

Listener online engagement with BBC Radio programming

Tristan Ferne, BBC Audio & Music Interactive

Tim Wall and Andrew Dubber, Birmingham City University

Lyn Thomas and Maria Lambrianidou, London Metropolitan University

Matt Hills and Amy Luther, Cardiff University

Bethany Klein, University of Leeds

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Foreword

Tristan Ferne, Senior Development Producer, BBC FM&T for Audio & Music and Mobile

This report has come out of a year-long collaborative project between the BBC and three universities - Birmingham City University, Cardiff University and London Metropolitan University. The project was jointly funded by the BBC and the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in an initiative aiming to enable collaborative arts and humanities research between the BBC and universities in the UK. Overall this is a study of the online behaviours and cultures of listeners and fans of BBC radio but it consists of four distinct yet connected case studies; interactivity on the BBC Radio messageboards, the off-bbc.co.uk activity of fans of Terry Wogan, online fan cultures around the Archers and, finally, how the BBC serves specialist music fans and the relationship between online and broadcast media.

But first, some background. At the beginning of 2007 the BBC's Innovation Culture team sent out a Call for Proposals for collaborative projects between the BBC and arts and humanities departments. I had just read Henry Jenkin's *Convergence Culture* (New York University Press, 2006) and had become interested in how fans of TV and radio programmes, but BBC Radio in particular, use the internet to interact around programmes; potentially extending and enhancing their experience of the medium. Lots of interesting fan behaviours occur where the programme is always the social object at the centre; speculating about the plot, fan fiction based on the characters, or user-generated videos based in the fictional world. I was looking to answer questions about what benefit and value do the fans derive from this behaviour and should we, the BBC, do more or less to support it? Does it make the fans love the programme more? Will fan activities get taken up by other listeners (i.e. those who don't self-identify as fans). Do fans spread the word and make the programme more popular? How can fans affect what programmes are made or how the story goes? What benefits are there for the programme makers? And what happens when programme makers try to stop these fan behaviours? With these questions as a starting point I was then able to contact a number of leading researchers in the fields of radio, music and fan studies and this report is a collection of the work that resulted.

The areas of radio studies and fan studies are both well-developed, however radio audiences have been generally under-researched and there has been very little work at the intersection of these two areas that is radio fan studies. We think that by applying theories of fan cultures and active audiences to radio we have contributed a significant body of research. And I think this research certainly answers some of the questions I raised initially but it also comes up with many more things to think about. We have covered a necessarily limited but nevertheless broad selection of relevant areas in BBC radio and we ended up with studies covering popular radio networks and personalities, specialist music fans, public broadcasting, drama and soaps. The four case studies are presented in this report as separate chapters and are briefly introduced below.

"Contrasting Interactivities: BBC Radio Message Boards as an Extension of and Break from Radio's History of Listener Participation"

This study acts as a good starting point for the others as it touches on a number of different radio networks and looks at a fairly well-known method of interaction - the online messageboard. It explores the relationship between online interactivity and radio's long history of encouraging listener feedback and

participation. It also identifies a number of common themes which also occur in the other studies. By studying the messageboards of BBC Radio 1 and Radio 2 and by surveying the participants the study finds a number of common deficiencies in the BBC messageboards, and suggests both technical features and editorial behaviours that would be greatly appreciated, and even expected, by the regular users.

Dr Bethany Klein is Lecturer in Media Industries at the University of Leeds

"TOGs - 'This Ordinary Group' - Official and Unofficial Listener Activities around Wake Up to Wogan"

This study looks at the online behaviours of fans of "Wake Up To Wogan", the flagship breakfast programme presented by Sir Terry Wogan for BBC Radio 2, that is noted for its irreverence and strong fan loyalty. The research primarily focuses on interactions on the non-BBC fansite togs.org ("Terry's Old Gals/Geezers"). Matt Hills is a renowned academic in the fan studies field and has found several archetypal fan behaviours here; mirroring (where fans take on personas that reflect the object of their fandom), brand performance, anti-celebrity content and even self-archiving fans. The report suggests a number of directions the BBC could take to facilitate these fan behaviours and support the Wake Up To Wogan brand.

Dr Matt Hills is a Reader in Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University. Amy Luther is a PhD candidate in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

"Online Fan Cultures around The Archers"

This study features the fan cultures of The Archers - a long running radio soap on BBC Radio 4. The Archers is unique among British soap operas in attracting a predominantly female, older and highly-educated audience and it has some very active official BBC messageboards as well as a number of fan sites. The study discovers that the various messageboards provide a space where users can develop, share and compare their thoughts and visions of characters and storylines - particularly appropriate for the open and imaginative world of radio listening - and the various online spaces, including a Facebook group, have very distinct characters and conventions and support communities with different outlooks and at different stages of Archers fandom. The study concludes that these online discussions should be seen as a successful adjunct to the programme - "a broadening of its cultural wings and a sign of the passionate engagement of some listeners".

Lyn Thomas is Deputy Director of the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University. Maria Lambrianidou, PhD Candidate, University of London

"Specialist Music Fans Online: Implications for Public Service Broadcasting"

The final study looks at how the BBC supports online fan communities for specialist music - particularly jazz, indie rock and soul. As part of the methodology of this work the working practice of BBC Audio & Music Interactive was studied and the report has a number of observations and conclusions around how the BBC works and thinks. So, as well as valuable insights into how the BBC can better support specialist music communities it identifies that there are a range of orientations within BBC Audio & Music from broadcast-focused (a one-to-many mindset where online products support the primary broadcast) to

online-focused (where the internet can be seen as a medium in its own right). Finally, by placing these ideas in the context of the historical development of the BBC and the wider music culture the report discusses how the BBC could reinterpret public service and broadcasting.

Andrew Dubber is an AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellow in online music and radio innovation and Tim Wall is Professor of Radio and Popular Music Studies at the Birmingham School of Media at Birmingham City University.

We have concentrated on BBC radio and music on the internet in these studies, but I believe that much of the ideas and findings could be translated, or at least have close parallels, in the world of television. It has certainly been a very rewarding and interesting experience working on this project and I have found the studies fascinating, intriguing and ultimately, useful. I hope you do too.

Contrasting Interactivities: BBC Radio Message Boards as an Extension of and Break from Radio's History of Listener Participation

Bethany Klein, University of Leeds

The integration of internet-based activities in user experiences of media has resulted in a powerful rhetoric of 'interactivity' in both the academic and popular realms. While much of the discourse around new media treats the changes in technology and user activity as significantly different to what came before, the degree to which new media paradigms echo participatory experiences with old media suggests that the newness of new media sits beside some obvious and important continuities. This section of the report analyses the role of BBC message boards for Radio 1 and Radio 2 listeners through the examination of survey responses of listeners who utilise the interactive tools offered by the BBC. It explores the relationship between contemporary, online participation and the longer history of interactivity among radio listeners, and assess the uses, possibilities and limitations of the message boards as a base of interaction.

Perhaps more than other traditional forms of mass media, radio has always offered a space for listener feedback and participation. With talk radio programming, listeners have been key to producing a mediated deliberative (if not necessarily representative) environment. In terms of music programming, requests and dedications have long been incorporated into broadcasts. Further, while online fora allow listeners to respond to radio content instantaneously, the process of contacting programmers and DJs is not new: letter writers have never hesitated to deliver their views on radio content. In light of previous considerations of radio listener engagement and participation, it is important to approach internet-based activities as not new phenomena, but the most recent in a long and varied history: 'New practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings' (Marvin 1988: 5).

Through a consideration of message board uses, and open-ended surveys with listeners, this research into Radio 1 and Radio 2 audiences links the practices associated with online engagement to more traditional methods of radio interaction. Do regular users of message boards also engage in more traditional interactive activities, such as phoning in requests or writing to the BBC with feedback? Do listeners understand engaging with other listeners and making contact with media producers as distinct social interactions around radio? How might listener age relate to the types of interactive activity (online and offline) in which they engage? What do the intentions and beliefs of listeners tell us about the relationship between online and offline practices, and the conceptualisation of the Internet as ushering in a 'new' era for cultural producers? This paper addresses these and other questions around the interactive media component of BBC Radio.

'Interactivity' and radio

The concept of interactivity has been of particular interest in recent years in its application to so-called 'new' media, and particularly elements of the World Wide Web.

As classic social and cultural theory has been revisited and reconsidered to suit the characteristics of new media technologies and audience uses, the emergence and prevalence of concepts presumably intrinsic to

new media suggest the need for departure from old theoretical models; the discourse around ‘interactivity’ fits this paradigm. Holmes describes, in her analysis of reality television, how the proliferation of interpellating phrases in media aids in ‘articulating a rhetoric that insists pressingly upon a “new” participatory relationship between viewer and screen’ (2004: 213); this statement has clear relevance to non-screen media, too, where bids for audience participation also prevail. Further, it is not only within the academy, but in the popular realm as well, that new media has received treatment indicating a significant split with what is now understood as old media. Whether the rhetoric veers towards the utopic or dystopic, the shared perspective is one of difference, of newness, of change.

Yet interactive activities around new media ring familiar somehow; while fresh vocabulary may have crept in, the experiences themselves continue a tradition of participation with media that can be understood as interactive. Though the concept of interactivity may be more readily and frequently applied to new media technologies (Kioussis 2002: 356), and while older media may not rank as highly as new media in fulfilling some commonly shared criteria invoked (370), ‘the standard for what makes one medium more interactive than another is quite ambiguous’ (356). In his concept explication of ‘interactivity’, Kioussis considers the various senses implemented by scholars in order to construct a working definition of the term; he offers the following as an admittedly non-comprehensive guide:

Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). With regard to human users, it additionally refers to their ability to perceive the experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence. (2002: 370)

Notable in this definition is that it is inclusive of interactivity via old media (i.e. the telephone) as well as new media; noting that phone voting is hardly a recent phenomenon, Holmes asserts that it would be a mistake to relate participatory programming necessarily to new media technologies, and that what, in this case, ‘reality programmes do is take the basic concept of feedback and, first, make it more central to the discursive organization and structure of the programme; and, second, articulate its possibilities across a range of comparatively “new” media sites’ (2004: 218). Likewise, the incorporation of radio listener participation activities via the web does not so much construct an entirely new arena as extend a previously existing one.

Indeed, interactivity and interactive practices have been subject to theorisation and empirical study in radio research for decades. Much of this research has investigated talk radio (Armstrong and Rubin 1989), and particularly political talk radio (Page and Tannenbaum 1996; Ross 2004). O’Sullivan (2005) provides a recent study of non-political talk radio, exploring, as this project does, the role and importance of media interactivity in our ordinary (political with a small p) lives. More recently, scholarship around interactivity has turned to television, where online activity has been integrated into viewer experiences (see Brooker 2001 for a discussion of television ‘overflow’), and competitive reality-based programming has combined with digitalisation and changes in communication technology to produce a format that relies upon and boasts of its interactive element (Holmes 2004).

Online fora have emerged in discussions of interactive media as a virtual public sphere; if most ‘interactive’ media activities limit audiences to either binary decisions (vote for or vote against a statement or contestant) or short sound bites (consider the sorrow of the cut-off caller), message boards offer the possibility of ongoing and lengthy interaction, subject to moderator approval. Klein and Wardle’s (2008) exploration of *Big Brother* as a catalyst to online political deliberation reveals the ways in which message boards are used by some viewers as a space for rational, critical debate – a far cry from

the narcissistic havens of squabble or sex solicitation often invoked by mention of chat and online messaging.

An accessible, usable space in which citizens can discuss contemporary topics is important not only within the political realm, but also for fan culture. The relationship between radio and community is longstanding – Douglas writes of early radio's 'pivotal role' in aiding our connections to other citizens and in constructing 'imagined communities' (2004) – but the internet has introduced new possibilities for nurturing this relationship. The other sections of this report explore fan activity and culture as it relates to radio and online interactive media. Here, I simply want to emphasise the degree to which entertainment is often overlooked in discussions of public spheres and mediated communities.

The pleasures derived from entertainment media may not appear, on the surface, as obviously or always political, but the politics of pleasure retains links to the more traditional understanding of what constitutes political life. Indeed, pleasure is, as Street (2003) demonstrates, a necessary element of music's political nature. Recognition of this link highlights the significance of encouraging fan activity around music.

Method

In order to explore the uses and meanings of message boards for communication about and around music radio, I invited users of BBC's dedicated Radio 1 and Radio 2 message boards to answer a survey consisting of ten open-ended questions. Questions were developed through identification of the recurring themes related to interaction and the management of the message boards over the months prior to soliciting responses. A link to the survey, with a brief explanation of the research scope, was posted by BBC board moderators on the Radio 1 and Radio 2 message boards (there are multiple boards on each site). Questions addressed use of the BBC message boards, other instances of contact with BBC radio, and general demographic information (age, gender, location)¹.

Like traditional survey methods, online surveys suffer from a bias of self-selection; users who choose to respond to the survey are unlikely to be representative of most radio listeners. However, in this case I argue that respondents can be understood as sufficiently representative of the population under investigation: BBC radio listeners who are also message board users. That message board users have already decided to join these communities is a factor that may distinguish them from most radio listeners; survey respondents can be understood, in this respect, as perhaps the most enthusiastic and involved segment of the enthusiastic and involved population of BBC radio listeners.

Further, if recruiting informants and conducting research online often presents issues of representativeness and generalisability in media studies, because this project is focused on online practices and processes, the method is not only suitable but necessary: looking for message board users offline would have proved inefficient, if not futile.

Altogether, responses from 76 informants were collected and analysed. 22 responses were from Radio 1 message board users, and 54 were from Radio 2 message board users, a surprising difference considering the much heavier traffic on the Radio 1 boards. Younger message board users may be less likely to respond to solicitations, possibly as a result of being exhausted by the (often commercial) research pleas that heavy internet use can bring. 20 Radio 1 respondents supplied gender and age information; the average age of the 11 male respondents was 27.0 and the average age of the nine female respondents was 24.8. 44 Radio 2 respondents supplied gender and age information; the average age of the 27 male

¹ See Appendix for survey questions.

respondents was 48.0 and the average age of the 17 female respondents was 45.5. Salient and significant themes evinced by the responses were identified through the constant comparative method, as conceptualised by Glaser and Strauss: '(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory' (1999[1967]: 105).

New media, old habits and new concerns

Responses demonstrated a high degree of correlation between use of the BBC Radio message boards and other forms of interaction with the BBC, with half of the Radio 1 respondents and more than half of the Radio 2 respondents reporting that they have contacted the BBC. The 11 Radio 1 respondents who reported contacting the BBC cited text messaging most frequently as the method of communication, while the 31 Radio 2 respondents reported making contact through a range of technologies, including telephone, text messaging and email. Many Radio 2 respondents described being disappointed with the lack of or automated responses received. A large proportion of the Radio 2 respondents also identified themselves as having a particular investment in the BBC's folk provision, and their responses suggest that members of subcultural groups, and those with a concern that their interests are under-catered for, are particularly likely to take advantage of any and all communication and interactive vehicles made available by the BBC.

The appearance of a strong relationship between message board use and other forms of interaction or contact confirms previously published theories about the personality types drawn to participatory activities (like those who call in to talk radio programmes). Indeed, the results of this survey no doubt also display a perpetuating self-selection bias: those who are most likely to make contact and interact with the BBC are probably also more likely to respond to a solicitation to answer a survey. Yet, even as some suspicions are seemingly confirmed, it is perhaps more interesting that almost half of all respondents have never attempted contact with the BBC, suggesting that the message boards are not merely an extension of other forms of contact.

