYC could continue to have something on air in the event no one was in our studios.[1]

But that's not what happened. Although forced to evacuate the Municipal Building, morning announcer Mark Hilan snuck back in and continued to broadcast from the studio over our AM station switching to NPR as events developed. As he remembered, "The World Trade Center was disappearing and there was no one in front of the microphone to let our listeners know...I bolted back toward the entrance of the Municipal Building, surveyed the scene in the lobby, saw

that the security personnel were otherwise engaged, sprinted up the stairs...and headed back into the studio.”[2] It should be noted it was 25 flights of stairs.

With the help of one news producer, a reporter, WNYC's CFO and CEO, Hilan could keep up with developments. The AM signal remained viable until World Trade Building number seven collapsed later that day, severely damaging the entire West Street central telephone office.

Several WNYC news reporters heard in these recordings were in the field. At that time, they were using MiniDisc recorders. When the south tower went down, Beth Fertig was just two blocks north and one block east. She recalled, “And I thought to myself--it was so surreal--I thought it looked like...one of those perfect demolitions... And then I held out my microphone to record the sounds, and I started narrating what I was seeing.”[3]

Calling reports into the studio was a major challenge as cell phone coverage had become spotty at best, depending on the carrier. Fortunately, Beth ran into WNYC reporter Marianne McCune in Foley Square in front of the Federal Courthouse. Marianne had been on the street since 5am as September 11, 2001 was a primary election day in New York City. Between the two of them, they were able to phone in reports. Marianne remembered, “I immediately put Beth on when we called in when we got the phone to work...she put her tiny little headphone against the cell phone and played a piece of tape of herself running from the first falling building.”[4]

The WNYC studios in the Municipal Building were fully evacuated by late afternoon. Essential staff and engineering went uptown to the NPR news bureau to set up a new studio.

In the hours, days, and weeks that followed, WNYC engineering worked tirelessly to get our FM signal reestablished at the Empire State Building while stabilizing and improving our AM transmission. The staff broadcast and produced programs from remote locations at the NPR New York news bureau and WKCR at Columbia University. WNYE, the Board of Education station, “loaned” us their FM frequency to broadcast our signal, preempting their programming until we restored our FM signal over the following weekend. WNET and Oxygen Media provided additional assistance and remote workspace.

Recording our air was not foremost in our minds during 9/11. A few reel-to-reel airchecks were made in the studio and off-air. The majority of recordings, however, are from our digital logger, a recording system primarily meant for retaining copies of our broadcast air for legal reasons and only for a finite amount of time after their initial broadcast. These recordings were retrieved by WNYC engineering staff on digital audio tape (DAT) and later moved to gold dye CD-Rs before being transferred to WAV format.

It has become cliché to say the world changed after 9/11, but it’s true. WNYC's programming changed too. The focus on the news became more intense, and a significant portion of our broadcast day previously devoted to classical music was eliminated. All of the WNYC reporters and announcers on that day have moved on to other jobs, but no one will forget the importance of their work captured in these recordings when the disaster movie became a reality.

Andy Lanset is founding director of the New York Public Radio Archives (WNYC/WQXR). He has worked in public broadcasting as a reporter, producer, engineer and archivist for the last 40 years.

[1] Shultis, Steve, WNYC 9/11 Oral History, December 9, 2002, WNYC Archive Collections, unpublished.

[2] Gilbert, Allison, editor, et al., *Covering Catastrophe: Broadcast Journalists Report September 11*, Bonus Books Chicago, 2002, pg. 88.

[3] Fertig, Beth, WNYC 9/11 Oral History, January 9, 2003, WNYC Archive Collections, unpublished.

[4] McCune, Marianne, WNYC 9/11 Oral History, December 31, 2002, WNYC Archive Collections, unpublished.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.