

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON RADIO AUDIENCES

Sara O'Sullivan¹
Peter Lewis²

This paper begins with a brief discussion of existing research on the radio audience in order to chart the background and context for this discussion. We then move on to discuss the findings of two small qualitative audience studies, offering some insights into the way listening is woven into people's daily routines and its meaning for their imaginative lives and sense of self. The advantages of, and the case for more qualitative research on radio audiences are outlined. There is a lot of work still to be done in this area and many questions left unanswered. We still know too little about how radio audiences understand the medium i.e. what audiences do with radio. Studies of the experience of listening to the BBC radio drama and an Irish talk show provide an insight into this largely unexplored area of radio research. Listeners to both genres were found to belong to the active audience. Similarities and differences in modes of listening and levels of engagement will be outlined. Following

1 University College Dublin

2 Research Fellow Department of Media and Communications - London School of Economics - Visiting professor Sunderland University. Coordinator of the IREN-project.

from our experience of researching radio audiences we will make some suggestions for future research in this field.

Listening to Listeners Collaboration

The two studies described here were quite separate, concerned with different radio genres (talk radio and radio drama) in different countries and in different decades. But the methodologies used to gain access to the listeners and conduct in-depth interviews with them have much in common. Following a serendipitous meeting at the Radio Studies Network conference in Luton (January 2004) the authors decided to collaborate, feeling that the field would benefit from some attention being paid to methodological issues relating to radio audience research. The researchers worked together over a period of 18 months exploring some of the methodological issues raised by their experiences of doing qualitative research on radio audiences. A peculiarity is common to both studies. Both in their way pioneered an approach to radio listening, but *both were unpublished* up till now. Could this be an unconscious echo of the radio drama fan's dilemma : there was no one to talk to ? That situation has now changed, and makes it possible, in a piece of media archaeology, for these findings to be discussed in the light of day.

Qualitative Research on the Radio Audience

A number of problems can be identified with broadcast audience research. Most of the research done on radio audiences is done either by market researchers for commercial purposes (for example RAJAR in the UK and JNLR/MRBI in Ireland), or by or on behalf of broadcasters themselves. The information is important for academics who wish to study radio and can provide a useful overview of trends in radio listening (see for example Hasebrink, 2004). However this data is often designated commercially sensitive, unavailable to 'outsiders', and prohibitively expensive to access. Another issue is the methodology used in these studies (see Starkey, 2004 for a critical analysis of these figures). Moreover, there are limitations to quantitative approaches if one wishes to understand how « media exposure is interwoven into the fabric of everyday life ..[since] for most people [it] may hardly ever be considered as a separate class of experience accessible to instant analysis » (Day *et al.* undated c.1983 : 286).

One solution to these various problems with available data and methodologies is to investigate the potential of qualitative methods which have been used extensively in other areas of media analysis. Despite the ubiquity of the radio the focus of cultural studies and media sociology in recent decades has been on television and film. Work focusing on television, and in particular on the television audience, has been both plentiful and theoretically rich (e.g. Ang, 1985 ; Morley, 1992 ; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). In contrast work on the radio audience was slower to emerge and until quite recently there was a paucity of empirical research available on the qualitative listening experiences of the radio audience. Quantitative data can tell us about composition of audiences, but is of limited use where the interest is how audiences respond to media texts. In contrast qualitative data, grounded in the everyday life of those studied, has the potential to allow access to audience responses /meaning of radio for audience. As Jensen (1992 : 224) has argued both « the origin and the gratification of communicative needs through media use is a complex process which takes place in a particular social setting and cultural context ».