The picture of interactivity formed by the survey responses instead indicates a range of different, and sometimes conflicting, uses of message boards, some of which relate clearly to traditional forms of contact and others of which do not. The complexity of usage is clearly demonstrated by users' conceptualisations of the role (or non-role) of BBC staff on the boards. Highlighting the expectations prompted by BBC-supplied message boards, many respondents expressed interest in greater participation from BBC staff. Survey responses included comments recalling staff participation, comments appreciative of such participation and comments hopeful of greater participation.

When asked about their experiences with BBC staff participating on the message boards, some respondents recalled greater participation in an earlier era. Wrote one, 'I find that DJs do not interact with listeners on the Boards. They used to but not in the last year or so' (R1; Female, 36, Cardiff). Another identified the decreased participation as related to increasingly petty moderation (a topic that will be further addressed below): 'Years ago, there was lots of input from DJs and staff but poor moderation means you get very little now (unless it's to tell you your message is off-topic)' (R2; Male, 33, Lancashire).

It was clear that respondents who remembered instances of participation desired a return to that form; others expressed appreciation of existing participation, however minimal: 'It's really cool when they get involved. I remember Annie Mac jumped in on a thread to tell someone the name of the tune they were looking for...It's great when a DJ or Mod starts a topic though' (R1; Male, 33, London). A Radio 2

listener noted Alyn Shipton as a regular participant on Radio 3 boards, and hoped for similar active engagement on the Radio 2 boards (R2; Male, 40, Wiltshire). Listeners from both Radio 1 and Radio 2 boards were in agreement in terms of wanting more participation from BBC staff, encouraging DJs to post again (R1; Female, 22, Nottingham) and requesting responses to policy critiques that have been posted (R1; Male, 31, Manchester). It is clear that many message board users hold the expectation that BBC staff read and use the boards, but are not satisfied with their presence. As one wrote, 'Message boards allow me to discuss BBC content and hope that someone relevant may notice it' (R2; Female, 32, Kent), demonstrating that at least some users consider the message boards a direct line to BBC staff. A Radio 2 listener expressed the need for a more obvious presence: 'We have one good, known, host who posts infrequently (not often enough though), and the very occasional visit from other unknown officials. Input from DJs – or some, ANY! evidence that they read the board would be a major improvement' (R2; Male, 52, Yorkshire).

Of course, as with any subject offered to message board users, not everyone agrees. While many respondents were enthusiastic about the possibility of interacting with BBC staff, one (R2; details not provided) dismissed the involvement of moderators and hosts as 'diabolical', concluding, 'I certainly wouldn't want DJs involved either!'

Perhaps the strongest evidence that many users do not visit the message boards to connect with BBC employees is their enthusiasm about what they view as the primary goal of participating: interacting with other users. Responses indicated that message board users understand the boards as a place to interact with other listeners, often over the opportunity to possibly interact with a DJ. The role of the BBC, in this case, is as a reliable brand name:

The BBC is a familiar name and you know that the boards are safe and used by people who want to interact and give help, advice and opinions to others. It's a nice place to be. It can curb some boredom on the odd occasion and you can get comfort with some of your problems through posting asking for help, or reading stories that let you know you're not alone. You can share musical tastes etc. (R1; Female, 18, Warwickshire)

A Radio 2 listener acknowledged the message boards as a place where requests can be made but he noted, 'I usually prefer to engage with other posters' (R2; Male, 40, Wiltshire). Another made clear his view of the difference between the message boards and other forms of contact: 'I use the Message Board to communicate with the other Board users, not the BBC. If I wanted to contact the BBC directly, I would do so via e-mail to the producer or broadcaster concerned' (R2; Male, 46, Cornwall). This perspective was echoed by others, and particularly Radio 2 listeners, who insisted that getting their views across to the BBC was not why they used the message boards. That Radio 1 listeners were less likely to differentiate the use of the message boards from other forms of contact may reflect their experiences of technological continuity, and an interactive world that seems limitless in some ways (where sites like MySpace allow music fans to send messages directly to bands).

Characterisations of the type of users on the message boards displayed two persistent and conflicting tropes: on the one hand, users were understood as 'likeminded' and, on the other, users were understood to represent a 'broad range' or 'cross-section' of society. For example, one user reports enjoying 'speaking to like minded people' (R2; Female, 53, Essex) while another asserts, 'The more people who use the boards the better, especially when they come from a wide background with different age groups' (R1; Female, 40, Cheshire). While it is unclear precisely how these seemingly incompatible descriptions can co-exist, both are hailed as positive qualities and those that interest users in further interactions. If interacting with other users is a typical and predictable use of message boards, users emphasised a desire for even greater interaction with users, offering suggestions on how this might be achieved. Responses

also suggested that message boards are not considered public in the same way as other forms of contact, echoing previous studies into message board users and sense of privacy (Chen 2004). Despite the fact that the boards are clearly accessible to the public (and BBC staff) respondents who use the message boards to interact with other users might write to, phone or text the BBC if they wanted their opinions to be 'public'.

The overall mixed results in terms of the primary role of the message boards – with some respondents suggesting that the BBC Radio message boards should represent the views of BBC employees as well as listeners, and others viewing the boards as a place for users to interact – suggest that the scope of 'interactivity' is not clearly defined. And if anybody knows how message boards *should* function interactively, it is the users. The next section considers the features of the message boards that serve to differentiate them from standard boards and some of which users are especially critical.

Message board features and interactive expertise

With traditional forms of contact (writing, phoning), power dynamics are clearly defined: it is the media producers who control the system, determining whether a listener comment might be broadcast, and in what ways listeners might participate. One sense in which message boards differ from other forms of interaction is in terms of the locus of expertise: unlike traditional forms of contact, on message boards the users are the experts, maybe more aware than producers of how the boards should operate and what features generally work and do not work for users. Respondents frequently pointed to the lack of or failure of message board features as preventing the boards from being fully and satisfactorily utilised. Features discussed include post counts, users as moderators, linking and access.

The request for post counters related in part to the desire for greater interaction with other users. Features like post counts and registration dates allow users to approach others in context, tease out possible trolls from regulars and vet message board relationships. Wrote one Radio 1 listener, 'It would be nice to interact more with other people posting. I.e. see how many posts they have made, when they joined or even have a personal message system' (R1; Female, 24, London).

Users also questioned the constraints around access, and around posting clips and links. Many other boards provide 24-hour access, a quality of particular interest to users who might have unusual work hours, or who cannot access the boards at work. It may be necessary to revisit moderation policy in order to meet demand. The posting of links and clips is also constrained by BBC policy, where borderline cases may be interpreted as either breaking or following the House Rules depending on a moderator's subjective judgment. A user explained how interpretation may over-reach at times: 'I've had posts blocked for "advertising" when all I've done is post links to Amazon or something, and when I see some of the stuff that people get away with which blatantly breaks the rules it puts me off coming on here. Such inconsistency' (R1; Male, 23, Surrey).

There was a suggestion from a few users of a practice that occurs on other message boards and that might relieve the pressures of greater access and leniency: implementing a system of users as moderators. The same user who complained about inconsistency with respect to the House Rules suggested: 'Let users become mods, it works on other forums. I know this is BBC and has to [be] monitored closely but let a few regular users moderate each board. The mods are not doing a good job and are not in touch with users at all. If new mods didn't keep to the house rules then just replace them' (R1; Male, 23, Surrey). A Radio 2 listener also linked the rigidity of House Rules and the possibility of volunteers: 'I would like a change in the house rules to allow charity gigs to be promoted. I would like the moderators to read posts in

context. The current system is an insult to the licence fee payer. I would like additional, more attentive hosts – or the use of volunteer elves. (I would volunteer to help, for example)’ (R2; Male, 52, Yorkshire). It is clear from such responses that users are not opposed to the existence of House Rules, but recognise the need to evaluate the nuances of individual cases against the criteria. They also recognise the stress such close attention would place on the current moderators, and noted that it could be partly relieved by a volunteer system. The involvement of users would also address a related request for ‘More, and more informed, moderators’ (R2; Female, 44, Sussex).

As hinted at by the suggestion of user-moderators, easily the most common gripe among BBC Radio message board users is the role and behaviours of the moderators. In fact, critiquing the degree of moderation is practically a message board law, regardless of the management details. Yet, with the BBC Radio message boards, such complaints stand out as shared among many users; although the survey did not prompt informants to comment specifically on moderation, 33 (43.4%) informants provided critiques of moderators and the moderation process in their responses. That moderation emerged so consistently as an area in need of improvement suggests a justification for the critiques, at least insofar as tensions between users and moderators ultimately serve no one. Responses indicate a need for moderation of the moderators if the boards are to serve the community’s wishes.

Users from both boards expressed frustration with the moderators, with users of the Radio 2 boards particularly acerbic in their conceptualisations of the moderators as controlling, severe and patronising. No doubt the average age of Radio 2 listeners plays a role in the difference: Radio 2 listeners may be less used to constraints particular to online interaction, and are, on average, further distanced from a period in which their leisure time was controlled (by parents, by teachers). Likewise, it seems probable that users of the Radio 1 boards have more experience using message boards and have adjusted to, if not celebrated, moderator rule. Radio 2 listeners referred to the moderators as ‘buffoons’ (R2; Male, 55, North Yorkshire) and the environment of moderation as a ‘Stalinist state’ (R2; Male, 49, Birmingham). Moderators are viewed as excessively paternalistic:

The moderators treat us like children! We are not allowed to comment on shows/presenter style/playlists etc - even though we are the listeners! Shocking! None of us want to have 100s of msgs saying “I hate (insert DJ name)”, but actually being able to comment on changes in scheduling (i.e. Stuart Maconie being dropped from Sat afternoons) should be permitted. We are adults and should be treated as such. (R2; Female, 38, Lancashire/West Yorkshire border)

Like the involvement of DJs, the extent and tone of moderation is a quality of the message boards that users believe has changed over time. One user proposed, ‘remove or at least lessen the moderation and return the message boards to the way they were 15 months ago or so’ (R2; details not provided). A number of respondents insisted they no longer use the boards because of the degree and type of moderation (how they found the link to the survey that was posted on the message boards is anybody’s guess). Of particular concern to users is the removal of ‘off-topic’ posts, the perception that posts are not moderated in context and the absence of a space to voice critical opinions.

The ‘off-topic’ rule allows moderators to remove posts or threads that are judged as veering from the goal of the fora, frustrating users who do not view the boards in the same narrow terms. Users would prefer ‘less closing of threads because of the topic’ (R2; Male, 50, Northwest England), an idea that echoes the conclusions of previous research assessing the uses of message boards for rational debate and deliberation (Klein and Wardle 2008). The popularity of Radio 1’s board dedicated to *The Surgery* suggests that the boards are providing and could provide a wider service than a forum for music discussion. A Radio 1 listener reported posting on the message boards about ‘Anything from relationship issues to music taste’,

and noted, 'On the Surgery I have the chance to discuss any problems that I have in an anonymous environment where I will get honest opinions from others. Also to help other people with their problems and to share experiences' (R1; Male, Cambridge). As the 'off-topic' rule controls the scope of discussion, so, too, it limits the possibilities of interaction.

Users were further concerned by what was viewed as a low-threshold for potentially sensitive content. One Radio 1 listener, who reported being a 'well-behaved' user, encouraged moderators 'Not to be so sensitive sometimes' and requested 'clarification on what words are deemed inappropriate' (R1; Male, 29, Bristol). A common concern is that posts are read and judged for sensitive content out of context; one user suggested the BBC hire 'hosts that actually DO the job and moderators that read posts in context and not just in isolation' (R2; details not provided). (This same user was annoyed that the third-party host of the Folk and Acoustic board was not fulfilling the duties of the job; hosting and moderating are separate duties.)

The topics, posts and threads that were most regularly identified as being unfairly removed through moderation were those that included criticism of BBC programming or staff. According to one Radio 2 listener, 'The level of intervention from the message board hosts and moderators has in the past seemed a little heavy handed if the topic has strayed towards criticism of Radio 2 shows or presenters' (R2; Male, 53, Southeast England). A Radio 1 listener was less generous: 'If they don't like what you have to say about their shows i.e. crap playlists/same thing day in day out then you get put in pre mod' (R1; Male, 28, Manchester). The feeling among users was that constructive criticism should be more clearly defined and allowed by the House Rules. A Radio 2 user suggested the need for a 'higher level of tolerance, when it comes to objective criticism of shows and DJs on Radio 2. This is the Radio 2 messageboard, so you should expect criticism of the station's shows, presenters and output, instead of keep saying "This message has been hidden" etc. There are rules yes, as in insulting etc, but constructive criticism can't hurt' (R2; Male, 54, Surrey).

Alternatively, if the message boards cannot accommodate criticism, a mechanism or automated response which directs users to a more appropriate venue would be appreciated: 'I have contributed to threads before where people have been having a moan about a presenter or something and the thread has been closed. Maybe a message board isn't the right place for that kind of thing as it's a bit personal for the person involved but we probably should be re-directed to another way of voicing an opinion' (R2; Female, 42, Shropshire/Cheshire border).

The grumbling caused by a lack of certain features (24 hour access; linking options), and an excess of others (moderation) suggests a need to address the organisation of the message boards. Relieving the tension between users and moderators (and, at times, hosts) would aid in developing a more mutually productive interactive environment.

Communication breakdown

Another tension recurrent in the responses emerged between the importance of getting views across and a sense of the futility of providing feedback. Many respondents were clear that getting their views across to the BBC is important to them as licence payers and in terms of shaping programming content. There was a feeling among many respondents that the BBC should respond to audience choices and preferences, and some felt that the message boards should be one place in which audience opinion is evaluated. Some are convinced that the BBC *is* paying attention to the boards: 'I don't know, because I do have the impression that they take more notice of the chatter on the messageboards than of individuals who contact them. So

recently, when I wanted to moan about the horrible mish-mash of “country” accents they flung into “Lark Rise” I went on to the Points of View messageboard’ (R2; Female, late 50s, Bedfordshire). And users do not interpret interactive possibilities as simply providing the opportunity for critique; wrote one Radio 2 listener and self-confessed board lurker, ‘Not so important to get my views across as to get HMG/Opposition to recognise that we (public) have an interest and that the BBC has our support in providing impartial publicly-funded information, entertainment and learning resources for us’ (R2; Female, 42, Edinburgh).

Yet for those respondents who extended support to the BBC and believed the BBC was monitoring board discussion, many more were pessimistic about points of contact and interaction, including the message boards. Those respondents who reported no participation with respect to contacting the BBC felt that contact was futile. Some indicated that reason why getting their views across was not important was because they felt the views would be ignored. The perspective that feedback would not be taken into consideration by the BBC was communicated with respect to the message boards, but also extended across all types of contact. One Radio 1 board user expressed, ‘I have e-mailed, text and telephone and each and every time, I receive no response. That says it all’ (R1; Female, 36, Cardiff). Others reported ‘I don’t expect them to take any notice of my opinions’ (R2; Male, 61, York) and ‘I don’t feel like they will listen to my views’ (R1; Female, 22, Nottingham).

The overall shape of responses suggests that greater explicit involvement of employees, and more direct responses to audience views would help to offset the sense of futility. Currently, message board users feel monitored but not appreciated. A Radio 1 listener noted, ‘It would be nice if the BBC could pay more attention to some of the things that are said on the message boards’ (R1, 21). As the critique of the current system of moderation indicates, one way in which users want to be heard is through more openly critical boards. It is not only a lack of response that exacerbates the feeling of futility, but the perceived inability to voice critical opinions on the message boards.

Conclusions

The findings outlined above reveal a complex model of the BBC Radio message boards, and a mixed report on the ways in which the BBC has met and failed to meet the expectations of message board users. Existing tensions appear to reflect the uncertainty of the ‘interactive’ label and conflicting messages regarding the uses and control over these online spaces.

