

Institution: Queen Mary University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: The Audiobook Revolution: Changing Perceptions about Recorded Books		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014-2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Matthew Rубery	Professor of Modern Literature	Jan 2010-Present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Professor Rubery's research has transformed public understanding of recorded literature. He has tracked down Europe's oldest talking books and secured them for preservation by the National Sound Archive. He advised the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Blind Veterans UK, helping to develop their archives and working with them on a major public exhibition. That exhibition and his extensive engagement work have changed public understanding of the significance of recorded literature. He has also been called upon regularly by the book trade as an expert whose research has led publishers to consider the crucial role played by audiobooks in mental health, wellbeing and social inclusion.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Rubery's research presents the first comprehensive history of recorded literature [3.2, 3.5]. Surveying over a century of recordings, from Thomas Edison's recitation of 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' on the tinfoil phonograph in 1877, through the first talking books made for blinded veterans of the First World War, to today's billion-dollar audiobook industry, his research establishes a vibrant tradition of recorded books [3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5]. Noting that 'listening to books is one of the few forms of reading for which people apologise' [3.6], he has worked to bring attention and credibility to the form [3.5].</p> <p>While previous research has focused on the legislative or technological history of recordings, his work highlights the social impact of audiobooks, and particularly their impact on blind or disabled readers [3.4, 3.5, 3.6]. Rubery has revealed how talking book libraries were established for war-blinded soldiers in America and Britain in the 1930s [3.4]. His research highlights the ability of arts and culture to influence personal and community development, and to bridge the divide between disabled and non-disabled communities [3.4, 3.6].</p> <p>Rubery's work explores historic controversies over the legitimacy of recorded books, book selection policies, appropriate reading styles, handling of obscenity, and accusations of censorship, many of which continue into the present day [3.6]. By analysing the efficacy of publishers' efforts to use full casts, sound effects, musical scores, and other devices in setting audiobooks apart from printed ones and competing with other forms of entertainment including radio, television, film, and digital media, it offers new perspectives on the uncertainties of the audiobook's future [3.1, 3.3, 3.6].</p> <p>Rubery is also a partner on 'The SpokenWeb: Conceiving and Creating a Nationally Networked Archive of Literary Recordings for Research and Teaching,' funded by Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and 'READ-IT: Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool,' funded by the European Union Joint Programming Initiative in Cultural Heritage and Global Chance (JPICH). His international reputation has led to invitations to speak across North America and Europe, including keynotes or plenaries in America, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Norway, and Sweden. In 2019, he gave an invited lecture at a symposium on 'Ability, Access, and the Archive' held at Harvard University.</p>		

3. References to the research

- [3.1] Rubery, M. (2008). Play it again, Sam Weller: New digital audiobooks and old ways of reading. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13(1), 58-79. doi.org/10.3366/E1355550208000088
- [3.2] Rubery, M. (Ed.). (2011). *Audiobooks, literature, and sound studies* (Vol. 31). Routledge.
- [3.3] Rubery, M. (2013). Canned literature: The book after Edison. *Book History*, 16(1), 215-245. doi.org/10.1353/bh.2013.0012
- [3.4] Rubery, M. (2015). From shell shock to shellac: The great war, blindness, and Britain's talking book library. *Twentieth Century British History*, 26(1), 1-25. doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwu017
- [3.5] Rubery, M. (2016). *The untold story of the talking book*. Harvard University Press.
- [3.6] Rubery, M. (2018). Ulysses, blindness, and accessible Modernism. *New Literary History*, 49(1), 47-70. doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2018.0002

Evidence of the quality of the research

Rubery's research on recorded books has been supported by humanities funding bodies in North America and Europe. These awards include:

Rubery, M. [2017-02580]. *National Endowment for the Humanities*. Fellowship. USD50,400.
 Rubery, M. [MD130095]. *British Academy*. Mid-Career Fellowship. GBP86,234
 Rubery, M. *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Visiting Scholar. USD60,000
 Rubery, M. (2011). [RF-2011-367]. *Leverhulme Trust*. Research Fellow. GBP44,978
 Rubery, M. Small grants were provided by the *Being Human Festival*, *Wellcome Trust*, and *Bibliographical Society of America*.

