# General Introduction

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Until the middle of the twentieth century radio was the major broadcasting medium, a primary provider of information and entertainment to audiences around the world. But with the arrival first of television and then of other, mostly visual, media its role was gradually reduced: for many years and in many parts of the world it has seemed to consist only of various music formats punctuated by 'capsule' news. Yet this is not the whole story of modern radio. Communities can be, and are, defined simply by the kinds of music they listen to, but through the spoken word radio still carries other kinds of content which transcend the merely musical, afford a range of gratifications to the individual listener, and define identities and interests in a more explicit way. In this respect it may well be enhanced by the new phenomenon of Internet radio, with its global reach, potential for interactivity and convergence with other forms of electronic communication.

As its title suggests, the purpose of this collection is to explore some of these 'extra-musical' functions of radio in different parts of our media-saturated globe. It does not attempt to be exhaustive either in the range of places it visits or in the forms of radio it investigates. Its aim is merely to offer a spread of impressions, a snapshot of the needs which radio continues to serve and the uses to which it is put, whether within or apart from the mere provision of music. The reader will quickly be struck by two things. The first is how extraordinarily resilient radio is, notwithstanding its frequent designation

as the 'Cinderella' medium. In the context of convergent tendencies in the mass media, some of the essays attribute its resilience to an ability to preserve its distinctiveness, others to the ease with which it can incorporate new features such as interactivity and visual text. The second thing that emerges is how remarkably eclectic are the scholarly interests and range of expertise that the medium generates. The contributors have backgrounds in literary criticism, creative writing, history, journalism, media and cultural studies, marketing, psychology and social anthropology. Many have experience as professional broadcasters, whether in station management, staff training, scriptwriting, production or presentation. And all of them are enthusiastic and analytical listeners. It is hoped that the overall achievement of this book is to furnish a useful variety of approaches and insights.

As the editor, my first role in this introduction is to explain the way in which I have structured the collection. Despite the power which new media technologies have conferred on the individual, sound broadcasting, with its need to fill long and daily schedules for fastidious listeners, remains a collective, highly organised and costly activity. The opening section, 'Institutions', therefore focuses on radio institutions, and since our concern is with those which aim at something other than the maximisation of audiences through music formats, it is hardly surprising that none is funded in the conventionally commercial way. I have presumed to open the collection with my study of BBC Radio 4 because this mixed-genre network is not simply a good example of radio's ability to provide something other than non-stop music, but demonstrates the irreducible advantage it holds over the newer, iconic media of television, video and the Internet. We then consider some other radio institutions and the communities of interest they target: Radio 4's younger sibling, BBC Radio 5 Live, which attempts what is in some respects an awkward combination of news and sport; a resurgent U.S. public radio system; and the distinctive content and programming conventions of the Finnish digital station, YLE Radio Peili. The second section, 'Identities', takes a broader look at some of the identities that radio output is both shaped by and in some degree shapes: the primordial communities of Canada, the United States and the South Pacific; gay and women listeners. But a collection which perceived radio only in terms of institutions and audiences, of social contexts and processes, and failed to give some sense of what it is that audiences actually listen to would be arid and

inadequate. The third section, 'Genres', therefore focuses on some, and only some, of the non-musical genres that radio continues to offer: documentary, comedy, poetry, 'talk' and drama. Yet the social dimension is not lost sight of, since the discussion of genres is largely inseparable from a sense of the interest groups they seek to address. The final section, 'New Technology', explores new technology, the effect interactivity and media convergence might have on the forms and institutions of radio, as well as on listener behaviour. It begins with a look at the new phenomenon of Dutch web radio and concludes with an assessment of the likely impact of digital technology on speech radio in general.

However my second editorial duty is in a sense to dismantle the structure I have created, for while it might give a useful perspective on a diffuse subject it tends to sever the connections that support other possible perspectives. And this is significant, since in one way or another each of these essays transcends its stated theme. The discussion of a radio *genre* or of a particular radio *institution* is in some sense inseparable from a discussion of the *identity* of those who are listening to it. The accounts of digital radio affirm that *new technology* will lead inevitably to the development of new *genres*. Hence the second purpose of this introduction is to hint that other structures are possible which might support a different perspective to the one I have offered. One could begin, for instance, by making a rough but workable distinction between those essays which either focus on the special characteristics of radio, or are in some sense informed by a consciousness of these characteristics; and those which are primarily concerned with radio as an historical phenomenon, a social and cultural practice. And while recognising that there is always a considerable overlap between the two, we might describe the former as essentialist and the latter as empirical in approach.