The BBC message boards exist at a locus between old interactive media habits (whereby the interaction is between audience member and media producer) and new interactive media activities (whereby interaction is largely between audience members). BBC radio listeners who use the message boards thus understand the BBC message boards as offering the opportunity to communicate with other listeners as well as with BBC staff, and neither of these uses is efficiently or easily served. The degree of moderation present might be more easily understood alongside coordination of communication between listeners and BBC staff, but the minimal participation of presenters and production staff combined with a fastidious culture of moderation creates an authoritarian environment in which users feel that discussion with other users is unduly controlled. Because the boards offer similar activities to other message boards, users desire standard message board tools, such as user moderation, around-the-clock access, and post counts, and are disappointed by those qualities that stray from the standard model, and in particular those that are viewed as oppressive.

Ultimately, in order for BBC Radio to best serve its listeners' requirements in terms of message board provision, it needs to first decide what its purpose is and how it understands and communicates its own interactivity – whether it aims to encourage interaction between users or between user and BBC. Features and tools can then be modified to better reflect those goals.

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Appendix

This survey includes ten open-ended questions about your use of the BBC Radio X Message Board and other ways in which you have interacted with the BBC. You may answer only those that are relevant to you, and you may write as little or as much as you wish. Your thorough and thoughtful responses can help shape the future of BBC interactive media. Thank you for your participation. Contact music.fans.research@bbc.co.uk with questions or comments.

- 1. Why do you choose to use the BBC Radio X Message Board?**
- 2. Could you describe the types of topics that you read and post about on the BBC Radio X Message Board?**
- 3. What experience have you had on the BBC Radio X Message Board involving the participation of BBC employees or DJs?**
- 4. What sort of changes or improvements would you like to see made to the BBC Radio X Message Board?**
- 5. Individual BBC radio programmes often include forms for requests or comments on their websites. Could you describe your use of and experience with such online forms?**
- 6. Could you describe your experiences with telephoning, writing to or texting BBC radio?**
- 7. In what sort of circumstances would you consider phoning or writing to the BBC rather than posting on a message board?**
- 8. How important is it to you to get your views across to the BBC?**
- 9. We would be interested to know your age, gender and location.**
- 10. If you are willing to answer follow-up questions for this research, please provide your name and email address or phone number here. (This information will not be shared.) Thanks again for participating.**

music.fans.research@bbc.co.uk

TOGs - 'This Ordinary Group' - Official and Unofficial Listener Activities around Wake Up to Wogan

Matt Hills and Amy Luther, Cardiff University

Background and Method

As part of the AHRC/BBC research project tackling BBC Radio and online listener engagement, we were interested in studying in fan communities surrounding celebrity DJs. Matt's previous work has focused on media fandom more generally, e.g. in the book *Fan Cultures* (Hills 2002). Initially we set out to examine two off-BBC fan sites: togs.org and chrismoyles.net. We analysed most-popular and most-viewed threads at specific snapshot moments and asked for participants to get in touch for over-the-phone interviews. Matt was interested in getting detailed qualitative feedback rather than survey data, so semi-structured interviewing was used. Here, the interviewer can ask for follow-up information rather than just rattling through a set list of questions.

Our target was 10 interviews per site; a small number, but one we hoped would be able to generate a range of indicative responses (this number was also a product of the level of funding allocated to this project component, given that carrying out one-to-one qualitative interviews can be time and labour-intensive). Validity rather than generalisability was the watchword.

Ultimately, research on chrismoyles.net did not generate a sufficient number of interviews, despite very helpful support from the site-owner. Participants were suspicious of us as researchers, and this hostility was not countered by information coming from a member of the production team, which due to a communication breakdown failed to vouch for us.

Research on togs.org proved to be more successful, and will be our focus as a case study in this report. Despite initial hostility comparable to that experienced on chrismoyles.net, the togs community ultimately revealed itself to be a friendly and supportive environment. We later discovered that there were specific reasons for the togs' early scepticism regarding our research: the community has been highly negatively represented in the past in journalistic coverage, and so was rightly wary of negative portrayals from 'outsiders' (see Moreton 2001 online, originally in *The Independent*, 23/09/01). However, the tradition of academic 'fan studies' framing Matt's previous work has spent at least the past sixteen years countering and challenging prejudice surrounding media fan cultures (see Jenkins 1992). Ethically, this piece of academic research thus aims to give a voice to fans, and to take seriously and respect their specific engagements with BBC Radio.

Amy was able to carry out eleven over-the-phone interviews with togs using the site, as well as receiving two email responses, including one from 'Chuffer Dandridge', a regular contributor to *Wake Up To Wogan* (hereafter WUTW), and an audience-created character. Given Chuffer's special status, we have named him here; all other respondents will be anonymised in the following analysis of audience data, though most were also regular contributors to the radio show. The youngest over-the-phone interviewee was 38, and the oldest was 65. Amy interviewed 7 men and 4 women; though we would have liked a more even gender split, Amy simply interviewed whoever volunteered to take part. In any case, at the small numbers involved this is less of an issue.

Analysis of the togs site: Mirroring WUTW

TOGs, or “Terry's Old Gals/Geezers” represent a socially-organised, self-defined audience group. As their name suggests, they are typically regular listeners and contributors to Terry Wogan's Radio 2 breakfast show, WUTW. As of 13/04/08, www.togs.org had 35, 626 total topics featuring 745,633 posts. Its membership was 1,253 strong, and though some TOGs may have multiple accounts, this is clearly an active online community. In contrast to the total audience for WUTW, however, the TOGs are a 'speck in the ocean'. Given that fact, why should TOGs matter to the BBC?

Put simply, because here is an audience *not* just made up of 'hardcore' listeners, or technology-adopting youth: the TOGs are the BBC's “heartlands listeners 2.0”, a vision of where ageing BBC-loyal audiences making up 'the mainstream' could potentially be in the very near future. As one togs.org regular told us:

“I'm glad this is anonymous because I don't listen every day. It's just if I'm not working then we wake up and I'll listen and if I don't it doesn't bother me” (Respondent 4, F, 54, secretary).

And another observed that:

“I've written a couple of emails, but I have never had anything read out on air while I was listening. I do go into work, unfortunately it is one of those things you have to do {laughs} so, it could have been read out later but I don't know. I keep intending to write more, but, I generally find that by the time, it means getting the computer on first thing in the morning, which {laughs} is lethal because then it means I won't get to work on time” (Respondent 10, F, 50, IT trainer).

It is therefore significant to note that togs.org is not simply composed of the 'most devoted' listeners, hooked on interactivity with STW and WUTW; it also attracts and holds the attention of more 'casual' listeners, suggesting that being part of a socially-organised listener group is part of ordinary media use for these people. What's important about the TOGS is that, though currently a small fraction of the WUTW audience at an off-BBC site, they are not the 'hardcore' *per se*, and should not be thought of as an unusual or spectacular audience fraction. What's important is precisely their ordinariness.

In scholarly terms, fandom is often thought of as involving interpretation; fans act as a “cultural unit, an interpretive community” (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995:108). The same cannot be said of the TOGs, as in this instance the texts of WUTW and STW are barely focused upon: “the contents of most of the boards have little or nothing to do with STW, but instead are the ramblings of a very small proportion of his listeners, which, if nothing else, demonstrate what a diverse lot TOGs are” (Online 1).

At first glance, the TOGs are very much not an “on-brand” audience; they do not appear to focus on the meanings of WUTW. Instead they represent and repeatedly display modes of 'off-brand sociability'. One of the key organising principles of the different TOGs boards is their relationship to “seriousness”. 'The Serious Board' does as it says, with “no... discussions about race, religion or sexuality” being permitted as a result of past disagreements and conflicts. Though the Serious Board is undoubtedly popular (1,427 topics and 27,296 posts, at 13/04/08), it still contains fewer posts than ‘Games, Competitions and Quizzes’ (154,955) and fewer overall topics than the ‘Funnies Board’ (2,815), where jokes are nominally housed – though in point of fact they permeate the very fabric of togs.org. For instance, even the issuing

of rules for the Serious Board was immediately subjected to humorous recontextualisation. Informed that race, religion and sexuality were not permissible topics, one poster immediately responded by re-interpreting the term “race”: “Does this mean I cannot mention my Afghan auntie with the sex change who is running in the 200m hurdles?” (Online 2). And the togs.org welcome page also notes that the site is not an appropriate place for anybody's “desperate quest for information about quilt-ratings” (www.togs.org/index.html).

Though the Funnies Board therefore gives the impression that joking is contained within one enclave, this only relates to the self-conscious performance of jokes as “jokes”. Joking about, however, is prevalent across most boards, with ‘The Forum’ and the ‘Notice Board’ – the most used sections in terms of topic numbers (19,799 and 8,407 on 13/04/08, respectively) – being defined as spaces where “something silly” can be said, and where “Almost serious stuff” belongs (TOGs message board, welcome). ‘Seriousness’ is hence a relational term which structures the TOGs’ communicative space, not in the absolutely binary terms of serious/not-serious, but rather, as matter of the greater or lesser distance from ‘seriousness’ which different boards are said to adopt. ‘Seriousness’ is asymptotic, for this listener culture: a condition approached but never entirely reached. The rules of the community stress that users should “try (as far as possible) to leave the real world behind when visiting. This is supposed to be a fun place” (www.togs.org/rules.html).

Witty, punning and tangential interaction within threads is also a TOG-cultural norm. One topic can often be used as a starting point for an improvisational, comedic jumping-off point to another, as in the case of the most-viewed and most-replied-to thread on the Forum Board, “All right, who did it?” (62,669 views and 9,107 replies, as of 21/04/08). This is a labyrinthine, magisterial collection of associative jumps in subject matter. Initially posted as a query from one moderator over who had changed their user name, this rapidly mutated into performances of child-like querying, e.g. “Mum, are we nearly there yet?” (Online 3), on the basis that the original poster has been described as a “top TOG mum”, i.e. had frequently taken care of other board users (Online 4). The thread title provided a sufficiently open space for improvisation such that the topic could be appropriated by contributors, eventually settling into a series of parodies of children's behaviour which enabled posters to perform child-like (*not* childish) personae.

If TOGS are not an “interpretive community”, then how can we make sense of their posting activity? Recent work in fan studies has argued that textual interpretation is not the only manner in which fandoms cohere. As Steve Bailey puts it: “The important distinction between the approach here and conventional ...analysis... is that in this case the text is not simply an object of interpretative practices in a narrow sense, but also a resource for symbolic integration into a social self” (2005:211—2). And Cornel Sandvoss's *Fans* focuses on

“The role of the object of fandom as [a] textual extension of the self... manifested... [via] the assumed congruence between fan and object of fandom, which is based on processes of self-reflection. What I mean here by 'congruence' is the active construction of parallels, identity and 'identity' between fans and their object of fandom” (Sandvoss 2005:102).

Fans construct mirroring relationships between their own identity performances and fan texts, actively creating symbolic parallels through self-reflective readings. How, then, do TOGS mirror WUTW rather than interpreting it? Well, they typically operate under pseudonyms. These are often punning plays on linguistic homonyms which can be formed out of real-seeming names, e.g. ‘Mick Sturbs’ being a homonym for ‘mixed herbs’. In a sense, the TOG-cultural norm of creating comedic, playful pseudonyms mirrors and follows the linguistic performances of WUTW. There is a “symbolic folding” (Bailey 2005:209) together of fan performances and on-air broadcaster identities (since STW's underlings are also given playful, humorous names). And as the TOGs Welcome Page notes: “There are very few rules and

regulations here, other than that you shouldn't take any of this too seriously – a bit like listening to Wake Up to Wogan, really” (www.togs.org/index.html). Fan-text mirroring underpins togs.org to this extent; its asymptotic relation to 'seriousness', its performative emphasis on word-play, and its flights of surrealist, tangential humour all reflect attributes of the WUTW text, and STW's celebrity persona.

Being a TOG means playfully mirroring the value-systems of these brands, while steadfastly refusing to discuss them. In this manner, TOGs can evade any implication of media dependency, i.e., that their performed identities are derivative of Wogan/WUTW. Rather, they can self-represent as highly autonomous media consumers. *Nonetheless, they perform the brand rather than interpreting it.* This process would more than likely be of no value to a nakedly commercial broadcaster, who would require far more obvious and direct articulations to their content, capable of being instrumentally leveraged. From within a commercial logic, the TOGs move under the radar of branding or conventional brand extension. But their assimilation of brand values may be highly important to the BBC as a public service broadcaster, looking to engage distinctively with online audiences, as we will go on to argue.

Despite descriptions of the diversity of TOGs, there remains a loose communal identity, within which a 'Recommendations' board makes sense: “Something or somewhere that other TOGs may like” (<http://togs.proboards53.com/index.c.cgi?>). This contains threads on 'Thought-provoking reading', music, e.g. 'Covers as good as/better than the original', and the BBC TV shows *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Torchwood* and *Planet Earth*. At the time of our snap-shot, no non-BBC TV shows were contained on the first page of threads, and no radio programmes were being actively recommended and discussed.

There are patterns of taste recurrently performed, both in the 'Recommendations' board and in the 'Book Club'. TOGs frequently display a taste pattern which combines “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1984; educationally-valid knowledge, 'the classics') with specific fractions of “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1995; i.e. forms of knowledge not widely recognised as educationally-valid). This produces 'classic/fantasy' reading lists in the 'Thought-provoking reading' thread. Though they may seem counter-intuitive genre combinations, these reading tastes nevertheless articulate TOG identity:

These 2 I read once a year: The Road to Wigan Pier – George Orwell; A Christmas Carol – Charles Dickens (I don't read any fiction, except Dickens and Douglas Adams) (Online 5)

Good God... we're as one on something. Douglas Adams is a fine man, tragically missed. You should broaden your horizons a little however! (Online 6)

Best satire – any Pratchett.

Most thought-provoking – Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad (Online 7)

A TOG and a Pratchett fan – is there a better combination! (Online 8).

This type of combination resonates with other TOGs, as does Terry Pratchett fandom. The 'Can you name one favourite book?' thread on the 'Book Club' board rapidly moves into related territory:

'Reaper Man' Terry Pratchett. It makes me laugh like a drain reading it... (Online 9)

My favourite book is Great Expectations by some Dickens chap... What larks Pip! (Online 10).

There is a notable focus on creative writing and reading at togs.org, and the articulation of nonsense/surrealism/sf-fantasy and 'the classics' permeates through such discussions, whether these are

conjunctions of Eliot and Milligan, Dickens and Pratchett, or Conrad and Adams. Tim Wall (2003:119) has rightly noted that “radio... is part of a wider popular music system”, and though there are musical debates within togs.org, the conflation of 'canonical' classic literature with fantasy is a far more prevalent performance of TOG identity. In this instance, radio becomes part of a literary system. And there is a further symbolic mirroring of STW and WUTW evident here: Terry Wogan's radio persona can also be interpreted as carrying specific cultural capital (see Taylor 2003:83). The “discursive world” of WUTW (Scannell 1996:133) displays a pleasure in the materiality of words, in the cadences and rhythms of stylized language. WUTW involves “cultural capital” expressed through badinage. TOGs mirror this middle-class emphasis on the word, via a logic of cultural consumption which takes in literatures of neologism and wordplay (sf/fantasy) as well as classic literature's poetic, expressive status.

Having presented this summary analysis of togs.org, stressing the manner in which TOGs symbolically “fold together” their appreciation of WUTW and online identity performance (Bailey 2005; Sandvoss 2005), we will now move on to assess how interviewees made sense of WUTW's online content. Though our primary aim was to generate data and findings for BBC Future Media and Technology, the small-scale qualitative study undertaken also necessarily raises larger issues of BBC policy and distinctiveness.