- [EQR.3.1] Translated into Danish for special issue of the literary journal *Passage*.
 [EQR.3.2] Excerpted in *Harper's Magazine* (March 2011).
 [EQR.3.3] Honourable Mention for the Donald Gray Prize for best article on Victorian Studies.
 [EQR.3.5] Translated into French.
 [EQR.3.6] Recipient of a Certificate of Merit in the 2017 Association for Recorded Sound Collections Award for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research; translated into Korean; excerpted in *The Bookseller* (October 19, 2016).

4. Details of the impact

Recovering, preserving, and promoting the history of audiobooks

Rubery found and ensured the preservation for posterity of a number of extremely significant early recordings of audiobooks. In 2016, he discovered Europe's oldest audiobooks, including Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon* (1935) and *The Gospel According to St John* (1935), in private collections in Canada and the UK. He secured the recordings for the National Sound Archive at the British Library, where they could be preserved and digitised. He also discovered an uncatalogued, historic recording in the EMI Archive (Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* (1936)). Jonathan Summers, curator of the National Sound Archive, notes that 'his research exploited an area of the collection that had been hardly used at all [...] his work enabled me to acquire a very large collection of talking books for the blind produced in the 1930s and 1940s' [5.2].

Rubery also led efforts to preserve audio archives in the US. He brokered a deal for Stanford's libraries to acquire the personal archive of audiobook pioneer Duvall Hecht, who in 1975 founded Books on Tape (B.O.T.), one of the world's first commercial audio publishers. Hecht's extensive collection, containing thousands of cassette tapes, has now been preserved by Stanford's special collections. According to Hecht, 'Matthew was the moving force behind getting Stanford to accept all Books on Tape's business records and the thousand full-length recordings that I took with me when I sold B.O.T.' The head librarian at Stanford's Archive of Recorded Sound wrote that Rubery 'helped to secure the preservation of an important part of US audiobook history, enriching the Archive of Recorded Sound's collections. We are grateful to him for his support in ensuring that the history of audio-recorded literature in the US is recognized and preserved' [5.1]. In 2020, Rubery brokered a similar arrangement with Johns Hopkins University's libraries to secure the personal memorabilia and record collection of

Barbara Holdridge, who founded Caedmon Records in 1952. Rubery's discoveries and his contribution to the preservation of audiobook heritage have been featured internationally in a variety of major media outlets (BBC, CBC, NPR, The Guardian, The Times) [5.8, 5.9] and he continues to write about these issues on his popular blog 'Audiobook History' (11,061 visitors, 16,703 views as of 27/11/2020).

Benefitting charitable organisations and people with disabilities

Through a process of co-creation and collaboration with visually impaired people, disability advocacy groups, and public sector organisations, Rubery has explored the neglected history of people with disabilities and their contributions to arts and culture in the UK. His work has promoted the heritage collections of national organisations and allowed them to reach new audiences.

Rubery worked closely with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and Blind Veterans UK (BVUK), as a key contributor to the 'RNIB Talking Books Are Now Free' video and #BooksChangeLives campaign. Rubery and RNIB's Library and Heritage Services Manager were interviewed together on BBC Radio 4's 'Open Book' (27 November 2016) and jointly supervised an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award. Rubery also collaborated with RNIB to produce a documentary titled 'Talking Books at 80' for Insight Radio, Europe's first station for blind and partially sighted people [5.8].

His conference on 'Blindness, Technology, and Multimodal Reading' (June 27-28, 2014) at the Royal College of Physicians included visually impaired writers, disability activists, and representatives from RNIB (including Claire Maxwell, Senior Product Manager; and Clive Gardiner, Head of Digital, Content & Reading Services). Attended by more than 40 registered delegates, the conference aimed to influence attitudes and affect policy around inclusion and disability, and participants included key influencers such as Colin Low, Baron Low of Dalston, a member of the House of Lords.

