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Forty Years of BBC Radio News

From the Swinging Sixties
to the Turbulent Noughties



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EDITION

Chapter 1 Tuning in

It always begins with an almost silence,
world-wide potential held in the fingers,
remembering the stately warming-up of the valves,
an anticipation lost to transistors.

Sean Street, "Tuning in", *Radio and Other Poems*

Radio News is dead. Long live Radio News! The death of radio has been predicted many times since its invention, but a hundred years on it perseveres, reinventing itself -- some would argue growing in strength -- perhaps the only medium able to survive into the future. True, the media landscape has changed dramatically, through technological advances and changes in media consumption patterns, but still the essence of radio – communication to the masses through sound and the spoken word – has endured, even if those masses are increasingly dispersed. Whereas once radio was only heard through the “wireless” set, now it is available through digital platforms, internet, mobile phone and podcast too. Whilst in western countries radio has to compete for its share of the audience with a variety of media and other activities, in the UK and the Netherlands at least radio maintains its reach: each week 89% of the UK (RAJAR 2012) and 92% of the Dutch population (Rab FM 2008) spends at least some time listening to the radio. Figures from Latin America (Soong 2002) and South Africa (Omar 2008) show similar percentages. The internet and its option to listen to items again or those missed during their scheduled broadcast is gaining in popularity. In the UK in December 2008 nearly a third of all adults, that is 16.1 million people, claimed to have listened to the radio via the internet, an increase of 1.6 million since May 2008 – and 7.2 million downloaded a podcast (RAJAR 2008). ‘Three quarters of [...] Listen Again listeners said the service has no impact on the amount of live radio to

which they listen; while almost half said they are now listening to radio programmes to which they did not listen previously.' (RAJAR 10 December 2008)

There is evidence to suggest that a large part of the radio audience listens to hear the news content. The US Radio ratings research group, Arbitron, estimates 'the percentage of people who listened to some kind of news, talk or information on their traditional radio during an average week was 16.1% in 2006' (State of the News Media 2008). The project for Excellence in Journalism suggests that public radio is thriving. 'News headlines, provide an important and diverse source of information – and are far more than anchors reading wire copy.' (State of the Media 2008) The weekly reach of BBC Radio Four's flagship bulletin, the Six O'Clock News is 3.4 million and the network's current affairs programme *Today* saw its audience rise to 9.81 million in the final quarter of 2008 as, is thought, listeners turned to the show to hear coverage of the economic crisis and the US Presidential elections (Plunkett 2009).

Journalists have had to become multiskilled across the various media; they once chose to write, but have now taken on the roles of cameraman, sound operative, studio manager and presenter. Where once they chose a distinct type of media, whether it be newspapers, radio or television, and more recently online, convergence has meant they must be able to work across the spectrum. Those who do still manage to solely work as radio journalists are having to provide more output because of the increase in outlets and the decrease in overall staffing levels. With increased competition demanding faster news gathering and speedier delivery -- and modern technology making this possible – it might be reasonable to assume that the output from previously distinct media is becoming more homogeneous. Less time spent on crafting the language could lead to more room for factual and style errors. As journalists work in what might be termed a 'news factory' (cf. Davies 2009), it is pertinent to ask where that leaves the journalists' role of communicating the news to their audiences. Perhaps pressures of time and competition are just excuses to complain and perhaps journalists never really spent that much time in

the past on their story selection, ordering and linguistic sculpting either.

1.1 Context

Media language pervades society and news is the primary media genre (Bell 1991; McQuail 2005). Studies of the media by sociologists and linguists go back to the mid-1950s with research into professional norms of individual journalists (Breed 1955; Gieber 1961), newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge 1965), the news production process (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980; Schlesinger 1987), news ideology (Hall 1980), media bias and objectivity (Kress 1983, Fowler 1991, van Dijk 1998) and the role of the audience (Donsbach 1983; Bell 1991; McQuail 1997). Jacobs et al (2008) point to the introduction of new concepts of journalistic practice and the need for updated newsroom ethnographies to take into account the implementation of new technologies in newsrooms. They argue that 'from an analytical point of view, media sociology has largely disregarded journalistic agency in favour of organisational and institutional levels of analysis (...) and that the agency of journalists as social actors' is in pressing need of study (2008: 3). More recently, scholars have redirected their attention to theories of cultural production, in particular Bourdieu's field theory (Benson 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2006; Couldry 2007). Indeed, Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' is an interesting one to investigate in the case of journalists, to see if they are consciously aware of writing the way they do:

While agents orient themselves towards specific interests or goals, their action is only rarely the outcome of a conscious deliberation or calculation in which the pros and cons of different strategies are carefully weighed up, their costs and benefits assessed, etc. ..by virtue of the 'habitus', individuals are already predisposed to act in certain ways, pursue certain goals...actions can never be analysed adequately as the outcome of conscious calculation. (1991: 17)

Chapter 3 of this book will give an overview of some of the main theories in sociology and sociolinguistics which are of par-

ticular interest in shaping the context in which this particular research project into radio news language and radio news journalists takes place.