Interview Themes: ‘Missed Opportunities’ in a BBC symbolic universe?

As might be expected of participants in an online community, our interviewees took the internet very seriously as part of their media consumption. Only the audience-created persona, Chuffer Dandridge, playfully questioned whether WUTW should have a greater online presence. This response can be interpreted as a deliberate and self-conscious performance of fageydom:

“As far as I'm aware the show has nearly 9 million listeners. Does it need the online gaming crowd as well?” (Chuffer Dandridge, “semi-retired Actor-Manager in search of a big break”).

But the so-called “online gaming crowd”, the trendy younger things, were not nominated or discussed by any other interviewees, for whom internet use was not explicitly or implicitly related to age. Interviewee 1 did dwell on age as an issue, but purely in relation to further encouraging internet usage among the over-65s:

“obviously getting people like Sir Terry to endorse it [online content] I think is a good thing, um, and it does work because I know - I actually live in a block of sheltered accommodation and we're trying to encourage all the residents who live- who are almost all over 65 to get involved with surfing the internet” (Respondent 1, M, 46, compliance manager).

It was therefore a taken-for-granted assumption among our interviewees that WUTW should have an online presence, and that it should be developed beyond its current state. Many appreciated and made use of online playlist information, and this information provision was almost universally praised, both in terms of jogging TOGs' memories and enabling some to purchase new music on iTunes after they'd double-checked it on the WUTW playlist.

However, a number of interviewees responded to questions about online WUTW content by stressing their lack of expertise and knowledge on the topic. In these cases, respondents discussed what they felt the BBC *couldn't* offer online rather than what it could profitably develop:

“Oh, heavens above! I don't know, because I wouldn't know what's missing if you know what I mean, that it could offer, um, {sighs} I know there are certain things which I know they can't do because of um, copyright and that's the likes of being able to record a programme properly” (Respondent 3, M, 65, retired)

“they did have the morning chatroom every Friday. I was a regular there... that got dropped. That was another little family party, the same people in every Friday morning... [W]hat you couldn't do is sort of get really interactive online, but that's an impossibility, actually with the show live, but that is a complete impossibility, logistically... I really got into it basically because I got a computer and needed someone to email but I didn't know anyone, so I emailed him! And got read out, and that started it all” (Respondent 5, M, 65, retired).

The hesitancy and discussion of technological limitation here indicates a lack of what, following Bourdieu (1984), we would term “techno-cultural capital”, i.e. the competencies, skills and languages of IT use. Respondent 3 even went on to discuss how useful he found togs.org for technical support issues:

“the technical board is very good... and, you know, many many togs have put information on there on how to do things on the notice board, like how to put a photograph on, how to change a photograph or change a website from being just a long address string to something short so it looks like- say a video of Neil Diamond, instead of putting the string on that comes off YouTube, you shorten it and make it read Neil Diamond. ...[T]he amount of support you get is amazing” (Respondent 3, M, 65, retired).

Probably the single greatest contrast in our interviews was between TOGs like these who articulated a lower (but increasing) level of techno-cultural capital, and others who self-evidently possessed a very high level of techno-cultural capital. Such TOGs were not only comfortable with IT but were also, in some cases, professionally involved in the computing industry:

“I have to say that I wish they [the BBC] did something like the togs message board, um, the Archers has a message board that is really lively and really good, um, and I don't know why they don't do the same with the togs, there may be a good reason and I am not sure what it is, but um, the uh, togs message board is great but I wish it was a BBC thing, that's a personal thing and I don't know why I want it to be BBC but, I think they have more authority” (Respondent 10, F, 50, IT trainer).

As well as asking for more on-BBC WUTW interactive content, and praising *The Archers* (see Thomas 1992 and this project), this interviewee also criticised the current content for being “information provision” only, or a sort of 'broadcasting on the web' furnishing info on presenters and playlists. Though the playlist information was felt to be useful for many, presenter info was something that this TOG had only used when first listening to WUTW. As such, it was felt to be of little value to established, engaged and enthusiastic listeners (a major group who may actively be looking for online content).

Another TOG possessing a high level of techno-cultural capital described WUTW's on-BBC online content as a matter of “missed opportunities” (the phrase came up repeatedly in the interview):

“I mean we have got the number one most popular show, uh, breakfast show ...on radio, and it's ignored, pretty much, by the website... because ...the people who run the message boards and also the BBC website don't listen to the show! They don't get it” (Respondent 9, M, 50, executive).

This interviewee alleged that there was a cultural disconnect (implicitly age- and taste-based) between WUTW listeners and BBC staff responsible for online brand extension. It is not our place to comment further on this, though it may be a worthwhile topic for further BBC reflection and debate, given the crucial importance of mirroring fan audiences' value-systems and textual 'authenticities' when extending brands. Despite togs.org being “an official recognised site”, this respondent opined that: “I think they [the BBC] regard us as a bunch of weirdos really {laughs}” (Respondent 9, M, 50, executive).

Another 'missed opportunity' involved the fact that the BBC made no further online use of listener-submitted content which had originally come in by email:

“I would have a lot tighter integration with online content... because a lot of the time there are things going on, on the show, um, like, you know, there are people the whole time who are looking for- uh, information, or they want- they pester the producer and say "can you send me a copy of that email?" which somebody sent in, all these sorts of things, it is already in electronic format for goodness sake, the stuff all comes in as emails anyway, it wouldn't be desperately difficult to actually get that in a usable format” (Respondent 9, M, 50, executive).

And this critique fed through into on-BBC messageboards for Radio 2: “I have tried under various different names to try and participate in some parts of the BBC website and I have been moderated to death, um, and I just gave up” (Respondent 9, M, 50, executive). Indeed, in contrast with current on-BBC moderation practices (see Klein on messageboards, this project), togs.org was valued for the “control” which it gave to this socially-organised audience:

“The togs site is there, although it is not part of the BBC, it is attached to the BBC... um, they have nothing to do with it, they have no say in the content on it, we do! {Laughs} I mean it's the one place that we do have a certain amount of control within a media- kind of media-ish set up” (Respondent 6, F, 38, unemployed).

This also resonates with the TOGs performance of brand autonomy – i.e. that they do not wish to be viewed as conventional “fans” and deliberately avoid discussing STW and WUTW online. Despite positioning themselves in this way – they are somewhat resistantly not a 'target market' for one BBC brand – the TOGs occupy what we would call a “BBC symbolic universe”. Both in interviews, and in the 'Recommendations' section of togs.org, BBC products were repeatedly discussed, and non-BBC products were barely present at all, certainly in no significant way. The TOGs represent the BBC's “heartlands audience 2.0”; a mainstream, middle-class and ageing listenership who are nevertheless migrating online, increasing in techno-cultural capital, and expecting more from the BBC. This 'BBC symbolic universe' represents a huge opportunity for the BBC to consider ways of linking its brands together, not necessarily via top-down marketing, or even traditional station-led marketing, but rather in relation to consumer-led repertoires of media consumption. If the TOGs are especially interested in BBC content such as *The*

Great British Menu or *Waking the Dead*, both discussed in WUTW during the course of our study, then online brand extension could organically mirror and take into account these intertextual links, emerging in WUTW as a result of production decisions and audience interest.

But to summarise, the key themes emerging in our interviews were:

- “TOGs control” (off-BBC) versus “BBC authority” (on-BBC);
- some listeners' lower techno-cultural capital versus others' high levels of online expertise, but with the internet remaining important and 'mainstream' for all;
- A “heartlands” listenership engaging online within a 'BBC symbolic universe' versus 'missed opportunities' by the Beeb.

In the final section, we will go on to offer recommendations generated by this research. There remain two key matters here: seeing the TOGs as an ordinary audience, rather than as somehow “weird.” If anything, socially-networked audiences and technologies have only recently caught up with what TOGs have effectively been doing, online and offline, for many years. But the TOGs are not essentially extraordinary; some people we interviewed didn't listen to WUTW every day, others weren't regular contributors, and others emailed the show but failed to hear whether their messages had been read out. Socially-networked TOGdom thus comprises a range of differential audience engagements (Costello and Moore 2007) rather than merely representing an 'unrepresentative audience' of the “hardcore.”

Secondly, there is of course the matter of how the BBC can *distinctively* support and grow online engagement with its established brands. As we will go on to suggest, this may involve sidestepping logics and discourses of “brand extension” which are implicitly but fundamentally commercial in orientation.

Recommendations: The BBC’s distinctive fostering of online listener engagement?

i) Following criticisms from interviewees 9 and 10, both of whom were TOGs who worked in the IT industry and so possessed highly developed levels of “techno-cultural capital” (following but revising Bourdieu 1984), we would suggest shifting from an 'information-provision only' role in support of WUTW to offering a more interactive experience alongside 'broadcasting via the web'. This is a chance to build on the key values appreciated by the TOGs audience – those of perceived “intimacy” and “interaction” with the WUTW team via the radio show itself. The website content of playlists and presenter biogs was praised by interviewees, but described as being more suitable for new listeners rather than those already knowledgeably engaged with the text of WUTW:

*“I have looked at the playlists, um, quite often, because he quite often plays stuff that I haven't heard and I want to know more... I mean, when I first started listening I wanted to know who- you know, Fran was and the team, so I looked at the site for that... um, I go to the site every so often, you know, the main page, ...it doesn't serve me as a tog that well I don't think. [I]t provides information, that's what it does... It is not interactive at all”
(Respondent 10, F, 50, IT trainer).*

On this basis, content for the established audience could be developed, along the lines put forward by Interviewee 9, who argued for a far greater integration between text and online content. Emails received by WUTW could be used as an online resource, displayed via a well-designed graphical interface, organised by date or by topic, and searchable by listeners. An “archive” of listener-generated content would supplement the radio show by mirroring its values; enabling listeners to “show off” that their submissions were used (i.e the “TOGS stats” that we were told about), or to search for content which was on a 'short-list' to be read by STW but perhaps wasn't quite included. This online archiving – distinct from a message board *per se* – would also provide a record for TOGs who may not be able to listen to all of the show due to work commitments, and could perhaps be added to online.

Though it is currently a rare audience activity, TOGs have been known to *auto-archive*, presenting all their emails submitted to WUTW online for others to peruse, regardless of whether these were read out on-air or not. The audience avatar, Chuffer Dandridge, “semi-retired Actor-manager” maintains such a site at <http://www.iol.ie/~chuffer/> (as edited by Roger Byrne and Charles Slane). WUTW and the BBC could pre-empt this self-archiving audience by publishing listener content from WUTW. For some of the TOGS we spoke to, getting their material on-air provided a very real sense of achievement, and online content could affirm and broaden this appeal by presenting 'on the short-list' content as well as 'on-air' content:

“was I doing it... because I wanted to appear on the radio? Um, my reason for- well, I am a fan, but my reason for going on was self-satisfaction, I'm sure that I could- to do it, you know, I had a few knocks at work, and this was my way of proving to myself that I could still, uh, achieve something. But yes, I am, I am a fan of Terry Wogan” (Respondent 7, M, 53, retired; our emphasis).

As well as appealing to established audiences, following the *auto-archiving audience* could draw in new contributors to WUTW and extend the brand by allowing for a (limited or managed) “overflow” of radio programme content online (Brooker 2001 and 2003). But the key thing here would be **greater integration of WUTW and online content.**

ii) Following the comments of a number of interviewees, and the structure of togs.org 'Recommendations', we would suggest building organically on the 'BBC symbolic universe' inhabited by these consumers. Non-BBC shows were very rarely, if at all, referred to by TOGs in interviews (with some local radio potentially falling into this category), and one interviewee even noted: “I'm a BBC man I'm afraid, I hate ITV with a vengeance {laughs}” (Respondent 1, M, 46, compliance manager). Likewise, togs.org at the time of our snapshot only had BBC TV shows on its front page of 'Recommendations'. Despite this arguably class-based and age-based consumer distinction (“heartlands audience 2.0”) discontent was expressed at the BBC's self-promotion, thought of as “BBC advertising”:

“Yeah, that annoys me actually, but that annoys me across the board, um, radio shows plugging their own- you know, BBC shows. I don't like adverts within the BBC, it's picky but I suppose if anything annoys me, that does, that's not just Wogan, that's all of them” (Respondent 6, F, 38, unemployed).

“all the BBC's big bright ideas just seem to be to smack a few adverts for other shows in the middle of [WUTW], which is frankly, just, you know, missing an opportunity” (Respondent 9, M, 50, executive).

Our suggestion, fitting with recommendation 1 above, is to more closely integrate the online brand extension of WUTW with other relevant BBC brands, i.e. to “organically” rather than “overtly” advertise (Ross 2008). Whereas the latter involves direct appeals to the audience, the former is disguised by virtue of being textual 'content'. Online content supporting WUTW could thus be multi-branded, but strictly as a mirroring of the text. Once STW and producers have determined which shows they, and listeners, want to discuss on-air then these specific BBC brands could be tied into WUTW-branded online material, e.g. *Waking the Dead* or *The Great British Menu* to give two examples TOGs enjoyed discussing and emailing in about. Even listeners who described themselves as “radio people” rather than “TV people” *enjoyed radio-TV cross-branding when it was presented, irreverently, as an organic part of the programme format rather than as direct advertising:*

“sometimes I don't know who they are talking about and I don't watch a lot of TV, I'm a radio person, sometimes I am sort of uh, what's all that about? But then again it is so light hearted that you know, it quite often takes the Mickey out of the television and I think “thank goodness I didn't watch EastEnders” I mean I haven't the foggiest who's who in EastEnders and they quite often discuss EastEnders... I don't know I don't watch television you see, so if they watch television- there was quite a lot of discussion on Waking the Dead which I watch anyway, that's one of the programmes I do watch, um, and I thought, oh yeah, I can follow what he is on about there and so it feels I am quite included in that” (Respondent 10, F, 50, IT trainer).

Approaching brands as discrete 'bits' of meaning doesn't mirror WUTW where a range of other BBC brands are light-heartedly and affectionately discussed. Online content could thus be conceptualised less as a one-to-one branding exercise (extending the WUTW brand only or discretely), and more as a chance to reinforce the BBC symbolic universe occupied by many listeners. E.g. branded online content could focus specifically on WUTW and listeners' mockery of *Waking the Dead*, or specifically on WUTW listeners' michael-taking recipes for *The Great British Menu* etc. **But these multi-brandings would absolutely need to organically mirror the content of WUTW**, following the decisions of production talent and listener interest rather than being top-down marketing exercises.

iii) Our interviewees, and the togs.org site, also mirrored specific qualities perceived as structuring WUTW: “taking the seriousness out of the Beeb” (Email 1). One area that was positively discussed was STW's gentle lampooning of celebrities, though TOGs were insistent that STW wasn't a 'celebrity' himself, seeing him instead as a commentator on media culture and its excesses. Without being sycophantic, Wogan was also seen as avoiding genuine offence:

“I know I am not going to hear anything distasteful, um, that's the difference between Wogan and Chris Moyles, Chris Moyles will- he won't do anything like that, but he will still push taste back, and he has been warned for doing that sort of thing. You would never hear Wogan being dragged in front of the um, uh Broadcasting Standards Commission {laughs}” (Respondent 1, M, 46, compliance manager).