Rubery worked closely with BVUK to promote the history of audiobooks and their associations with blinded veterans. 'The Story of Blind Veterans UK in 100 Objects' cites his research for entry #9 'Talking Books': <http://www.blindveterans.org.uk/about-us/100-objects/talking-books>. In 2016, he exhibited a rare optophone mechanical reading device, held by BVUK, to members of the British Academy. Rob Baker says that 'The benefits for Blind Veterans UK [of Rubery's research] have been multifold... [It] has enabled us to better understand our own role within the wider history of the audiobook,' and generate content 'which commands widespread interest including to a general audience which might previously not have been aware of us and our history, ...helping us to raise our public profile.' Baker also says that the decision recently to 'formally re-establish a research function within the charity' was influenced by their work with Rubery, and that collaboration is an aid to 'our credibility and success' in developing future research partnerships [5.5].

Rubery's research was significant in enabling collaborations with a number of organisations for the interactive exhibition 'How We Read: A Sensory History of Books for Blind People,' which Rubery curated in 2014. He established partnerships with RNIB, BVUK, the British Library, ClearVision, Enhanced Vision, Science Museum, Wellcome Library, and EMI Group Archive Trust to deliver the exhibition, which displayed two centuries of assistive technologies used by thousands of visually disabled readers in Britain. Held at the Peltz Gallery in central London, it introduced rare artefacts and historic recordings to the public for the first time, emphasising the role blind people played in shaping those technologies. A series of hands-on activities, interactive workshops, and live performances encouraged visitors to try out for themselves alternative ways of reading. These included descriptive tours led by museum curators, a tactile storytelling workshop in which participants learned how to read braille, a live reading by a professional actor who has recorded books for people who are blind, and a panel led by visually impaired readers who shared their experiences of reading books in different media. The exhibition ended with a live performance from 'The Braille Legacy,' a musical

based on the life of Louis Braille that was later staged at the Charing Cross Theatre (10 April to 24 June, 2017).

The exhibition, which was featured in *The Independent* (May 20, 2014) and *BookBrunch* (November 17, 2014), reached a broad audience including academics, creative industries professionals, voluntary sector representatives, people with disabilities, and the wider public, and it continues to reach audiences through a custom-designed website: <http://www.howweread.co.uk> [5.8]. In particular, the events succeeded in bringing disabled and non-disabled communities together. The events also helped to increase awareness of the challenges faced by disabled people and contributed to evolving attitudes toward disability, while highlighting the positive effects of reading on individual well-being. Selina Mills, Senior External Engagement Manager for Leonard Cheshire, was 'impressed with how blind visitors to the exhibition were given total access to the exhibition in different formats... This gave blind people access to blind history on their own terms for the first time.' She praised Rubery for 'giving a voice' to the UK's two million blind people and engaging 'on blind people's terms,' adding that he 'has created a bridge that closes the gap between academic clinical research and ensuring everyone from the general public to blind people in particular have access to their own history. This in turn impacts the world I am trying to influence in accepting disability as part of daily life, rather than separate from it and giving people their own choice of words and language to be heard through' [5.4].

Benefitting the Book Trade

Rubery has also shared his research with members of the book trade, increasing their understanding of the history of the recorded book and its role in social inclusion. The Audio Publishers Association (APA) Executive Director, Michele Cobb, recruited him to revise the website's historical timeline. Cobb writes of Rubery's monograph that 'We have 70 publisher members and a number of them have turned to the title as a reference tool. Matthew Rubery's knowledge of the industry is impressive. With his help, we improved the industry information that we share with our members and interested press. This historical timeline has been incorporated into international presentations about audiobooks. It helps them to understand their own place in today's market, so the timeline is an important tool for the APA' [5.3]. Following an interview with Rubery, Jessica Kaye -- a member of the APA -- included his research on the historical origins and uses of recorded books in an important industry manual, *The Guide to Publishing Audiobooks: How to Produce and Sell an Audiobook* (2019).