Communication is sending (and receiving) a message (Crystal 1990; Campbell 2010) and it is important to see how radio news does this; how it communicates the events that have happened - which its journalists think are relevant - to its listeners. There is considerable literature on journalism but most tends to be on the printed word. Radio news is often either amalgamated with television as 'broadcast news' or, if mentioned separately, there is a concentration on describing or analysing the output or the (social)history of the medium (cf Burger 2005; Crisell 1994; Crook 2004; Hendy 2007). The radio journalists who write, or rather collate and edit, i.e. "radiofy" news that comes in from press agencies, correspondents, press releases, and members of the public, are rarely questioned about their role in this communication act (Schlesinger's 1987 study forming an exception, although here he looked at *both* Radio and Television) and in particular there is a lack of broad qualitative research. Where there are studies of radio, many concentrate on the genre as a whole, or on drama, phone-ins or current affairs, whilst there is little detailed explanation of the radio news bulletins and summaries, cues (introductions to correspondent reports or audio of interviewees) and copy stories which are compiled continuously (Crisell 1994; Scannel 1991). This study attempts to somewhat redress the balance by speaking to writers from a Radio Newsroom, both current and retired, and by looking at a sample of news bulletins from the past forty years to try to tease out further some of the examples those writers - also known as 'subs' -- have mentioned with respect to language use, format and content of their news output. The project also tries to evaluate if and how external factors in today's society in terms of the changing mediascape (i.e. technological advances, increased competition, time pressures, budgetary constraints; fewer journalists, convergence, bimedia reporting/multi-skilling, less prestige for radio) and changes in audience affect the language of Radio News, the choice of items and the perception of the job. Perhaps a strategic lesson can be learned from this or at least in-

formation gathered which will be useful to future radio writers and scholars of radio, media sociology and social history.

The focus of this project is BBC Radio News, the media organisation with an unrivalled reputation in the world for accuracy, objectivity and journalistic writing and production skills. Its radio news operation employs some 900 staff who provide round-the-clock news and current affairs for ten national networks and local radio with very different audience profiles. The focal point of this research is on those who write and subedit national news bulletins for BBC Radios 1-5. The BBC is also the organisation where I worked as a journalist for five years in the 1990s. I remember being astonished by the selection processes at TV news, where – although understandable because of the importance of the visual medium – the availability of pictures was often more important than what I, and my radio colleagues, thought was the news value of a story. The beauty of radio is that it is immediate and a blank canvas for listeners to create their own picture. Radio is also much cheaper to produce than Television: 'hour by hour it costs at most a tenth, and often as little as a fiftieth of [TV]' (Hendy 2007: 6). The BBC was created in 1922 and several excellent works have been written about its early history, notably by Asa Briggs (1985). This project concentrates on the period 1966-2008, the time when the BBC Radio networks as we currently know them were created; the time that saw the introduction – and then the demise – of the graduate trainee programme; the move from straight-read bulletins to ones with inserts; the huge expanse in competition from commercial radio stations; the move of parts of radio news from Broadcasting House to Television Centre, the enormous changes in technology, and the time where the people I interviewed worked and/or still work in the radio newsroom. Whilst it would be impossible to say whether the findings from this study involving the BBC can be extrapolated to all radio news output anywhere in the world, or even in just the UK, it is hoped that this case study approach will form the basis for further exploratory studies into other radio organisations. This study concentrates on writers in the newsroom as opposed to reporters and correspondents, partly because the radio newsroom writers have not been the subject of much research up until now and partly because I want to try to establish whether

these writers think 'painting' (i.e. using descriptive language that creates an image in the listeners' heads) in news is possible and necessary or whether that should be the responsibility of the correspondent. Thus I have restricted my observations and analysis to a sample of news bulletins and summaries and the interviews to those who write and edit such material, leaving the texts and views of correspondents as well as the output of current affairs programmes for other scholars to pursue. The terms radio (news) journalists and writers will be used interchangeably throughout and thus both refer to those professionals who are responsible for the production (that is the collating, writing and editing) of the (half)hourly news summaries and bulletins; if correspondents or reporters or newsreaders are meant, they will be denoted as such.