Interviewees repeatedly suggested, without any prompting, that Wogan's celebrity critiques could be taken further, and this offers a further area for online development, starting from values and content of the radio show and seeking to resonate with these listeners' *anti-celebrity brand performances*. As above, the

key thing here would be to organically mirror WUTW's tone and specific content through online material, rather than looking to mechanistically reinforce or support 'the WUTW brand' as a discrete bit of meaning divorced from other media texts.

iv) Given that the foremost value of WUTW expressed by togs was “intimacy” with the radio show, STW and other presenters – another factor seeming to underpin this audiences' resistance to viewing STW as a 'celebrity' – then **getting the talent involved online would appear to be the sine qua non of seriously developing online brand extension**. TOGs cherish moments of intimacy with the show and STW in their self-narratives:

“one example is that Terry always makes out that he goes into the studio at three o'clock in the morning and rehearses and rehearses and rehearses for his half seven show, which of course we know is not true, we know that he gets there by the skin of his teeth at about 29 minutes past seven, and this time last year we were going down- on holiday, down to, uh, West Wales and so I emailed Terry to say to him that he shouldn't feel that he's on his own uh, in the studio rehearsing at four o'clock in the morning because that was the time we were setting off, so to say good morning to us etc etc, he did, he read it out on the very first one of the show at half past seven, and we were still on the road” (Respondent 2, F, 58, housewife).

Or in terms of the radio show more generally:

“I felt it was the first radio show to embrace emails so you could get instant reactions to things, um, and I just like the sort of -- the whole interaction thing, um, in some ways it is just a bit of a conduit for listeners sort of fantasies really. Including my own” (Respondent 1, M, 46, compliance manager).

Online interaction could, therefore, be approached not as something bolted on to WUTW, but as a real extension of an “interactive” relationship which listeners already feel they have with the text. Again, online content likely to be experienced as 'authentic' will be that which closely mirrors and adopts the show's format and tone.

v) Encapsulating all of the above recommendations, our key central finding is that togs.org, as detailed, constitutes a series of online brand performances rather than brand-focused discussions. In the above ways, and no doubt in others, **the BBC could uniquely and distinctively position itself as a facilitator of such brand performance as well as focusing on more conventional brand extension**. Any nakedly commercial broadcaster would absolutely not support or encourage brand performance for the simple reason that it appears to be composed of 'irrelevant', 'everyday' content, failing to focus meaningfully on a given brand. But what is deemed irrelevant by wholly commercial logics could be developed, distinctively, by the BBC as a public service institution. If the BBC's “heartlands audience 2.0”, loyal to a BBC symbolic universe, is now promiscuously mixing BBC brands and even starting to archive its own attempts to interact with WUTW, then the BBC has a fantastic chance here to go beyond the limitations and opportunities of commercial branding and brand extension; to support online audiences' brand performances within the conditions of media convergence rather than mechanistically seeking to leverage singular brands (Jenkins 2006). And the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, might distinctively

perceive and encourage the ways in which listeners symbolically integrate their appreciation of shows (like WUTW) into online performances of identity. We would argue that this type of audience activity is by no means restricted to our case study (see also Thomas on *The Archers*, this project), as current 'fan studies' in the academy suggests. It would repay further BBC attention, especially by Future Media and Technology and Audio and Music.

Finally, we would like to conclude by thanking all those who took the time to participate in our research. We would also specifically like to thank the site owners of togs.org and chrismoyles.net for their support.

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Online fan cultures around *The Archers*

Lyn Thomas, London Metropolitan University, with Maria Lambrianidou,

Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the nature and social composition of online fan cultures around *The Archers*. We hope to show how listeners engage with the programme online both on BBC and independent sites, and how this activity adds to their enjoyment of the programme. We have used two main methods: a questionnaire survey and interviews with *Archers* fans recruited through the BBC *Archers* website and analysis of online discussions including the BBC's own *Archers* messageboards, the 'Archers Addicts' fan club messageboard and social networking sites. Clearly, the role of the BBC *Archers* site is a major focus. We are exploring a success story: *The Archers* has an audience of 4.77 million² after 50 years of broadcasting, and the programme's website attracts large numbers of listeners each day. However, the age profile of the audience (average age 56), like that of Radio 4 generally, might be a concern. Therefore, we have paid particular attention to the emergence of younger *Archers* fans online and to the cultures they are developing.

We are interested in exploring 'ordinary fandoms' as well as the more extravagant versions which have tended to dominate academic interests, following the arguments of Williamson (2005) and Gray et al that fan behaviour encompasses a broad spectrum, 'from regular, emotionally uninvolved audience members to petty producers' (Gray et al 2007: 8). We are defining our sample as 'fans' of the programme since they listen regularly and are keen enough to visit the website. We are taking into account the need to explore *Archers* fandom in a way that is useful to the BBC. Keri Davies, the web producer of the *Archers* site and a scriptwriter for the programme, expressed an interest in finding out about the 'silent majority' who visit the BBC site but do not post on the messageboards.³ Keri Davies reads the boards constantly as their host, and summarises the discussions of the programme several times each week for the production team and writers. As a result, he arguably knows more than anyone else, and the programme-makers generally know a lot about the posters on the BBC *Archers* site. Keri Davies and the programme-makers are very aware of the danger of seeing the posters' views as representative of the audience more broadly, but it is likely that there will be some slippage, given that the feelings of the silent majority are by definition much less available to them. This research can provide an insight into the views of committed listeners and users of the website who do not post, since only a minority of the sample (33% of 126 respondents) cite the messageboards as one of their main uses of the BBC *Archers* website, and of these 12% say they do not post. Finally, the mapping of online discussions of *The Archers* and messageboard analysis provides insights into online fan cultures around *The Archers* on sites other than the main BBC one, about which less is known by the production team.

Survey and Interview Responses

² RAJAR Wave 1, 2008.

³ Interview with Lyn Thomas, 26 February 2008.

Who are the online fans?

Our sample consists of people recruited mainly through the BBC Archers website, but also 10 people were recruited via the Addicts website and 7 through the Facebook ‘Archers Appreciation’ group. We conducted 18 telephone interviews⁴ and received 108 completed questionnaires (with open-ended questions regarding the programme, the websites and listeners’ online engagement with *The Archers*). Our sample is 76% women, mainly white British (81%) and UK residents (78%). While the largest number of respondents was in the 50-59 age range (34%), a significant 28% were between 40 and 49, and therefore younger than the average listener age in the RAJAR survey of the Archers audience (56). Most of them own their houses/apartments (80%), live in cities (37%), villages (24%) or towns (18%), with either their family or partner (36% and 37% respectively). It is interesting to mention at this point that 17% are British people living abroad, who only have the opportunity to listen to the programme online. For them listening to *The Archers* is often a means of keeping in touch with British cultural life, and it is significant that almost 20% (a further 2% live in Ireland) of our sample live abroad. The BBC Archers website is clearly crucial for this group. Our sample is very highly educated: 74% have been through higher education and a 13% have a PhD. Finally, according to the National Occupational Standards Classification most of them exercise Professional Occupations and Associate Professional and Technical Occupations (33% and 32% respectively), followed by 14% in Administrative and Secretarial Occupations.

According to RAJAR statistics on the total Archers audience (this includes both the daily listeners and the Sunday Omnibus ones), the audience is predominantly female (58%), having an average age of 56, where 10% are between 15 and 34, 33% between 35 and 54 and 58% over 55. We recruited 18% more women than the broader audience and slightly younger age groups: 45% of our sample is under 50, as opposed to 43% under 55 in the RAJAR sample. This is an indicator that there are more women and a very slightly younger age range in the online ‘fan’ audience of the programme, though it should also be noted that women are more likely than men to express publicly an interest in soap opera, and therefore to participate in qualitative research such as this (Hargrave and Gatfield, 2002). The RAJAR statistics indicate that 73% of the Archers audience are ABC1 in terms of social class; we do not have the breakdown within the RAJAR figure, but it seems likely that at 65% in professional and associate professional occupations, our sample is even more weighted to social classes A and B. This, along with the very high educational levels can probably be attributed to a recruitment based on web use – given the social stratification of IT skills and computer ownership in the general population.

Clearly women are overrepresented in both the Archers general audience and our sample as the UK population (based on the 2001 census) has an almost even split on gender. In terms of age, 15.7% of the overall population of UK is aged over 65 which is very close to the 18% of our sample aged over 60. Thus, Archers fans of these generations are part of a generally ageing population, which the BBC could be said to be serving in terms of age and gender, through this provision. Finally, in terms of ethnicity our sampling was relatively representative of the overall UK population insofar as it is mainly white British. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that ethnic diversity in our sample consists mainly of non-British white groups (12% of total sample). Only 4% belong to Asian or mixed race ethnicities, and there are no respondents of African or African-Caribbean origin. Online fan cultures around *The Archers* thus remain white spaces, despite efforts to represent multicultural Britain in the programme.

⁴ 18 respondents were recruited for interviews: 13 through the BBC site, 2 through the Addicts site and 3 from the Facebook group. A further 3 respondents interviewed had participated in Thomas’s earlier research on *Archers* fans: two of these do not post and one posts mainly on the Addicts board: they are occasionally quoted but as their interviews followed a different pattern, are not included in statistics.

Our conclusion is that the online ‘fan’ audience of the programme is predominantly white British women between 40 and 59, middle-class and highly educated. Furthermore, although these tendencies also characterise the broad *Archers* audience, they are more marked here, particularly in terms of gender and level of education, than in the broader audience who may listen more casually and may not go online in relation to the programme. There seem to be significant differences between the profile of fans of *The Archers* (and still more so our sample of online fans) and those of television soaps, with the predominance of women in the fan audience as the common point. Hargrave and Gatfield found that respondents they defined as ‘fanatics’ in terms of soap opera viewing were mainly women, tabloid readers, younger and of lower social class while those dismissive of TV soaps were mainly men, in classes AB and readers of broadsheets (Hargrave and Gatfield, 2002). It seems that *The Archers* distinguishes itself from its TV equivalents by providing ‘soap’ for the educated middle classes. As previous research, and the comments of many of our interviewees indicate, *The Archers* is perceived as a high quality soap opera (Thomas 2002). This ‘quality’ attribution derives not only from the programme’s production values, but also from the higher cultural status of Radio 4 and from the fact that the programme has some information values (and a history of association with information), and from the longevity of the programme generally: *The Archers* has become, for many, a national monument.

Online Fans’ Responses to the Programme

As previous research on *The Archers* suggests (Thomas 2002), an extraordinary feature of *The Archers* is not only the programme’s longevity, but also the fidelity of its audience over decades. Although interestingly the largest number of respondents (27%) started listening in the 1980s, over half (53%) started listening in the 50s, 60s or 70s. Given that 45% of our sample are under 50 (and therefore under the average age of the broader audience) this implies that many started listening as children. Many respondents commented on this:

‘I cannot remember not listening to the Archers as my parents were also fans. I began tuning in deliberately myself when I was about 11 in 1992.’ (F, 20-29, Project Development Officer, Q⁵)

‘Alright. When I was in school we used to listen to Dick Barton. Dick Barton, special agent. Yes? No? Great fun. And it stopped and we had The Archers instead and I was deeply indignant about the whole thing but my parents liked it and I used to listen and I remember Grace Archer getting burned in the fire and that sort of thing, you know. So I really do go back to episode 1 and they were very boring to start with or I thought so. And it got more interesting as people started getting burned up in fires and things. And I stopped when I was at university largely, I didn’t really listen very much though I did when I went home. For some years after that ... When did I get seriously interested in The Archers, that’s a good question. It was some time ago. Twenty years, possibly more. More like thirty.’ (F, 70-79, Retired Lecturer, I)

This history of early listening, followed by a break in young adulthood, and culminating in commitment to the programme in mature life shows the programme acting as a kind of marker in a life history, and providing a sense of continuity. The return in later years with the background of early listening gives the

⁵ ‘Q’ indicates that this is a quotation from a questionnaire, ‘I’ from an interview.

programme an added depth and resonance. Some respondents comment directly on how the programme is connected with memories of childhood and of home, so that the familiar voices (some actors also go back several decades) and theme tune have a comforting effect; the association of real family with the fictional families of Ambridge inspires both loyalty and nostalgia:

'Ever since I was a child. My mother was a great fan of the programme so it was always on at 7 o'clock in the evening. So it was just always there, it seeped into my radio listening at a very early age.

Of course as you grow up with the programme you get to know who the characters are. It was rather nice and reassuring. It was always on at the same time each day. It was always on in the kitchen at home so I tended to associate it with home cooking rather so it was rather pleasant oral wallpaper rather than the drama but when I grew up I started being interested in the characters a bit more.' (M, 30-39, University Lecturer, I)

'15 minutes of time to myself to immerse in the 'lives' of people I have come to know as well as my friends and family.' (F, 40-49, Accountant, Q).

'Fun, nostalgia, 13 minutes of escapism' (F, 40-49, Art Teacher, Q)

'News of farming & rural life, interested in the story. Have got to know the characters over the years' (F, 40-49, Local Government Officer, Q)

The provision of a sense of rural life was commented on by several respondents, and is interesting given that 63% of the sample live in towns or cities. Even those who themselves live in the country can find this appealing and relevant:

I also like learning about current farming issues, especially since I live in a rural area – it gives me some background knowledge when talking to farmers! – thank you Graham Harvey!(F, 40-49, Self Employed Classical Musician, Q)

For many, as for TV soaps, whether listened to live or online, the programme structures the day and provides a space for relaxation – 'something to look forward to' - as the respondent quoted below remarks. The programme's entertainment value was commented on by many:

'I don't watch much TV, so a bit of a change from the other programmes on Radio 4. Gives me something to look forward to....some of the characters are just purely comical and crack me up, some make me want to slap them, whilst others deal with issues which are both interesting and relevant to everyday life.'(F, 30-39, PhD researcher, Q)

As in previous research, we found that these pleasures are relatively guilt-free because of the programme's brevity and a widespread belief in its superiority to the TV soaps and 'quality' soap status (Thomas 2002). Particular features contributing to this were the slower pace of *The Archers* compared to the TV soaps and the effort of imagination required to visualise radio characters and scenes:

'It is the only 'soap' that I follow. It is enjoyable to have good storylines with realistic time scales, some episodes where not much happens, just like real life, humour, great characters, and the chance to use my imagination thinking about what the characters look like, and where they live etc'. (F, 40-49, Self Employed Classical Musician, Q)

'It's very comforting and they cover the storylines very well and the characters are very believable. They have storylines that take a long time. They are not like soap operas; like Eastenders or Coronation Street. They take a long time. You get to know the characters very, very well. They are almost like friends; people that you know. Some things can be very funny some things can be very sad some things are like normal life as well, you can get quite a lot out of it, I think'. (F, 40-49, University Lecturer, I)

Responses to the BBC Archers Website

The majority of our respondents have been users of the BBC Archers website for a fairly long period; 45% have been using it for between one and five years and 37% started using it more than five years ago. The features of the website that seem to mainly attract people were the 'listen again' and the 'podcast' facilities (50% said they used these features):

'The 'listen again' to listen to something I've missed. And now that I know that it's there I don't worry about trying to listen to it at the particular time; it gives me the flexibility to listen when I want to listen.' (F, 40-49, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I)

'The availability of the podcast is a great new addition – can listen now on my PC, MP3 player, mobile phone, etc.' (M, 50-59, Database and Web Developer, Q)

The middle-class nature of the sample is clearly in play here, leading to an 'early adoption' approach to technology even in a sample which is mainly over 40. Having been offered these alternatives, listeners do not have to organise their lives according to the broadcasting schedules and can still catch up on the programme:

'I get to see my friends or talk to them on the phone at any time now, whereas before they knew not to call me when the Archers were on, especially on a Sunday morning before I retired. Now I catch up on the BBC site.' (F, 70-79, Retired Showroom Manager, Q)

It was also the 'listen again' that made many respondents visit the website in the first place, and they then started looking at other features:

'It wasn't until probably.. I think probably 2004 until I first remember doing it, because I started having more regular access to internet. And also I think I started to go to the 'listen again' feature and then I started to look at the messageboards and other features that are on the website. But now I access it quite regularly mainly for the 'listen again' stuff actually.' (F, 20-29, PhD Student, I)

Again, the fact that the majority of our sample are in professional occupations means that they do not always have the time to listen to the programme daily, so that features such as listen again and the synopsis are very important. The latter is particularly useful as a way of catching up quickly and of getting new perspectives on the programme:

'The thing I use the most is the synopsis of the daily episode because I can never listen in real time, so what I will do every morning as a ritual is check my emails and have a look at the synopsis cause I don't ever listen in real time on my computer. I will pick episodes according to what I like the sound of it from the synopsis or if I'm doing the ironing on a Sunday I'll listen to a whole week's worth of episodes or the Omnibus edition.' (F, 50-59, Librarian in an International School, I)

'It gives me background and allows me to listen again if I miss anything. It isn't the site, but I also receive emails which is handy for filling gaps, but which also gives me insights I haven't got from the actual programmes. I mean if I have heard an episode and then read the email it may interpret something from the character's point of view I hadn't picked up from the programme!' (F, 60-69, Legal Adviser, Q)

Being able to follow all storylines is very important to the loyal audience of the programme. Consequently, they also enjoy checking background information and things that had happened in the past, that they have either forgotten or didn't know about in the first place as they happened before they started listening to the programme or in some cases even before they were born: *'Catching up with the latest episodes and acquainting myself with the details of the programme, which I would have otherwise missed through not being old enough to have listened first hand to them'* (F, 40-49, Housewife, Q). Another feature that seemed to be quite popular was the weekly vote which one third of the total sample chose as an aspect of the site they used: *'I mainly just use the synopsis and occasionally I will vote on the quiz of the week you know, what should characters do.'* (F, 40-49, Hospital Doctor, I)

Interestingly there were not many critical comments on the website. A few people said they would like to have more archive clips or the option of listening to older Omnibus editions: *'Sometimes it would be nice to be able to hear the weekly Omnibus of the previous week, you know so that there would be two weekly Omnibuses, but mostly it's fine'* (F, 40-49, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I).

