

Radiolnsight Tech:

WBZ's Big Move Part 1 – The Inside Story

By Scott Fybush on September 24, 2018

Radiolnsight is soon to launch a new section dedicated to audio technology from the rack room to the dashboard. This week we will feature a sneak preview of the news and inside information you'll only find in the upcoming Radiolnsight Tech.

On a Wednesday morning in late August, I pulled into an office park ten miles north of downtown Boston, rode up an elevator and walked into a sight that was simultaneously familiar and completely alien. For five years in the 1990s, I made my radio home in the newsroom of WBZ, New England's oldest station. Here I was in what was clearly the WBZ newsroom, complete with faces and voices I knew well and all the usual bustle of a news operation in full swing. Here, though, there was a wall of windows and more daylight than I'd ever seen in any newsroom, ever. Each desk featured not only the usual computer but also a Surface tablet that provided access to every incoming audio source. The desks were clean, shiny and white, and whatever walls weren't glass were all bright red. The old analog consoles I knew were gone, replaced by crisp new Wheatstone LXE surfaces. And the talk studio on the other side of the wall? Thanks to the ease of digital routing, it was serving not only WBZ but our longtime archival, WRKO.

How did we get here? That's a long story, one that started a few days earlier and a dozen miles away. On Saturday, August 25, I had the privilege to be on hand when WBZ left the studio building it had occupied for 70 years, the one where I was so lucky to have worked from 1992 until 1997.

When Westinghouse opened the building at 1170 Soldiers Field Road, it was one of the first structures anywhere that was purpose-built as a standalone radio and TV facility for WBZ radio and its new sister station, WBZ-FM. They stayed together all the way until 2017, when a massive ownership shuffle saw CBS (successor to Westinghouse) sell its radio division to Entercom. Boston was a particularly sticky gear in that complicated sale, because Entercom itself already owned a big cluster of radio stations. Combining those with the one AM and four FM's CBS owned would have put Entercom over the ownership limit, and so two more companies entered the equation. Entercom kept its own sports station, WEEI-FM, and swapped CBS Radio's sports station, WBZ-FM, to Beasley in exchange for WMJX-FM, AC "Magic 106.7." (In an upcoming segment, we'll take you inside the studio shuffle that relocated WBZ-FM to Beasley's facility.)

As for WBZ(AM), it would have fit within the ownership cap for Entercom, but as a dominant station in the Boston market, its revenues were too high to make the deal palatable to antitrust regulators. And so Entercom swapped four stations – WBZ(AM) and classic rock WZLX-FM from CBS and talk WRKO (AM) and R&B WKAF-FM from the original Entercom cluster – over to iHeart Media.



WBZ's Allston talk studio



WBZ's Soldiers Field Road building

Before we see how all of that changed things up at iHeart's studios in Medford, 10 miles to the north, let's take a farewell tour of WBZ in its last hours at its longtime home along the Charles River in Allston.

When I worked here in the 1990s, it was another time of big change at WBZ. The Gulf War in 1991 brought the end to the last of the middle-of-the-road music that still filled a few dayparts in the station's full-service format. Those midday slots went to talk (featuring an up-and-coming Tom Bergeron), then to all-news a year later, relegating talk only to nights and weekends. In 1995, Westinghouse bought CBS, replacing the big red "Group W" on the building with a blue CBS eye. A year later, a major building expansion and renovation moved our radio home out of the west side of the building where it had been since the beginning. A new spirit of cooperation meant we relocated to an expanded wing of the WBZ-TV newsroom on the east side. Instead of being rivals with the TV staff, we were now working side-by-side.



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WBZ radio's newsroom in its final hours, looking into the row of studios and master control

Our studio space was all in one long line facing the newsroom desks: a talk studio, a master control room where the operator faced into the talk studio, and two mirror-image news studios facing each other. Our stacks and stacks of carts didn't come over from the old studios; instead, an early version of MediaTouch brought us into the digital world of 1996. Our Basys newsroom software moved with us, but back then we couldn't yet integrate audio cuts with our scripts. Network news feeds still came in to a row of reel-to-reel machines, but those didn't last long.



The WBZ Radio Hall of Fame on the wall of the old building

22 years later, on WBZ radio's last night here, the bones of the newsroom hadn't changed much. The old tape-op area with the reel machines was gone, opened up to provide desk space for in-house traffic reporters. The newsroom software had been updated several times, integrating audio with news copy. Newer automation powered master control – but there and in the news studios, the same Ward-Beck analog consoles still ran WBZ's audio, augmented by some SAS routing between studios and into the tech core where the station's audio went out to its transmitter site, 20 miles away on the coast in Hull.

By the time I made it into the newsroom around 5, only a few people were left. Most of the weekday staff had said their farewells and taken their boxes from their desks on Friday, leaving only a skeleton weekend news crew and a few engineers waiting to begin the shutdown. Anchors Garo Hagopian and Mike Macklin alternated the half-hour news blocks leading up to the last one, which Macklin anchored at 5:30. At 6, Hagopian had recorded a short newscast, leading into a paid financial program that was pre-recorded and loaded into automation both here in Allston and over at the new studio in Medford.



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WBZ anchor Mike Macklin after the final newscast in the old studios

As it turned out, the switch didn't finally get pulled until that show ended at 8, which left a little time to ramble around the old building one last time. Several newer staffers had never seen what the studios had looked like before 1996, so we took an impromptu tour of that side of the building. Our old newsroom was now a sales office, itself already vacated for the move of that department up to Medford. The long hallway that had led from there to the studios had been reconfigured, but I could still show them our old master control (now the mailroom, with an incongruous DX-10 backup transmitter sitting in one corner), the old talk studio, now the building manager's office, and the old production room, now a storage room.



8:02 PM: Thumbs-up for a successful transfer from the old control room

And then it was time for history: just before 8, the disclaimer from the paid programming ended, board op Britt Chittick potted down the automation in Allston – and we all held our breath as we listened on a portable radio for the delay to run through. No audio from the console here, but audio was still on the air, now coming from the new master control up in Medford. After 70 years, Soldiers Field Road was off the radio airwaves, leaving the engineers to swoop in (and under), extracting critical newsroom servers to be moved up to the new studios and immediately reconnected. The old AudioVault screens went dark, power to the Ward-Beck consoles went off, and with one last walk down the long hallway out to the lobby and one last respectful glance at the WBZ Radio Hall of Fame plaques by the front door, it was all over.

(Just a couple of days later, WBZ-TV, still owned by CBS, announced that it too will be leaving this building in a few years. As this land becomes ever more valuable, the TV station will relocate to a smaller new building on what's now the parking lot, and the old building will be razed for condos and offices. So it goes.)



A last look back down the long hallway to the old newsroom

In part two later this week: WBZ makes a new home as part of iHeart's shiny expanded studio space in the suburbs.