1.2 The function and form of Radio News

The main function of news is to inform people, to tell them either about new events or new developments to those events. News may not actually reflect reality, but offers facts and interpretation of some of the events and issues which a particular media organisation wants to impart to its target audience, be they readers, listeners or viewers. Journalism textbooks (e.g. Sissons 2006; Harcup 2009; White 2002) urge news writers to keep stories concise, distil the facts, and use the style known as 'the inverted pyramid', in which the main point of the story is in the top line with details added in successive lines so that the story forms the shape of a triangle or pyramid. On the subject of writing for radio the same training manuals speak of using conversational language, 'to write for the ear', and to 'paint pictures'. But how it works in practice might not always be clear to a radio journalist and it may not always be possible or even desirable in radio news if those 'pictures' get in the way of telling the facts as concisely and simply as possible.

The mission the BBC set itself at the time of its creation was 'to inform, educate and entertain'; something that is still at the heart of the BBC's purpose (BBC Statements 2007). Although by its very nature news may well educate listeners and viewers (e.g. about current affairs or world politics) or entertain

them by broadcasting light-hearted, even comical stories (whether by accident or design), the prime role of news is to inform. Whether that informational role will continue to be the most important function in the coming years remains to be seen. Schlesinger (1987: 119) suggested that the style of the news in the late 1980s was to entertain more. Complaints about the news media, including the BBC, dumbing down, surface from time to time now too – although the media sociologist Brian McNair argued in 2003 that in the case of British journalism it appeared there was a tendency to “brain up” (McNair 2003). It is worth investigating whether there is substance to these accusations of ‘dumbing down’ or ‘tabloidization’, at least whether it applies to BBC Radio News by talking to the current group of journalists and scrutinizing the content of bulletins over many years.

Radio news bulletins have a clear distinctive structure, with well-defined openings and endings. Examples would include opening phrases such as:

“The eleven o’clock news, I’m Anya Luscombe”

Or: “The News at eleven o’clock. The headlines this morning....[*headlines*]...today’s newsreader is Anya Luscombe...”

Endings might include finishing on a “softer” news item or the weather forecast; signposting the last story with “And Finally....” or actually closing with a phrase such as “Next update at 12”. Although the precise nature of the structure will vary depending on the radio station and could be jettisoned in the event of a “major” (breaking) news story, all radio news bulletins adhere to a clearly recognised format to alert listeners/viewers and then guide them through the bulletin until the end and back to the rest of the programming (Burger 2005). Listening to the radio is often a secondary activity; people (half)listen while engaged in another task, be it driving a car, doing the washing-up, or even studying (Aberg 1999; Crisell 1994; Bell 1991). The challenge for radio news journalists is to catch the listeners’ attention:

[We need] to be aware what the audience actually uses us for. Radio is a background medium of all of that, so it is good that people come to the *Today* programme or *Five-Live* or anything. The part

of being on in the background is that ... there is a framework there when you can come into the forefront, in the foreground, which is just to give the information they need whether it is the news, or the traffic or the weather. It is not something that other media need to do in the same way. (02-06)

In many commercial radio stations in the UK (and other countries), one or just a few people are responsible for the station's entire news output. The journalists double as writers, editors, reporters and news readers. The BBC is remarkable in that it has large numbers of journalists involved in the production of news broadcasts. They have different titles depending on their level of seniority: BJ, SJB, AssEd and Editor (see glossary of terms). The BBC Radio Newsroom is the main centre of radio news writing, providing news bulletins (longer news broadcasts) and summaries (shorter news broadcasts) for many of the radio networks. Over the years the actual number of networks it caters for has varied (see chapters 2, 5 and 6), but all the writers move around the 'desks' writing for the different networks which have very different audience profiles. For this study I have also spoken to journalists who work for BBC Radio 1 Newsbeat, based at Yalding House rather than in the Radio Newsroom at TV Centre, as news for Radio 1 was the responsibility of the writers in the radio newsroom at the start of the time period being studied, but has now for more than ten years fallen within the remit of the Newsbeat team. In addition, it is worth examining if having these distinct groups of journalists has influenced the language and style of Radio 1 bulletins.

Breakfast time is when radio listening peaks, with the 8 am bulletin the highest rated listening period for radio (White 2002; 103, Leitner 1983: 57); that has been so for many years. The BBC's Radio Newsroom News Guide of 1967 said six million tuned in at 8 am whilst at 10 pm the figure was just above half a million. After the morning peak, listening drops off, although on many stations there is an upturn at lunch time and during drive time (5-7 pm). On BBC Radio 4 million tune into its Six O'Clock news. Many of the journalists in the BBC Radio newsroom indicate they enjoy working on this 30 minute stand-alone bulletin as it gives them what they say is "a chance to be