The few suggestions for improvements to the site were by students or retired people, or people who work in IT. Seven people commented on the layout of the website arguing that it is off-putting. These comments were mainly by younger people, or those whose profession was web-related.

'Overall design – I'm just looking at it now. It's an old fashioned kind of design and it's not very clear; it's not well designed. I can't give you an example now of what would be a really well designed one but a lot of the BBC sites would be much slicker looking.' (F, 40-44, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I)

Most people were happy with the BBC Archers website (including the mustard colour!) and could not think of anything that they would like to be different:

'It's just a really good website, it's a good messageboard; I mean going back to the website, the articles that they put on, things like anaerobic digestion that was very interesting, the messageboard will always have useful information about anything, good comments about TA, enjoyable, fun writing from people and it's just a great place to be and well done BBC for providing such an excellent service' (M, under 19, student, I).

Responses to the BBC Messageboards

33% of our respondents use the messageboards, either just to read them (12%) or post and read (21%). When asked what they liked or disliked about the BBC Archers website, 7% commented favourably on the messageboards,⁶ emphasising the sense of community that participation in the messageboards offers. Talking to other listeners, mainly about storylines or characters, is a means of enhancing enjoyment of the programme for those who post on the messageboards:

'It makes me quite deliberately listen to the programme and think about it before I come and read ... well, I would anyway because I can't reply till after, you know. I listen to an episode and then I think they are probably going to say this and this and this and then I go and look at it and by God they have.' (F, 70-79, Retired University Lecturer, I).

In some cases, the messageboard becomes a kind of alternative soap, whose characters and their conflicts and storylines are as interesting as the programme:

Well the spats about Ruth and David or Lizzie are sometimes amusing though reflections on Jack's storyline can be illuminating. I think the interest it creates is fascinating: how people hear the mix between fact and fiction and characters is weird.' (M, 40-49, Manager of Financial Services Company, Q)

'Discussion of recent episodes on DTA interests me most. I particularly enjoy analyses of the characters, their behaviour and relationships, especially regarding fundamental aspects of life such as birth, divorce and money. Also posters' personal stories supporting or not the storylines (F, 40-49, Computer Programmer and Analyst, Q).

This doubling of pleasure, or double dose soap even leads very occasionally to abandonment of the programme:

'I don't actually ever listen to the programme itself very much at all anymore, which is strange really, I tend to catch up online and then to read what people think of it. I think what I like about it is any kind of drama is supposed to make you think and have reactions to it. I like reading about other people's reactions it's almost as good, well it's better in some ways than listening to the soap opera itself. And there are identifiable characters on the messageboard who have a very witty take on the programme and I like reading their opinions and seeing whether they match mine or are different from mine. And the quality

⁶ The highest percentage in response to this question was 16% ('the website provides an easy environment').

of the writing is really really good, on a lot of online messageboards there is rubbishy writing and people who cannot spell but on TA messageboard quite a lot of the commentary is very witty and well written and precise and I enjoy that, it is entertaining reading material.' (M, 30-39, University Lecturer, I)

It is clear that the quality of English and of the discussion on the boards are important to this 'lurker' and to many others, and that if *The Archers* is a 'quality soap', the BBC messageboards vehicle a correspondingly 'quality' fan culture where middle-class values and ethos dominate (see analysis of messageboards, below). The messageboards also offer to some the opportunity of displaying their knowledge about the programme or 'fan cultural capital' (Hills 2002). These comments were mainly made by people who spend a lot of time on the website and have been listening to the programme for many years. These were also the people who called themselves 'fans' of the programme:

'I love the ones with questions about various characters. I keep loads and loads of notes about TA and because I've been listening for so long I've got loads of stuff about TA. I also receive the Village Voice as an email attachment, Hedli Niklaus sends it to the members so I've got that on the computer. So I usually answer questions about when characters last appeared, how long a character has been in TA, so I love those sorts of threads.' (F, 30-39, Student, I)

It is not surprising that the display of fan cultural capital in this context is often combined with cultural capital in the broader sense. The 'Fantasy Archers' board provides a space for display and performance of this kind: *'A feeling of participation; again friendship, the opportunity to let off steam, opportunity to show off (posting parodies to Fantasy Archers)' (M, 40-49, Civil Servant, Q)*. On the 'Discuss *The Archers*' board, high cultural references also abound; on several occasions in recent months, posters quoted Voltaire to justify everyone's right to express their opinion. One of our interviewees commented humorously on this:

'You may think it's Voltaire but it's not. And I keep saying this. And people keep quoting the ruddy thing and it wasn't Voltaire. If you google it you get the whole history. This keeps coming up. People keep saying why shouldn't we say what we feel like saying on the message board because Voltaire said ... And I think, "Oh God, not again!" However' (F, Retired University lecturer, 70-79, I).

As this quotation and the analysis that follows below indicate, there is a high level of irony on the boards – in relation to the programme, and sometimes to the discussion itself. The display of cultural capital is embellished and rendered still more subtle and sophisticated by its ironic deployment.

Whilst for many, the high levels of cultural capital and the intellectual games played on the BBC boards are an attraction, inevitably, these aspects of the boards can seem off-putting to some, and 10% of the sample listed the messageboards as an aspect of the site they disliked. Some people claimed that they used to use them or have tried to but find them very cliquy, and that they did not enjoy the people's comments on characters. This was attributed variously to the very fast threads or to the language used, or just to the fact that most of the regular posters seem to know each other and sometimes reply one to the other without taking into consideration other people's comments:

'..I'm afraid I do not like the message board. What a lot of rubbish people talk on there, and they are so critical of all the characters. Of course that is not a fault with the site, just the silly-ness of the people leaving messages. I cannot believe they are true Archers fans' (F, 60-69, Retired Supplier of Software for NHS, Q)

'I find it too difficult to navigate and to use and as I said the people on that site can be very insulting and very nasty at times and I don't particularly like that aspect of it. I know it's human nature but. And that's the main reason I don't use the other boards and I use only the Archers Addicts. One more is that it's just basically a nicer class of people to be honest on the AA site.' (F, 30-39, Former Office Worker now Full-Time Mother, I)

'There are often discussions about whether the message board is cliquy, and the guilty parties always deny that it is – as a non-posting lurker, I would say it is definitely cliquy in that some posters obviously know each other very well, and seem unaware that their messages are readable worldwide by many people to whom the posters' relationships are meaningless and boring.' (F, 40-49, Former Computer Programmer and Analyst now Full-Time Mother, Q)

This is in contrast to the participants in the other *Archers* online discussions in the sample who found those spaces very friendly:

'There's more to it than just TA, it's a very friendly sort of forum and there's quite a bit of personal chat that goes along as well, and I enjoy that. I am registered to the group, you know, the BBC messageboard and I do look at it occasionally but I just don't enjoy it so much. For one thing it is too fast moving and I don't have time to sit there for hours I just like the Facebook group that moves a bit slower, more conducive to the time that I've got available, popping in and out 2 or 3 times a day and see what's been said and ask something; and you know you're not gonna miss a huge amount of things that have been said. I get more sort of personal interaction than on the other one and that's what I like on the Facebook group.' (F, 50-59, Retired Clerical Officer, I)

They (Archers Addicts) are a lot friendlier than the BBC board, they are always getting at one another over stupid things. (...) They are quite intellectual as well on there as well. I think a lot of them – I shouldn't say this – they are all university probably, lecturers or something. And they are on their computer and they write these long posts in-depth. I mean, we can do that if we want but I would think I was boring people, you know. And that's why you can't keep up with it. You can't ... I defy anyone to keep up with all the messages on there (F, 60-69, retired legal secretary, I).

It should, however, be borne in mind that forming factions and defining one's own group in opposition to others are strong features of most fan cultures (Johnson 2007). In this sense, inevitably, the various spaces occupied by Archers fans online develop their own cultures, and that each space / group attempts to define itself as 'true' fandom. Slightly different intersections of age, gender and class may also be in play

in each case, and will generate a particular habitus⁷ (Bourdieu 1984). Again, inevitably, feelings of unease will result from visiting an unfamiliar habitus and in this sense the fan cultures analysed here reflect and participate in the hierarchies and inequalities endemic in contemporary British society.

It would, however, be wrong to characterise the BBC boards as functioning solely as fora for intellectual debate and argument. The non-Archers boards (The Village Hall and The Bull) also seemed to be of great interest to many people. The sense of community discussed earlier creates a supportive environment which people can bring their problems to:

'No, dreadful things that have happened to people tends to be the Village Hall which I avoid. And the Village Hall is full of people having a good moan and I've read some of that from time to time and I think oh no, I am not going to moan on a message board. I mean, for heaven's sake. But you do ... It's made ... It is presumably very helpful to people from time to time. Or some people.' (F, 70-79, Retired University Lecturer, I)

This comment displays an interesting and rather English ambivalence about self revelation online, which is no doubt shared by many, who will avoid the Village Hall board as a result. However, even those who would not dream of talking about themselves and their problems in this way are deriving social support and connections from the BBC boards, and for some, they can become a lifeline. This can apply to people in busy jobs with apparently full lives, but also, and importantly, to those who are wholly or partially housebound, because of a disability or caring responsibility.

The social benefits of the boards and friendships made are augmented for some by the regular and well attended meets organised through the BBC boards, but also occasionally by Archers Addicts, and recently by the Facebook Archers Appreciation group. Whilst not many of our interviewees had taken part in non-online activities regarding the Archers such as fan club events and performances, several commented positively on 'meets' organised through the BBC messageboards:

'The meets you mean, that sort of thing? Yes I've been to a few meets now. I went to my first one when I was 16 I think and yes I really enjoyed it that was great, really good fun. And my parents were a bit concerned, you know meeting people off the internet, you hear all these horror stories but it's been great, I've really made a lot of good friends through the meets people from the messageboard.' (M, under 19, Student, I)

'Not yet, not yet, no. I am hoping to do so not this Saturday but next Saturday when they have a vast meeting at the Tate, something like 80 people have signed up for it, including Keri Davies. Yeah, that's what I thought. Oh dear! But I haven't signed up for it. I am just going to go along. I think. If I can, I am not sure.' (F, 70-79, Retired University Lecturer, I)

As we write, the Facebook group is on the point of meeting in London (19.07.08), and several of the other fan sites also create a 'RL' social dimension. The activities organised by the official 'Archers Addicts' fan club have declined in recent years, perhaps in part because they have been replaced by this thriving culture of 'meets', particularly those organised all over the UK through the BBC Archers boards. Whilst

⁷ A term coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to denote the shared beliefs, attitudes and practices which both emanate from and enable us to adapt to our position in social hierarchy.

Keri Davies sometimes attends these meets (and is very welcome there), and they clearly would not be possible without the BBC boards, we can conclude that online Archers fans are creating their own autonomous social spaces, and that they are flourishing.

Archers fan cultures online

The first stage of the research consisted of a mapping exercise in relation both to Archers fan sites and discussion of *The Archers* on social networking sites. We identified the following fan sites in addition to the messageboards of the BBC Archers site and of the official 'Archers Addicts' fan club site:

- umra⁸;
- lowfield⁹ (where a small group write programme summaries);
- Mustardland¹⁰;
- Archers Anarchists¹¹;
- Saddicts¹².

On the Mustardland site, which mirrors the BBC site, and was created in 2005 because of a change of format on the latter, the founder of the site was the main poster, joined only by 5-6 other posters; the site lists 20 registered members. The 'umra' group, which originates from an early Archers usenet group, has about 100 regular posters, its own set of abbreviations and nicknames, and social events. The threads are lively, but roughly 80% are concerned with issues other than discussion of *The Archers*. Threads on the 'Saddicts' site had 10-20 posters, who clearly 'knew' each other well and were regulars on the site. The Archers Anarchists site has members only email discussions rather than a board. On this site there are regular 'surveys' on 'anarchist' themes such as 'which Ambridge resident would you most like to slap?'. These attract large numbers of votes (200-300), but since it's possible to vote every 30 minutes over a period of two months, there is no way of knowing how many people are participating. However, it seems unlikely that large numbers are involved.

The BBC Archers site has seven boards, with high levels of activity. The 'Discuss the Archers' Board has 35,401 threads dating back to October 2005, at time of writing (14.07.08), and some of the threads contain over 1000 posts. In one hour, on the same date, there were 20 new posts. The messageboards of the official BBC fan club - Archers Addicts - proceed at a stately pace, but there is also sustained activity here: there are 8 boards (referred to as 'categories' on this site) including Archers Discussion, Plotlines, Events and Quotes, Poems, Puns. At any one time on any board, 25 threads are visible, dating back 2-6 months depending on the amount of activity, and with about 10-20 posts in each thread. On checking the site on 14.07.08, we observed that there had been 20 new posts across all categories in

⁸ <http://groups.google.co.uk/group/uk.media.radio.archers/>

⁹ <http://www.lowfield.co.uk/archers/>

¹⁰ <http://www.paranormal.org.uk/mustardland/index.php>

¹¹ <http://www.archersanarchists.com/>

¹² <http://www.saddicts.com/>.

almost 4 days – as opposed to the 20 posts in one hour rate observed on the BBC site. Our conclusion from this mapping exercise is that the BBC site is the most active online, Archers fan venue, but that the programme has generated several smaller, less active groups, who zealously affirm their difference from other Archers sites / boards, and particularly from the BBC site.

In terms of social networking sites we found significant discussion of *The Archers* in two places: Mumsnet and Facebook. On Mumsnet¹³ we found discussion mainly under the ‘Culture Vultures’ and ‘Telly addicts’ headings. A thread under ‘Telly addicts’ – ‘Admit it...someone else must listen to The Archers!!!’ had 62 messages by 30 posters. We can conclude that on Mumsnet this is a minority interest, but the presence of *The Archers* on this site is nonetheless an instance of a fan culture around the programme in a broader cultural context than its own fan sites and the BBC Archers site. It is also indicative of the programme’s popularity among women.