Rubery was the only academic to present at FutureBook, Europe's largest digital publishing conference, where he gave a keynote address. He was interviewed by Audible's editorial team (Emily Cox) for their *Sound Off* newsletter and blog (Nov 6, 2017). Audible, a subsidiary of Amazon, is one of the world's largest sellers and producers of spoken audio entertainment on the Internet. He has also been interviewed for business-oriented podcasts such as 'The Kindle Chronicles' (December 23, 2016). His book was excerpted for the trade magazine *The Bookseller* (October 19, 2016) and his research has been reprinted in *BookBrunch* (July 1, 2014), a publishing newsletter. [5.7] He participated in a public lecture at the International Agatha Christie Festival (along with RNIB's Chief Executive, HarperCollins's Head of Audio, and voice actor John Telfer), which was attended by approximately 200 people and cited in the *Torquay Herald Express* (September 9, 2015). He has also spoken to library groups, including eReolen, the Danish libraries' Digital Audiobooks Service (December 6, 2017), which has actively changed their collection practices with regard to audiobooks.

Nicholas Jones, Managing Director of Strathmore Publishing, writes that Rubery's 'timely' research 'provided a brilliant summary of the development of what is now a significant portion of the general publishing industry -- the Publishers Association figures for 2019 suggest that it might now be as much as 5 per cent of the general books market.' His exhibition 'did much to raise understanding about the origins of 'talking books,' and at the same time greatly helped people realise that 'talking books' are not just 'books for the blind' but books for everyone.' Rubery's research 'has been the seed of an ongoing awareness of the subject that is now reaching out into both academic and general readerships' [5.6].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] [Testimonial] Head Librarian, Stanford Libraries' Archive of Recorded Sound. [Corroborator 1]

[5.2] [Testimonial] Curator, National Sound Archive, British Library. [Corroborator 2]

[5.3] [Testimonial] Executive Director, Audio Publishers' Association.

[5.4] [Testimonial] Senior External Engagement Manager, Leonard Cheshire. [Corroborator 3]

[5.5] [Testimonial] Information and Archives Executive, Blind Veterans UK. [Corroborator 4]

[5.6] [Testimonial] Managing Director, Strathmore Publishing. [Corroborator 5]

[5.7] [Reviews] Rubery (2016) excerpted in *The Bookseller* (October 19, 2016): 16-17, reviewed in *Times Literary Supplement*, *Times Higher Education*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Spectator*, *AudioFile Magazine*.

[5.8] [Media] Interviews for newspapers and podcasts:

Interviewed on 'How the audiobook went from a resource for the blind to a popular form of storytelling', Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's 'q' (January 5, 2017):

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/schedule-for-thursday-january-5-2017-1.3919997/how-the-audiobook-went-from-a-resource-for-the-blind-to-a-popular-form-of-storytelling-1.3920008>

Interviewed on National Public Radio (NPR), 'On Point' (November 17, 2016),

<http://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2016/11/17/audio-books-history>

Interview with Catherine Nixey, 'Let me tell you a story: Why the stars want to do audiobooks', *The Times* (January 9, 2017):

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/times2/let-me-tell-you-a-story-why-all-the-stars-want-to-do-an-audiobook-jk7g0rb7f>

Presenter, 'Talking Books at 80' documentary for Insight Radio,

http://www.insightradio.co.uk/podcast-episode.html?category=readon&name=2016-01-22_the_story_of_talking_books_tx.mp3#.V5Hyb7iAOKo (November 6, 2015)

Interviewed for 'Does the Digital Age Spell the End of Braille?' *The Independent* (21 May 2014),

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/does-the-digital-age-spell-the-end-of-braille-9405836.html>

[5.9] [Press] Heritage / Early recordings (especially Conrad):

Conrad recording played on BBC Radio 4's 'World at One' (November 23, 2016), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b082vywj>

- Interviewed in 'World's first audiobook tells its tale again', *The Times* (November 22, 2016), <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/world-s-first-audiobook-tells-its-tale-again-6mmdr0rm>
- Interviewed on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's 'As It Happens' (November 21, 2016), <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-monday-edition-1.3860483/hear-what-may-be-the-first-full-length-audio-book-found-in-canada-1.3860492>
- Interviewed in 'Long-lost audiobook—one of the earliest ever published—discovered in Canada', *Los Angeles Times* (November 21, 2016), <http://www.latimes.com/books/la-et-ic-michael-schaub-20161121-story.html>
- Interviewed in 'Unique copy of first full-length audio book found in Canada', *Guardian* (November 21, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/21/unique-copy-of-first-full-length-audio-book-found-in-canada>