Let us begin with those essays which seem to be informed by a strong sense of the quiddity of the medium. Nobody writes more sensitively than Frances Gray about the unique pleasures and significance of the listening experience, or about the interplay between 'listener' and 'audience'. Yet her insights draw their strength from a sense of continuity with radio in a pre-televisual age – as a primary, 'fireside' medium with critically alert listeners. The latter make an interesting contrast with the more restless, interactive creatures posited by Richard Berry, and Gray's notes towards an anthropology of radio forge an unexpected link with the empirical approach of

Andreas Hepp, who is also concerned to stress the *post facto* collectivity of the radio audience when it discusses and digests the programmes that its members have heard separately. Both scholars rightly insist that this 'radio audience' is still a meaningful entity, even though listening is – and to a large extent always has been – a solitary activity.

In showing how well-suited poetry is to radio, Mike Ladd lends weight to my own contention that verbal, not musical, content is the key to the distinctive role that radio can continue to play in a multi-media age. He also offers a timely reminder that poetry was originally not 'visual' in the sense of consisting of words on a page but, with its features of rhythm and rhyme, *auditory*: addressed to the ear. In this sense, as he points out, new technology harks back to ancient practices. Because radio itself is bardic, communal and addressed to the ear, Ladd aims in his role as producer to use it not simply to relay written verse but as a medium for which – and in which – poetry is composed. He thus has much to say that is interesting about *radio* as well as poetry.

Alan Beck is another who treats his theme in such a way as to throw light on the medium itself. In exploring the implications for radio of what he terms 'queer studies', he asks how its non-visual character can seek to generate bodily pleasure. Hence, in this fascinating essay queer studies are enlisted in the general effort to understand how radio makes meaning and contributes to the wider culture. Among these essentialist approaches is my own, which takes a conservative view of the medium. Because it is non-visual and primarily verbal, I argue that radio is inherently better suited to intellectual purposes than television is, and that its occasional efforts to emulate the iconism of the latter are taking it down what is (in both senses) a blind alley.

In an invigorating and 'producerly' discussion, David Hendy makes a helpful transition from an essentialist to an empirical perspective. Outlining the institutional contexts in which spoken word radio programmes struggle to get made, he throws fresh light on the familiar documentary tensions between art and reportage, telling and showing, editorial intervention and 'objectivity'. As a programme maker Hendy is more at ease with the iconic idiom than is the editor, arguing that radio documentary retains an advantage over its television counterpart in being less technically cumbersome and intrusive and less subject to competitive pressures. Hence the documentarist can create his or her programme in such a way

as to take the listener on the same journey of enlightenment that he or she experienced in gathering and researching its raw materials.

Like Hendy, Bob Lochte focuses on broadcasting practice. His lucid and lively chapter on public radio in the United States is as upbeat about the future as it is informative about the past. Moreover, in a country where the rise of television and thus of music radio began sooner and prevailed more thoroughly than elsewhere, and where the history of noncommercial broadcasting is relatively short, it is interesting that public radio is not only thriving but doing so on a largely mainstream audience. While noting the surprising success of 'talk' in commercial formats, Lochte makes a shrewd distinction between 'commercial speech' and 'public discourse', and in this invites comparison with Terry Flew's authoritative account of Australian talk radio. Flew warns against taking a facile view of the latter as a channel for democratic feedback, reminding us that the talk show host is a powerful agenda setter who holds the balance between free speech and social responsibility, the public interest and sectional pressures, those with dissident views and those who claim to represent 'the moral majority'. Flew argues that although the latter are highly vocal they are not necessarily as representative as is assumed and that their constituency needs further research.

Three other essays, though all empirical in focus, demonstrate the varying cultural significances of modern radio. In his vivid and fluent account of the genesis of BBC Radio 5 Live, a news and sport network which was soon nicknamed 'Radio Bloke', Guy Starkey finds himself obliged to treat radio as a supposedly masculine resource. But his investigation moves swiftly beyond considerations of gender, showing how, in its search for a settled constituency, the network has postulated a range of listener behaviour, from the brief and instrumental to the protracted and passive – yet not necessarily less attentive. These insights repay comparison with yet another kind of listener behaviour explored by Richard Berry and by Martine van Selm, Nicholas Jankowski and Bibi Kleijn.

Kate Lacey's is a feminist perspective. Her concern is whether the gendered discourses which shaped broadcasting in its formative years still resonate in the multi-media world. Hers is a vigorous polemic which challenges, among other things, the categorisations of this book on the grounds that a politics of representation which is based on the labels of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality pre-empts plu-

ralistic action and tends merely to preserve the status quo. On the other hand, Lacey argues that because it enters the private sphere, radio is a particularly good medium for advancing the interests and expressions of women: it is secondary, intimate and verbal. Nevertheless she insists that these are not to be understood as essentialist feminine qualities. They are ascribed to women simply as a consequence of the gendered demarcation of public and private.