However taking an approach of this kind raises a number of epistemological questions – can the researcher know the meaning of radio for those who listen ? How can we as researchers access this interior process which usually remains hidden from public view ? The audience's understanding of radio is not something that exists out there in some natural setting for the researcher to access. However there is an existing relationship between media texts and media audiences, aspects of which can be accessed by the researcher. This is not to overlook the many difficulties associated with doing qualitative audience research. As Livingstone points out

Methodologically, audience research is faced with trying to capture experiences which are private rather than public, experiences concerned with meaning rather than overt practices, experiences of all society not just the elite, experiences commonly regarded as trivial and forgettable rather than important (Livingstone, 2004 : 82)

Until recently the radio audience was neglected by radio researchers. In recent years a picture of how listeners listen to radio has

emerge. Mendlesohn (1964), in one of the earliest pieces of research on radio audiences, identified a number of important psychological needs radio fulfilled : « radio 'brackets » the listener's day ; it provides companionship ; it can both sustain and create moods ; it is a conveyor of news and information, thus « providing listeners with things to talk about » (1964 : 245) and allowing listeners to 'participate vicariously in the great events of the day' (1964 : 244). His argument was that these functions allowed radio to compete with the new medium of television. Dorothy Hobson's (1980) ethnographic work unpacked the gender subtext overlooked by Mendlesohn, focusing on the role played by the mass media in the everyday lives of British housewives. The flow of radio programming helps structure and punctuate the working day ; the DJ's chat provides listeners with company ; the music provides « a musical reminder of their leisure activities before they got married » (Hobson, 1980 : 109). She argues that listening to the radio helps them negotiate « the tensions caused by the isolation in their lives » (Hobson, 1980 : 109; see also Karpf, 1980). Hobson's work highlights the importance of paying attention to the context in which listening takes place. The meaning of radio for her respondents was linked to their status as housewives, the nature of the work they did, and their experience of isolation. Moores (1988) work on the early days of radio is another key study which shows us how radio made the transition from being a new technology an "unruly guest" to a taken for granted piece of equipment present in almost every home. This work, drawing on oral history interviews with older listeners as well as documentary research, reminds the reader that the current position of radio in the home is socially constructed rather than natural.

More recently what Crissell (2001 : 245) has termed « the rise in radio studies » has led an increase in studies in this field. Recent qualitative studies of the radio audience follow in the tradition of Hobson and Moores. Lewis's and O'Sullivan's studies can be seen as part of this tradition although both their studies predate the current interest in the radio audience. In an ethnographic study of radio consumption in the South West of England Tacchi (2000) examined the role played by radio in the everyday lives and intimate relationships of both men and women. Gender was found to be central ; informants present their listening in ways that are congruent with their understandings of masculinity and femininity. She argues that « we (women and men) use mediated fantasy to explore, establish and maintain our selves as gendered indi-

viduals » (2002 : 165). This work is important as it uses a relational rather than static conceptualisation of gender (Connell, 1987) and thus advances the debate about the role played by gender in relation to radio listening.

Thomas (2002) studied *The Archers* audience, using a combination of questionnaires, focus groups (where extracts from *The Archers* were used as a stimulus), telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews. She discusses these different methods, and her role as a researcher in some detail (2002 : 59-74) and this is a most useful contribution to the field. Her focus is on how complex identities are constructed through talk about media texts such as *The Archers* ; gender, national identity and class were all found to play a role in this process. This attention to multiple factors highlights the complexity of the interaction between radio audiences and radio texts. It also acknowledges that there are different types of female subjects (see also McRobbie, 1999). Domenget (2003a) draws our attention to yet another key factor age. In a series of in-depth interviews with retired people in France, he argues that the meaning of listening to the radio changes over the life course (see also Domenget, 2003b).

In all of these studies the social context of listening to radio is highlighted. Other notable studies in the field include Glevarec, 2003a and b ; Skuse, 2002; Cook, 2003 and O'Neill, 1998. This work on radio audiences has advanced our understanding of the meaning of radio for those who listen. However we suggest there is a lot of work still to be done in this area and many questions left unanswered. Although there are difficulties associated with researching the audience we argue that it is essential to include the audience in any in-depth study of radio.