Discussion of *The Archers* on Facebook strongly reinforces the point that diverse fan cultures around *The Archers* exist online and are not confined to specific fan sites. The numbers involved here, and degree of involvement, are far more significant than Mumsnet. Facebook has an Archers Appreciation group with 5 officers and over 2000 members¹⁴, having attracted almost 800 members (and 3 officers) since our first mapping of the sites in February 2008.¹⁵ Facebook also hosts three smaller, less active groups: ‘I listen to the Archers and I love it!’ which has 83 members, ‘Petition To Make "The Archer's" Theme Tune The National Anthem Of England’ whose 41 members only discuss this topic, and a spin off from the BBC site – a facebook ‘Mustardland’ where group members are encouraged to use their BBC screen names. Here there are 57 members, 30 wall posts and one discussion thread, alongside an announcement for the BBC Archers messageboard ‘Mustardland’ meet at Tate Modern, London in January 2008. This Facebook sub-group clearly does not replace the BBC messageboards but allows participants in the latter to exchange profiles and photographs and and thus connect in other ways. The Facebook site connects to the Mustardland theme (mustard is the background colour of the BBC site) by displaying photographs of Mustardland meet badges, packets of Colmans mustard and so on...

Having surveyed these sites, we selected four for detailed analysis on the grounds that they are the most active and cover BBC and independent spaces as well as fan sites and social networking sites with Archers groups or threads: the main BBC ‘Discuss The Archers’ board, the Archers Addicts, Mumsnet and the Facebook Archers Appreciation group.

The BBC ‘Discuss The Archers’ Messageboard

The playful performance of identity is as strong a feature of the BBC DTA messageboard as of other internet based cultures and fan cultures. Whereas on social networking sites most posters use their real names and many display a photograph of themselves, the DTA messageboard operates on the basis of invented ‘screen names’, so that posters can create a ‘persona’ on the boards from the outset, revealing as much or as little of their real identities as they choose. As one poster comments: ‘It’s quite fascinating actually, the tiny glimpses people give you of themselves; it’s like walking down a street with some of the curtains and blinds half open, tantalising glimpses of book-cases, agas, shaggy dogs and walls of

¹³ <http://www.mumsnet.com>

¹⁴ Membership of the group does not necessarily imply active participation in discussions, but is clearly a measure of interest in *The Archers*. Some members may of course lurk, rather than post.

¹⁵ <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2215391357>

paintings' (Post 82, F., 9.08.07, Captain, Adam's Angels thread). Some screen names refer to the programme, as is the case here – 'Captain' was the name of a long lamented dog belonging to one of the characters, Jack Woolley. Screen names of this kind often refer to Ambridge pets or to silent, minor or even dead (as in 'Grace's Ghost'!) characters, or have some rural connotation, whilst some posters choose names which refer to other aspects of their cultural capital, or to some aspect of their identity, whether 'real' or imagined: 'I'm named after my old teddy bear, Growly, I've had him since birth' (9.08.07, post 84, Adam's Angels). Screen names can obscure gender and thus open up a further possible realm of performance and play: 'People thought I was a man when I first started posting. So what! I thought it was quite humorous actually and took some time before I admitted I'm female. It's like coming to the ball in fancy dress, or in a masque, and having a laugh! In and out of different rooms, different masks' (9.08.07, post 80, Captain, Adam's Angels).

Posters often address each other by screen name on the boards (and indeed at DTA meets this is the convention), reinforcing the 'reality' of the personae and creating a sense of intimacy and community. Familiar forms of the screen names emphasise the intimacy of posters' relationships with each other: 'Hi Dragers, I was hoping you'd be along some time to get into the interesting nitty gritty of this SL' (Post 72, 6.08.08, Cath replying to Dragonfly, 'In his 50s, Tony hesitates about taking on a mortgage' thread). The use of screen names is particularly noticeable during discussions where posters disagree, and can become a way of aligning oneself with some posters and distinguishing oneself from others: 'Hello Anna.¹⁶ I wanted to add my support to your sentiment as it is pretty lonely in here. They mostly talk amongst themselves and avowedly ignore dissenting posts' (Post 211, 25.08.07, Captain, Adam's Angels thread).

The screen names also become the source of play, jokes and the display of cultural capital of various kinds, as in the following thread:

Which of you posting here is actually Caroline IRL? All your lines, like "We're not in a Thomas Hardy novel" are nicked from this MB. Who is it? COMe on out now, we won't bite! (5.08.08 Post 1, Redbookish)

'Snot me. I'm in a Shakespeare play' (5.08.08 Post 2, Lady Macbeth [officially old but with pink hair])

'Sorry, I'm Marge Simpson' (5.08.08 Post 3, Laurie [no longer lurking]).

'Well it serpently isn't me. I am but a humble blow up airbed incapable of any acts of espionage' (5.08.08 Post 4, LiLo).

'Whereas I am a Witch of Pendle' (5.08.08 Post 5, jennet_device).

This thread then interweaves discussion of *The Archers* with references to *Little Women*, the playwright Christopher Fry, and Monty Python, among others. The thread flits from one cultural reference to another, demonstrating how this is a space where those with the ability to follow and participate in cultural games of this kind can thrive. In this way, the boards become a site for the expression of the posters' middle-class, highly educated habitus, just as the images used by the poster quoted above ('Captain', p. 28) to describe the glimpses of real identities which the board reveals were actually glimpses into middle-class or even upper middle-class homes, with their 'book-cases, agas, shaggy dogs and walls of paintings'.

¹⁶ It should be noted that the full screen name referred to here is 'anna kist', so that the apparently ordinary 'Anna' of the shortened form here conceals a play on words and political reference in the full name.

Interestingly, the agas and shaggy dogs seem to be borrowed from the fictional world of the programme, illustrating how, as Cornell Sandvoss and Matt Hills have pointed out, even when fans are apparently not talking about the text itself, its atmosphere and ethos are mirrored in their communications (Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2008 forthcoming).

As in previous research on Archers fans (Thomas 2002), these online fans manage the apparent contradiction between soap opera fandom and middle-classness not only, as above, by displaying knowledge of 'high' culture alongside their knowledge of *The Archers*, but also by the deployment of an ironic stance in relation to the programme. For these fans, it is possible to talk about fictional characters 'as if they were real' if a large dose of irony is administered at the same time, making it clear that the speaker is only 'playing'. Early in what had been opened up as a 'fan' thread for one of the characters (Adam's Angels, following on from an earlier thread, 'Adorable Adam, Irresistible Ian & Family'), an ironic exchange of this type about one of the characters in the same family, Brian Aldridge, occurs:

'Yes Anna. As you and I know so well, Brine is the most caring, generous and selfless being ever to tread the hallowed Ambridge earth, a very king among men (...). Would there were a few more Brines in this world to lighten our darkness and supply us all with cottages, horses, cushy jobs and trips to the dark continent' (Post 5, 07.08.07, MsMumboJumbo).

Whereas the ironic fan culture I analysed earlier (Thomas 2002) was based in a friendship group, and therefore self-selecting, here on the messageboard the ironic mode of fandom meets, and can come into conflict with fandom of a more conventional kind – where fans want to express their admiration for the programme and / or indulge in the activity observed in much previous research on soap opera fandom – talking about the characters as if they were real, without the protection of irony (Buckingham 1987, Brown 1994). The 'ironic' posters complain about being ignored, whilst the 'fan' posters carry on chatting about the characters: 'But since Adam is an angel (to some, not all) then I don't have a problem with him comforting Brian or playing with Rory' (Post 80, 9.08.07, Growly), occasionally pausing to defend their position: 'I like the thread too Growly, and I never understand the people who come here and read it and then complain about it. We try to go somewhere we won't bug people and then we're accused of being cliquish. I think people just like to complain, but I'll celebrate instead' (Post 161, 17.08.07, DaisyViolet). This celebratory mode is maintained (the thread runs to 1727 posts) despite attempts to pour cyber cold water on it by the ironic faction: 'Bluddyhell, if the programme was not inane enough we get more of this cloying hokum (...) and get three simpering contributors all saying "ooohhh he is so lovely"' (Post 179, 20.08.07, Country Squire).

This quotation illustrates how in this context the ironic mode can become an 'anti-fan' position, in contrast with the fans analysed in my earlier work, whose irony towards the programme was always affectionate. The desire to be critical, and even, in some cases, to pour scorn, variously, on the programme, the actors, the characters, and the scriptwriters is a feature of the BBC boards which is present on some of the other boards and sites analysed, though less sustained¹⁷. It is important, however, to note that what Derek Johnson has called 'fan-tagonisms' or clashes between factions are typical of the operation of fan cultures generally (Johnson 2007) and that the 'anti-fan' stance can be as indicative of passionate engagement as celebration (Gray 2003, Click 2007). The 'anti-fan' posture adopted by some here is perhaps also connected to the high levels of educational capital shared by the participants, for

¹⁷ With the exception of the Archers Anarchists, whose 'surveys' are always framed by an anti-fan discourse, such as focusing on the most loathed, rather than the most loved character.

whom the ability to be critical is both a sign of this status and a deeply ingrained habit resulting from their education. The messageboard thus illustrates Bourdieu's theory of distinction, where 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu 1984: 6). *The Archers* is a suitable field for this cultural work because of its own reputation for quality. Posters are affirming their cultural position and superiority by discussing *this* soap opera, still more so when they are being critical of it: 'This is just the sort of junk rubbish you get on the likes of Eastenders. *The Archers* should be above catering to the lower intelligence level in this country (post 72, 'A Heartbreaking, Satisfying Conclusion' thread, 13.08.08, moonlight on the Am).

One might, furthermore, speculate as to whether the pleasures of taunting authority, through criticism of a programme which is seen as part of the establishment outweigh those of more celebratory forms of fandom for some posters. However, as we have seen, these tendencies are not shared by all posters, and the resulting conflicts fuel many of the threads, as well as attempts to distinguish other fan sites as 'more friendly' or 'less vitriolic'. In a recent thread entitled 'A Heartbreaking, Satisfying Conclusion' 12 positive posts are interrupted by the following more critical intervention: 'But it was so wretchedly written! OK, I see what the SWs were trying to do, but the poor actors were given a real handful of left-overs to cope with' (post 13, 11.08.08, DracoM1). A poster then protests, implying that the intellectual combat might for once be relinquished in favour of emotional pleasures: 'Oh, Draco, do lighten up a bit and let us have a good wallow for once' (post 15, 11.08.08, jennet_device). A third poster then remarks on the reversion to the critical mode: 'It was nice on this thread while all those of us who enjoyed the episode were chatting about it - but alas, now the cynics have arrived. Oh well....they're entitled to their views, of course!' (post 29, 12.08.08, Mircalla Karnstein). Despite these complaints, in fact, those intent on enjoying the scene are not prevented from pursuing their discussions, and the two lines – of criticism and praise - continue in parallel, with the latter most numerous. It could be argued that the clash of different modes of fandom on the BBC boards (anti-fan, ironic and celebratory), along with the pleasure of mutual recognition of shared high cultural capitals and their playful deployment is what draws both posters and lurkers to the boards, and makes them flourish. It is also a particular feature of this online space, which because of its direct connection to the programme attracts a range of fans and fandoms, whereas other spaces are more homogeneous. This can also be seen as a way in which the BBC's online provision has changed the fan cultures: whereas previously fans would meet in like-minded groups, in this relatively public arena they are likely to encounter a range of views and performances of fandom.

The relationship with the BBC is complex in these contexts, and the liberal ethos I found, again, in some previous research on *Archers* fans (Thomas 2002, chapter 5) is expressed here through resistance to anything even remotely resembling censorship. At the same time, the posters are sometimes nervous about the boards being closed down, and speculate that the host Keri Davies is trying to warn them about the hidden intentions of some higher authority in the BBC. This does not prevent conflicts ensuing with the host (known, rather affectionately, as 'Mr Keri'¹⁸), when he intervenes to rein in the 'anti-fan' mode:

'This – and similar comments in this thread and elsewhere – is exactly the sort of rubbish passing for criticism that I have been talking about. It demeans the writer and this messageboard and I would like it to stop, please. Please base your comments on what actually happens in the programme'. (Post 31, 12.02.08, Keri Davies).

¹⁸ When I use 'Mr Keri' in this report, I do so in order to distinguish between Keri Davies and his online persona, which like those of the other posters, is constructed.

'Right it's now official. This posting from the host tells us in no uncertain terms that ML as we have known it is dead and buried' (Post 33, 12.02.08, KT, Powerpoint Presentation thread).

The notion that the board is being censored inspires many posts in this 1134 post thread, and the discussion goes on for several weeks. Here, the posters become heroic defenders of freedom of speech, as well as rallying round the individual whose original post (asking whether one of the main characters, David Archer, would be intelligent enough to do a Powerpoint presentation), had caused 'Mr Keri's' alarm. In this we can again see the construction of a community – which is to be defended against the intrusions of its host, the BBC. In reality, this negotiation of the space with the BBC in the form of 'Mr Keri' (who is well known and liked through his attendance at meets and presence on the boards) may add to the attractions of Mustardland, in that there is both a sense of connection with the BBC and the programme-makers, and the pleasure of performing autonomy and a form of cultural dissidence in the face of authority.

However, 'Mr Keri' does not operate as an authoritarian figure. After much speculation on the boards about a line in the synopsis where Emma smashes a jar over another character (Will's) head, and the absence of any corresponding sound effect in the programme itself, he intervenes:

'If you have read the synopsis for last Friday night's episode, you might have found the reference to Emma smashing a jar over Will's head somewhat at odds with what you heard on air.

While it would be tempting to say that it was a silent jar of silent jam made by silent Freda Fry, this is actually what happened:

The script originally called for the jar/head interface, but it was changed in studio to Emma dragging Will away from the choking Ed.

Unfortunately the change didn't find its way into the synopsis. We're getting it changed. Sorry for any confusion' (Post 1, 4.08.08, Keri_Davies, 'The Silent Jar' thread).

Thus, despite the impression one might form that the board is dominated by posters who dislike the programme, and are in conflict with the BBC and its producers, in reality a class habitus shared by producers and fans, and a corresponding ethos of 'liberal' values and ironic humour ensure that communication thrives in this space. We can also, in this way, differentiate between what we have found on the Archers messageboards and Bethany Klein's report on the Radio 1 and 2 boards. The posters here benefit from a direct line to the production team via the boards' host, Keri Davies, and the personal relationship that he offers to them means that the feelings of frustration in terms of communication with the BBC and lack of engagement by the programme-makers which Klein reports on are not generally in play here. Whilst the posters may be critical of the programme, or even of Mr Keri's interventions on the boards, they clearly do feel a strong sense of connection with both. Furthermore, confusion about what the boards are for (communication with the BBC or with each other) is not a feature here, and one could argue that the two aspects co-exist successfully. The posters are strongly engaged with each other, and clearly derive great pleasure from their online community; in this sense, they are autonomous. At the same time, the fact that this is a BBC board and that Mr Keri occasionally intervenes provides a generally valued and respected framework and springboard for their creativity.

The 'Archers Addicts' Board

The 'Archers Addicts' are the programme's official BBC fan club, which was established in 1990 and is run by a member of the cast, Hedli Niklaus. After many years of organising fan conventions, Archers events and even cruises, the fan club went online in 1995. The Club still circulates a newsletter – 'The Village Voice' to members and occasionally organises events. Currently the fan club numbers 5000 members and a small and intimate group of about 20 'addicts' regularly discuss the programme on the Archers Addicts messageboard.