Andreas Hepp takes an approach to the cultural impact of radio which is not gender specific. In an absorbing and closely argued study he explores the way in which the interesting new genre of the 'radio-comic' has been assimilated into German popular culture, having made that important transition from 'listener' to 'audience' which is also identified by Frances Gray. He then addresses a remarkable phenomenon which he terms 'event-isation' – the way in which a number of radio stations in Germany have created and exploited public events in order to re-connect with their listeners. It can be difficult to determine how far the events owe their success to the stations and the stations owe their success to the events. But the significant point for Hepp is that while the sources of popular culture are often commercial, the public are adept at appropriating these events to their own tastes and turning them to their private advantage.

The other essays in this collection could be seen as a renewed warning about the artificial nature of the distinctions we have drawn, since they are empirical studies that in their own ways force us to reconsider what the essential nature of radio might be. In his stimulating discussion of the new digital technology Richard Berry points out that computer reception, lack of portability, wired rather than wireless connections, and visual displays all impugn our traditional understanding of the medium. Pointing to the formidable technical and economic barriers to the development of speech radio on the Internet, he is justifiably cautious about its future.

Though Berry by no means neglects the broadcaster's role, his is largely a listener's perspective. On the other hand, while Marko Ala-Fossi takes full account of the listener's experience, his illuminating study of Finnish digital radio seems to be primarily a practitioner's view. Its on-demand services, web pages and text format are a familiar concomitant of the new technology, but Ala-Fossi is mainly concerned to explore how it creates new programming conventions. Of particular interest is the way in which radio, so long the acolyte of television, can

draw on televised material for its own purposes, transposing it to new contexts and lending it new connotations.

Martine van Selm, Nicholas Jankowski and Bibi Kleijn begin their incisive and lucidly structured account of Dutch web radio by categorising the different types of webcasting and the different kinds of interactive behaviour. They then explore the ways in which web radio challenges the conservatism of broadcasters and listeners alike. On the one hand, radio audiences often retain the expectation of being entertained by 'stars' or 'talent' in the traditional, passive sense. On the other, the latter are challenged and unsettled when interactivity occurs. The audience can then become the co-producers and even controllers of the programming, reducing the presenters to mere website facilitators or moderators. Sound broadcasting, the writers suggest, is on the cusp of transition, though presently it is too early to say how far the changes will go.

It is not incongruous but logical that we should move from the most recent and sophisticated developments in sound broadcasting to a look at radio in three of the primordial or indigenous communities of the world. In their own ways, the essays of Valerie Alia, Helen Molnar and Bruce Smith each demonstrate three things. First and unsurprisingly, these communities depend on radio to a much greater extent than other kinds of community. Second, there is a sense in which the various institutional models of radio have not served them well. And third, these communities are likely to derive especial benefit from new radio technology: primordial needs are also sophisticated needs.

Valerie Alia observes that for the Inuit peoples of Canada speech radio is not just an option but a necessity, the only medium adaptable to a life divided between fixed residence at certain times of the year and a peripatetic existence of hunting, gathering and camping. But in their different ways Bruce Smith and Helen Molnar show how unsuited to the lifestyles and values of such peoples the traditional institutional models of radio can be. Bruce Smith makes the important point that because Native Americans hunt, trap and gather their food they constitute societies in which little cash circulates. They are therefore unattractive to advertisers, yet also unable to make the financial donations that would support a noncommercial model of broadcasting.

Helen Molnar observes that the subsistence economies of the South Pacific do not support large enough populations to

be exploited by commercial broadcasters, yet the lack of commercial competition has a negative effect on some of the public service stations. First, it makes them more vulnerable to government control, and second, it allows them to persist with archaic programming conventions which date from the colonial age. The broadcast diet might include indigestible 'development' features consisting either of direct homilies to the listener or stilted 'talking head' interviews. And this illustrates that in such a community indigenous radio is in a double bind. It is because the population is so scattered that a top-down approach to broadcasting is necessary: yet for the same reason a greater degree of localism and sensitivity to the listener is imperative.

This relates to Bruce Smith's warning that while radio can provide virtual community and even virtual nationhood, it can also be a means by which ethnic peoples simply become more rapidly assimilated into the majority culture. In a more sanguine vein he perceives radio as a potential resource in strengthening the non-literary, oral culture of Native Americans. And this in turn may involve that much more interactive, less 'top-down' use of radio which the new technology is helping to bring about. Yet Valerie Alia reminds us that in some sense radio has always combined broadcast with interpersonal or 'point to point' forms of communication, and she gives us a vivid instance of its contribution to the democratic process. She remains optimistic about radio as a means of strengthening ethnic identity and cultural diversity.

Notwithstanding their highly varied approaches, all the essays in this collection say much the same thing: that radio retains a distinctive and vital role in our multi-media world and is a fascinating, complex and rewarding object of study.