Background to the BBC's *Afternoon Play*

The original study was carried out in 1986-7 and combined a production study in the BBC's Radio Drama Department (reported in Lewis 1991 and 2004), textual analysis and an audience study based on telephone interviews with 15 listeners, and on 174 letters replying to a notice in *The Radio Times*. The *Afternoon Play* has been a part of the BBC's output for many decades and continues to the present. In the 1980s it filled a one-hour slot at 1500hrs, Monday to Friday on the BBC

Radio 4 (a 'generalist' channel including speech, news, quiz shows, magazines, documentaries and comedies). Drama averaged a weekly 12 hours in a number of slots on Radio 4, and on Radio 3 (equivalent to *France Culture* and *France Musique* combined). The *Afternoon Plays*' 5 hours were/are at the popular end of the scale yet included serious themes touching on contemporary social issues. Given the fact that, in the late 1980s, three quarters of listeners stayed tuned to one channel, the flow and content of the Radio 4 schedule as a whole has to be understood as contributing to the meaning of the *Afternoon Play* for many listeners: it was a fictional, narrative 'treat', a relief from the anxieties of the news and life in the world outside the home, yet also a meaningful part of daily life for the listeners interviewed. For the large proportion of women listening at this time of day, the *Afternoon Play*'s position in the schedule was enhanced by the fact that it followed the long-running *Woman's Hour*, a prestigious and popular magazine programme.

Background to The Gerry Ryan Show

The study was carried out in 1996-7 and involved a brief period of non-participant observation of the production of the show, interviews with members of the production team, telephone interviews with 42 callers to the show (which covered listening to as well as calling the show), a survey of 266 listeners to the show, interviews with 10 regular listeners to the show, and a discourse analysis of two weeks of the show (reported in O'Sullivan, 2005, 2001 and 2000). The aim of the audience component of the study was to explore both *why* and *how* people listen to the show. The show is broadcast on 2FM each weekday from 9.00-12.00 and has been on the air since 14 March 1988. 2FM is the Irish state broadcaster's (Radio Telefís Éireann) second radio station, and combines Top 40 hits, 'oldies', and Irish pop and rock music. Apart from *The Gerry Ryan Show*, the focus is primarily on music rather than talk and 2FM is aimed at a younger audience than RTÉ Radio 1. The show features a mix of talk and music, and is a mix of information and entertainment, involving both serious and not-serious items and features. The final component of the show is caller's stories about themselves and their everyday lives. The style of the show is informal, populist, irreverent, fun and sexy. This mode of presentation holds no matter what the topic under discussion. Regular listeners' talk about the

show pointed to the multiple pleasures of listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show*. These coalesced around an enjoyment of the host, the fun of the show, and emotional affect. Entertainment was understood to be what the show is 'about'. The remainder of the content of the show featured in a very minor way in comparison. This was in contrast to findings of previous studies of the genre. It was also a welcome corrective to O'Sullivan's initial Habermasian reading of talk radio and provided a fruitful line of theoretical enquiry.

Radio drama in everyday life

The BBC's audience research showed that, at the time of the study, 75% of listeners to the channel in the early afternoon were women (also that the audience profile was skewed towards middle-class and South East England listeners). The letters received from respondents and the sample of interviewees drawn from them reflected this distribution. For these listeners, radio was very far from being a 'secondary medium'. Their choice of routine and accompanying activities were examples of what Domenget, citing Bertrand and Mercier, has called bundling (agglomeration) :

It is not a question of juxtaposition, but of real integration, a merging of the two practices creating a new, specific practice which cannot be reduced to its constituent parts. (Domenget, J-C. 2003a :144)

These 'parallel activities' included some in which the relationship was so close that the listening experience became 'anchored' in the completed task and continued subsequently to recall it. For example, the re-examination of a piece of work – a painted window-frame or a design in a tapestry, or passing in a car a particular place, recalled the play listened to at the time of that activity.

These activities and choices, including the crucial choice to *be alone* while listening, form part of the *context* of listening. They may also provide a *motive* : while it has been argued that television soaps are popular among women working at home because their structure matches that of housework (Modleski 1984), the responses in this study suggest that contained segments like the hour-long *Afternoon Play*, with

its clear narrative closure, are desired precisely because this is usually denied in real life by the endlessness of women's work.

The context also includes the *intertextual* references to the radio play – the *Radio Times* billing, the on-air trail, the interview with the play's author in the arts magazine programme *Kaleidoscope*. These “vertical dimensions” of intertextuality are complemented by the “horizontal dimensions” of genre, character and content which interpretive strategies have to negotiate (Fiske 1987 : 108). Thus, according to Fiske, (whose comments refer to television, not radio, and have consequently as so often is the case in visually-dominated media theory, to be extrapolated and adapted), the discourse of interviewees' response completes the “final, crucial stage” of the circulation of meaning (Fiske 1987 : 117).

Bennett and Woollacott summed up this situation succinctly :

The process of reading is not one in which the reader and the text meet as abstractions but one in which the intertextually organised reader meets the intertextually organised text. The exchange is never a pure one between two unsullied entities, existing separately from one another, but is rather ‘muddied’ by the cultural debris which attach to both readers and texts in the determinate conditions which regulate the specific forms of their encounter. (Bennett and Woollacott 1987 :56)

Morley and Silverstone suggested that “at least four dimensions” need to be considered in reworking the text/reader model (again, visual media were the reference) : (1) interpretation is not confined to reception itself but is carried on “retrospectively in the subsequent uses we have for it” (2) meanings intrude from use of other media (3) the differing “modalities” of watching in a domestic environment have to be recognised (4) the modes of address of media interact with « variations in social and cultural circumstances » (Morley and Silverstone 1988 : 29, 47).

All these dimensions were observable in respondents' accounts of their listening. They spoke of different levels of attention (“*modalities*”) and of the necessity to shift to different modalities so as to allow the filtering out of unwanted messages or a concentration on what seemed

significant. These ‘gear changes’ are a matter of habit, like those of experienced car drivers, and are normally unnoticed, even if at one time they had to be learned. This points up the importance of the *history* of a person’s listening. Most interviewees and letter-writers in the study referred to the childhood experience of listening (invariably) with their mother, and often these were ‘only children’, or children whose sibling(s) were far enough apart in age to mean that informants had to amuse themselves in solitary activities like listening to the radio. It is in this early childhood experience that listening skills are developed, skills that have been observed to be lacking in later generations (Lewis, 2004 : 173).

Very striking is the evidence of *active listening*, of meaning-making, interpretation, memory, recognition of actor’s voices, guessing motives or the course of a plot and so on (cp. Livingstone 1998). Margaret is a good example of this :

Well, um it makes you use your imagination I think. I mean going back to what we were saying about picturing the set and the characters. Um it makes you think about situations.« Gosh, what if I was in that situation, what if that happens to me! » Um, makes you take sides maybe, or form opinions, makes you think about things you haven’t thought about before. Stimulates you into some sort of thought even, you know, if you’re not enjoying the play. I mean I have this thing. I argue back with the radio, you see. Um, because my husband will very often come into the kitchen and say « Oh, I thought somebody called. » But it’s not! It’s me arguing with the radio, talking to the radio.

Above all, a constant theme in the interviews is the *re-telling* of the story to oneself (Morley and Silverstone’s retrospective interpretation), and, if one is lucky, to a partner or friend – though this is rare : time and again respondents bemoan the absence of opportunity to talk next day about the plays they have heard as people talk about television. Joan, a 37-year-old with a full-time job as a credit controller, and Tony, a 20-year-old Cambridge university student, illustrate this :

PL : Is there anyone you can talk to about the plays you hear ?

Joan : No. They all think I’m a bit odd.

PL : Because you listen to radio ?

Joan : Yes. Nobody else I know listens to the wireless...though sometimes, I do have a friend Cath at work who, if something was said that perhaps we might have spoken to each other about a couple of days earlier, I'd say, well, "That was a coincidence." And she's interested. But, um, no, everybody talks about 'did you see the television last night ?'

PL : But do you actually talk *about* radio ? Do you find many other people in Cambridge, for instance, or at home who listen to the radio as much as you do ?

Tony : No, hardly anyone. They think that it's quite surprising that anyone should just sit and just (laughs) listen to a play on radio.

Lacking an interpretive community of an interpersonal kind, such listeners must depend more heavily on intertextual clues and the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) evoked and constantly reinforced by station's mode of address, an address conveyed by Radio 4 presentation in trails and discreet intonation, but more expressively in the case of RTE's talk show.

Shortage of space prevents a discussion of the meaning for respondents of the *content* of *Afternoon Plays* listened to, and of the particular play, *Sweet Stuff*, whose production was tracked from 'a gleam in the eye' of its author, through commissioning, scripting and production. Respondents' comments on *Sweet Stuff* can be compared to those listeners interviewed in the BBC's weekly omnibus survey, into which questions about *Sweet Stuff* were introduced in consultation with the play's producer and the BBC's Audience Research Department.

An answer, Joan's, to a final question in Lewis's questionnaire can sum up the radio drama listening experience.

PL : What do you think listening to radio plays does for you ?
What's the real pleasure of it ? What does it compare with ?

Joan : « What does it compare with ? » Now my wireless compares with company – company coming that you don't have to dust in the corners for. And that's really nice : sitting in front of the fire in the winter – some

needlework, and listen to a play. My house just fills up with people and it's smashing.

Talk Radio In Everyday Life

Listeners to *The Gerry Ryan Show* were also found to be active and engaged. Although *The Gerry Ryan Show* was described as 'good company' by both male and female listeners this is just one feature and it would be reductive to describe the show merely as a companion. Ninety four percent of survey respondents reported that they usually were doing something else while listening to the show ; the most common activity here was housework. This is the context in which the experience of listening is rooted. The interview data revealing *how* Gerry Ryan Show listeners listen to the show suggests that for many the show is more than background noise, or texture.

(...) even though I'd be pottering around or whatever, I'd still be focused in on what's happening, you know [(yeah, yeah)]
(Rachel, works in the home)

Listening to talk radio, like radio drama, involves different degrees of attention depending on factors such as content and work at hand.

One key difference in listening to talk radio and radio drama is that listening to the former is usually a fragmented experience. The format of the show is designed to facilitate this mode of listening, with short items and frequent topic changes. Both male and female listeners fit *The Gerry Ryan Show* into their daily routine and as the show is three hours long, it is very unusual for anyone to listen to the whole show.

I won't be listening to it now all the time, I have it on now all the time [(uhum)], but maybe I might be in and out to the garden [(yeah)] hanging out my clothes or [(yeah)] (Annette, works in the home)

Some respondents have modified their routines to ensure that their work causes minimal disruption to their listening, for example structuring noisy work like hoovering around the 'boring' bits of the show. This option is not available to those listening outside the home who appear to have less control over their work. Those who listen while driving reported that the ebb and flow of their working day means that they are often out of their vehicles whilst the show is on.

It kills me sometimes, they might just be getting to a really interesting topic you know and em I'd have to get out of the car to go into a shop of something you know and eh I'd love to stay listening, but I can't, you know [(uhum)] (Carol, salesperson).

Listening to the show can help alleviate the boredom of both paid and unpaid work. Note the similarities between these two respondents' descriptions of driving for a living and doing housework.

Yeah, the bloke with me is usually asleep! (laughs) [(laughs)] It just holds your interest and there's nothing better than holding your interest when you're driving, you know [(yeah)]. Whereas if there's nothing there to listen to and that you can get very drowsy (Simon, truck driver).

I love, yeah, I love the, the em, you know - the ones where you, you're listening to conversations (...). Well, I suppose its kind of, its kind of like when you're in the house all day [(mhmm)] (...) because you get to be very mechanical going around all day you know, doing these, your own jobs and things like that [mhmm, mhmm)] (Janet, Caller 44)

These examples also correspond to the concept of bundling (Domenget, 2003b).

Other motives for listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show* are linked to the various pleasures of listening to the show ; these include the host's on-air personality, the 'fun' of the show, as well as the way the show draws the listener in. This was also found to be important for listeners to the *Afternoon Play*. The show invites listeners to talk back to the radio (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998 : 111) and so offers various opportunities for audience involvement.

(...) in your own mind you're giving your opinion of what you would say or what you would do, you know [(yeah)]. (Simon, truck driver)

People are ringing in you know with general problems and you kind of say 'yeah', you know what I mean 'I've felt like that' or 'I've been like that' or you know so. (Rachel, works in the home)

This involvement involves taking the role of the caller or host and imagining yourself in their position. Note the similarities between these listeners and Margaret (above), one of Lewis's listeners.

In several interviews the topics discussed on the show triggered off conversations with me as we listened to the show. Respondents also spoke about the different ways the show can be drawn on in everyday social interaction; it is both an informational and a conversational resource. Regular listeners discuss the show with both other listeners, and also non-listeners. It is not just female listeners that make use of the show in this way (see also Gillespie, 1995 :145).

(...) and I also find about the programme it can be an education, he comes across with things that I wouldn't be aware of [(yeah)]. I would be passing it on to my sisters and you know my mother actually would be saying to me, 'did you hear this on the Gerry Ryan this morning?' (...). She would be at home as well and it's a topic of conversation even when you go out at times, something that have been said on the radio and you can go out and you can talk about it with your friends that night if they have heard about it. And if they haven't you can talk about it anyway [(yeah)]
(Elaine, child care worker)

You'd be going out for the night and you'd be talking, sometimes you'd be talking about 'were you listening to his show ?' [(uhum)] and what came up and all that, you know [(yeah)].
(Simon, truck driver)

Here the act of retelling is different to that found in Lewis's study, where retelling is usually only to the self. Listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show* is very much understood as an ordinary activity for those under forty, who constitute the majority of listeners to this hugely popular show. Listeners can and do talk to others about the show on a regular basis to others and can quite safely assume that they are familiar with the show, even if they have not heard the item under discussion.

Two types of audience response to the show are evident. One group of respondents focus on the host and on the fun of the show. There is an affinity between their understanding and the production team's understanding of the meaning of the show. They do not criticise the show

in any way. This can be termed a preferred reading of the show. The second group also enjoy the host and the fun of the show, but are critical of some aspects of the show. Following Hall (1994 :265) I have called this a negotiated reading; 'negotiated readings are probably what most of us do most of the time... Most of us are never entirely within the preferred reading or entirely against the whole grain of the text'.

An important component of the pleasure of listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show* is the fun of the show. All the respondents laughed and smiled at the show while we listened to the show together. Respondents described the pleasure of listening to the show to me ;

(...) you'd catch yourself laughing [(yeah)] (...) I think it lifts you, whichever way (...). I mean I have been cracked up, if anybody seen me walking round laughing, you know [(yeah)] at things he's said. (Valerie, works in the home)

Remember he had something on there about em he started talking about *Star Wars* [(yeah)]. They were just after being re-released. And he just started talking about it and then he got a few phone calls (...). And em it was just, it turned out to be for about 20 minutes just general good humoured banter, you know [(yeah)]. I can relate to it and have a bit of a giggle with it, you know [(yeah)]. Things like that you know [(yeah, yeah)]. (Mark, public service worker)

Whilst the *Afternoon Play* satisfies narrative cravings, *The Gerry Ryan Show* can be seen to satisfy a craving for these other pleasures.

Future Directions

The existing work on the radio audience shows some of the possibilities offered by this methodological approach. However this work is only in its infancy, and more qualitative audience research is required before we will have an adequate understanding of role of radio in everyday life. Radio is a complex medium and audience research has only begun to explore this.

It appears that when we speak about studying the radio audience two different approaches are possible, although both may overlap.

In the first instance the researcher can focus on the whole picture of radio listening. Studies that have taken this approach have tended to use ethnographic methods (Mendlesohn, 1964; Tacchi, 2000; Hobson, 1980; Moores, 1993). These studies seek to situate the activity of radio listening within the context of the everyday life of the listener. From this work a picture of how listeners listen to radio is emerging. We argue that there is scope for further work of this kind. The evidence of these two studies suggests that audiences have both a general relationship with radio, and specific relationships with different genres or formats. Radio research must explore these relationships further in order to better understand the meaning of radio for audiences. The differences in listening to different radio genres also needs further investigation. The notion of different modes of engagement is one that would be particularly interesting to investigate further. The current changes in the radio sector, in particular the increased fragmentation of radio audiences, makes this kind of work even more apposite. Exciting possibilities for radio audience research arise from technological developments in internet radio, including podcasting, on-line archiving and interactive radio (e.g. van Slem *et al.* 2004 on audiences for web radio).

In the second approach the aim is to include an audience perspective within a wider study of a particular genre, or a particular radio text. Here the research also looks at the production and text (for example see Skuse, 2002). This remains a largely unexplored area of radio research and would be an interesting area for future radio research.

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