The messageboard posters clearly know each other well, and the tone is intimate, warm and friendly, with exchanges of personal information as well as discussion of the programme. The posters move between discussion of the characters in 'as if they were real' mode, references to their own personal experience and eulogies of the programme:

'Great to see the Archers having a storyline showing how much of a strain growing up can be for teenager and parents. My heart went out to Ruth having to almost let her little girl go as she went out to meet the mystery boyfriend at the gate' (...) (post 1, 18.02.08, daisams, 'Pip growing pains' thread).

'Mrs Thermal and I had three boys and worried enough about them. We didn't have the pleasure of a daughter. So we missed all the dramas of boyfriends. We have two grand-daughters and will watch with interest. Very good episode I thought' (post 2, 18.02.08, thermal).

The Addicts also make critical comments on storylines and characters, but in a more neutral tone than that adopted by some posters on the BBC board. In one instance, there is an interestingly spontaneous feminist response to Lillian Archer consoling herself for her troubles with her partner Matt by going shopping, with several female posters finding this implausible:

'This doesn't ring true to me either. I don't believe that Lillian needs a new bag. Why? What on earth for? I'm sure she's plenty of them. Do women still use bags? I've managed for years without one. Doesn't she wear trousers like the rest of us?' (Post 2, 18.02.08, Denny, 'Lillian's spending spree' thread).

A male poster then interjects 'Isn't this supposed to be a woman's answer to sadness to go on a spending spree?', but two female posters take up Denny's theme:

'How very outdated to 'get back' by spending a man's money. We must have an old-fashioned, unreconstructed SW on this one'. (Post 5, 19.02.08, Ella)

'I must be a strange woman then because I've never understood the concept of "retail therapy". If that's what cheers them up though, fine – I just don't understand why she was using Matt's money. I have to admit I find it an outdated concept to "get back" at a man in this way, but then perhaps it says a lot about Lillian and Jenny's idea of a relationship?' (Post 6, 19.02.08, Brittany Addict).

The question of realism – which is ubiquitous in talk about media texts (Thomas 2002, Buckingham 1987) – is the main issue here, and in many other threads on this board. The discussion of how realistic a character's response is allows the posters to reveal something of their own beliefs, in this case on the subject of gender. As in previous research on *The Archers* we find feminism associated with modernity, and considered to be almost a 'given' in the contemporary conjuncture. In previous research with fan club members female respondents commented on the strong women characters of the soap opera (Thomas 2002). It is interesting that these online fan club members, ten years later, find these women characters rather old-fashioned in their devotion to their 'behaving badly' male partners.

There is, also, an awareness of the constructed nature of the realism being discussed (in the reference to the scriptwriter, or SW), and language such as 'unreconstructed' and 'concept' indicates that on this board too, a middle-class, educated habitus is on display. However, here this is combined with a version of 'common-sense' knowledge of human relationships (seen in the quotations above from the Pip's growing pains thread) which relies less on educated cultural capital, and more on a feminine ethos shared mainly by female but also to some extent by male contributors. As a result, the expression of emotion involves less struggle here than on the BBC DTA board, and exchange of personal information is welcomed: 'My eldest lad has just told me I'm about to be a granddad for the first time. Boy or girl if I've anything to do with it we will have a poster here to carry on the good work. Now back to the snooker, beer and crisps' (plumber, 4.05.07). This post receives five congratulatory and humourous replies, to which 'plumber' then responds: 'thanks for the congrats chums'. The warmth of this interchange among posters who clearly know each other well is striking, and 'plumber' basks in it, while simultaneously reaffirming his masculinity through recourse to 'snooker, beer and crisps'. The Addicts board offers an unusually supportive space where posters are able both to praise and criticise the programme and to speculate on storylines and characters whilst offering each other high levels of affirmation: 'I love your idea Vicky. I think that would work beautifully for Lilian' (Denny, 12.01.08).

The 'Mumsnet' Archers Threads

As might be expected, since many of the posters are at home looking after small children or combining childcare with paid work, the Mumsnet threads about *The Archers* are particularly characterised by the programme's association with domesticity, noted above and in previous research. Discussions of listening while cooking, doing other domestic chores or childcare are peppered with Mumsnet specific, mildly ironic references to the family context – DH (darling husband), DD (darling daughter) and DS (darling son):

'I just got dragged in much to DH's disgust because it was on radio at the time I would be cooking. And now I'm addicted and have the synopsis emailed to me when I can't listen live' (Othersideofthe channel, 29.08.07, CultureVultures: The Archers).

'Oh dear..am 22, 23 in two weeks. The radio in the kitchen is the only thing that goes loud enough to hear over DSs shouts while he is eating. Very bad I know but I have to have background noise on if it's just me and ds I go mad' (Anoush, 31.05.07, 'Admit it..someone else must listen to The Archers' thread).

'Hi Anoush I'm a fan too but wouldn't say addicted! Certain storylines are better than others, I think, very moving at the mo with Siobhan etc...Find it very relaxing of a Sunday

morning, doing the ironing and listening to the omnibus (my kids think it's the pits but then I loathe Eastenders!) (happystory, 31.05.07, 'Admit it..someone else must listen to The Archers' thread)

However powerful the image of the radio in the kitchen may be for these and other Archers fans, it is often far from the reality of how people listen, and the Mumsnet posters are no exception, greeting new modes of availability of the programme with enthusiasm, and again emphasising how it is enmeshed in the domestic and everyday routine:

'REALLY????? Archers as a podcast???? I am SO excited (...)' (seeker, 12.10.07, 'Culture Vultures: The Archers' thread)

'I had lost touch with The Archers for years because of general domestic chaos at Archers time. But now I will be able to follow it while out with dog. Glee' (ThreadyKrueger, 12.10.07, 'Culture Vultures: The Archers' thread).

This enthusiasm over technical developments is accompanied by the pleasure of discovering other Archers fans online and of 'coming out' as a fan: 'Also glee that people post about The Archers on mnet. I had toyed with the idea but lacked nerve because of fear of ridicule'. This comment and the title of the 'Admit it' thread quoted above are indicators of the continuing low status of soap opera fandom generally, and of the perhaps slightly 'uncool' image of *The Archers* for these young women. Like older Archers fans in other spaces, the Mumsnet posters employ self-directed irony to show that though they may be fans, they are not mindless fans. The term 'sad' is frequently used in this way: 'Just reviving this thread to let everyone know that you can now PODCAST The Archers – how exciting is that?!? Or how sad am I for being excited (wink)' (emsiewill, 12.10.07); 'I was thrilled out of proportion when I read this on the BBC. Very sad woman' (lilibet, 12.10.07, , CV: The Archers). This need to distance oneself from being a fan in any straightforward way may contribute to the creation of a thread on the most boring characters, which demonstrates that the critical aspect of Archers fandom is far from being confined to the BBC boards: 'Pip is shaping up to be really annoying and dull – another eco-warrior' (snice, 8.01.08). However, several characters receive more positive reviews, even in this thread: 'I LOVE the racy Lilian' (orangina, 08.01.08); 'I lurve Brian (and Charles Collingwood's not bad either)' (WendyWeber, 09.01.08), and one poster undermines the 'boring' theme by emphasising the 'comforting' aspects of *The Archers*, already noted in this research: 'Actually they are all dull but that's what I like about it. It is quite soothing to hear ruth and david mithering on about badgers on a Sunday morning. I hate it when it gets all sensational' (The GoatofBitterness, 08.01.08).

The main content of the threads, however, is speculation about dramatic storylines, such as Siobhàn's death, Betty Tucker's death or the rape of Kathy Perks. Interestingly the storylines highlighted all foreground women characters and the themes of sexuality, marriage and love. Like the Addicts' board, a predominantly feminine culture is developed on Mumsnet, but a younger demographic (indicated by the use of more internet and texting features such as capital letters, exclamation and question marks, smileys and so on) and the fact that the participants here are all women lead to different concerns. A mirroring game with younger women characters who are also mothers is a feature specific to Mumsnet: 'For years Siobhan's storylines have mirrored my RL' (yeahinaminute, 31.05.07); 'Oh dear yeahinaminute, sorry to hear that but well done for avoiding Brian. ds was born a week after emma had george but fortunately we don't have brotherly paternity issues' (fishie, 31.05.07). For Mumsnet posters, Archers fandom is one of

many areas of discussion and is linked to the complex cultural negotiation of the demands made on modern mothers. Humour about the programme or one's own fandom is part of a generally ironic self-presentation, as exemplified by screen names such as: yeahinaminute, Elasticwoman, QueenofBleach, flyingmum, coffeecrazed Mama. Here, *The Archers* appears as a relaxing interlude and distraction from the pressures of domestic life.

The Facebook Archers Appreciation Group

This Facebook group, like Mumnsnet, is considerably younger than the BBC Messageboard and Archers Addicts posters. There are some older posters (some of whom also post a University affiliation), but a 20s / 30s atmosphere dominates. While the majority of regular posters are women, there is a substantial number of men; analysis of a sample of three threads suggested that the ratio is approximately 60% women to 40% men. A thread where posters imagine an 'Archers Appreciation Fancy Dress get together' was particularly revelatory in terms of age and class cultures and the playful performance of identity in the group. Two female posters debated the nuances of young women's fashion styles:

*Melanie*¹⁹: 'I would love to be Fallon. Push up bra, short skirt, tons of eyeliner and permanently plugged into my ipod. Pretty much like normal then' (F, 6.12.07, 3.14pm).

Roisin: That's interesting cos I always imagine Fallon to be a girl-next-doorsy and the type who wouldn't have the confidence to wear a push-up bra and mini skirt. She seems a bit meek, almost unaware of how attractive she is. I'll come as Emma and we can scrap – full on Jerry Springer style (F, 7.12.07, 3.13am).

Melanie: She'd add biker boots to the outfit, I think. Maybe not the push up bra, actually, maybe just a hoodie, with a short skirt and biker boots. The right side of cute and funky. We'll need an Ed to fight over!! What would Emma wear? Elizabeth Duke? :) xxx (F, 7.12.07, 4.23am).

Roisin: Gosh – Primark's finest with a bit of H&M cos it's a special occasion. Probably not that slutty but bright and loads of jewellery including huge hooped or heart shaped earring – I hate those! ...

(...)

I've decided Annie should be Lilian sans cigarette. She's good looking, young at heart, bit of a wild streak and a glamorous style so us girlies will have to think again.

I really should have been a dictator (F, 7.12.07, 5.31am)

The youth of the protagonists – 'us girlies' - is clear from this exchange, and various other indications. They make a distinction between a style they might aspire too – 'the right side of cute and funky' and a working-class style which they describe as verging on 'slutty' and involving cheap clothes and jewellery. They associate the positive pole of these style distinctions and themselves with Fallon, a popular young female character (about whom we found no negative posts in all of the samples we looked at across the sites). Fallon combines 'love interest' through her (failed) relationship with Ed, with a burgeoning career as a singer. Her rival Emma is a single mother who works as a cleaner and in a café; in relation to Emma, on the contrary, there is a great deal of ridicule on and across the boards, beginning with her nickname

¹⁹ Posters' names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

here, Emmur. Although Roisin volunteers to come to the ‘party’ as Emma, it is clear that both girls are attributing a negative female working-class identity (single mother, hooped earrings) to the character and distancing themselves from that. Whilst Fallon cannot be described as middle-class (her mother is an amateur country and western singer renowned for her *décolleté*), she is on an upward trajectory in class terms, in that she is pursuing her education and a career in music. She is more attractive to these two well educated young women on Facebook, who are applying seminar skills (‘That’s interesting cos ...’) to debate the nuances of style, and through this play, affirming their own class positions. The extent to which the younger characters in *The Archers* have succeeded in interesting these younger listeners (and this extract is in that sense typical of the discussions of this group) is a significant success for the programme. The online discussion intensifies the pleasure of these storylines and permits a playful but nonetheless socially constructed expression of class and gender identity.

Another significant feature here is the supportive and friendly nature of the exchange, indicated by the ‘xxx’ ending of Roisin’s second message, and her offer to be Emma, which seems in part motivated by a desire to ‘play with’ her friend Melanie – ‘we’ll need an Ed to fight over’. An older female poster is also in absentia included in the play, as the two younger women recognise her claim on one of the ‘cooler’ older women characters, Lilian, the wealthy wild child of the Archers family. In this way, the posters show this group to be an inclusive one in terms of age. A certain fascination with older versions of femininity is expressed in another post in this thread:

Sally: I would go as either Peggy or Jill in order to indulge my frumpy tweed aspirations. Old ladies are so much fun to dress up as. (...)

Jill – polyester trousers, a jolly patterned sweater with the sleeves rolled up, and a gilet worn over it. On my feet would be those comfy, wide, shoes made by Clarks many moons ago. My hair would be white (of course) and worn a bit shorter than Peggy’s, but still waved. I would probably wear a hair clip on one side to keep it out of my eyes. I would be wearing a home made badge that Ben made at school last year saying ‘world’s best gran’.

This post, like its predecessor, demonstrates an ability to make very precise cultural and social distinctions on the basis of clothes and appearance, and could be read as a contemporary, feminine and lay version of the reading of social hierarchies through taste in food, art and music that Bourdieu carried out in France in the 1960s (Bourdieu 1984). This poster’s very precise placing of Jill and Peggy in cultural and social terms is affectionate in tone, with just a hint of identification: ‘my frumpy tweed aspirations’. The post (and others we have analysed) suggests that the older characters are important and far from unsympathetic to these younger listeners.

The post also illustrates the quite extraordinary levels of detail in listeners’ visualisations of characters, and how messageboards provide a space in which these visualisations can be developed, shared and compared. In this sense, the messageboards add a new, shared dimension to the pleasures of the imagination which a radio programme, unlike visual media, can provide (see Thomas 2002). Comparing imagined versions of characters or scenes permits multiple interpretations, in contrast to the threatening closure of photographs of actors (which in the case of *The Archers*, listeners frequently refuse to look at). In this way, the messageboard extends the openness and polysemy of radio, by providing a space where new meanings and stories can be generated by listeners, and where the imaginative work of listening can in some measure, be shared and captured:

‘I like the characters and I can relate to them all. And I think because it’s actually on radio you can use your imagination more and you can actually imagine what the characters look

like. And it becomes a bit of a disappointment when you actually see the actors that play them because they are not how you imagine them from listening to their voices. But because it is on the radio you have to use your imagination. Not only to imagine what they look like, but they become like friends.' (F, 30-39, full-time mother, former office worker, I)

Summary and Conclusions

The research confirmed that the BBC *Archers* website is used by large numbers of listeners and is very successful. The fact that over 200 people replied to our request for interviewees (posted on the 'backstage' section of the site) in just 2 days is a measure of commitment to the site and the programme. Our sample – who can be characterised as online fans of the programme – is predominantly female (76%), white British (81%) and aged 40-59 (62%). The level of education is very high indeed with 74% having been through Higher Education. These tendencies – particularly in terms of gender and education – are present in the broader *Archers* audience, but they are more marked among online listeners. *The Archers* is unique among British soap operas in attracting this demographic, and the website has clearly reinforced this effect – providing a space for keen listeners to keep up with the programme and exchange views with others. Catching up with the programme via Listen Again, podcasts or synopses is the most popular use of the site. The weekly vote is also popular, and for some, the website provides a visual accompaniment to the programme. Most respondents are happy with the website as it is, though a small group with strong web orientations thought it could be updated. It's possible that a redesign and a new 'look' would attract more of the younger listeners, or cause them to linger longer on the site.

Only a third of our respondents said they used the BBC *Archers* messageboards, which nonetheless are the most active of all the *Archers* fan sites we mapped. The second most active board is the Facebook *Archers* Appreciation group, which is growing rapidly and has over 2000 members. New generations of listeners in their 20s and 30s, and some older listeners are discussing the programme on social networking sites such as Facebook and to a lesser extent Mumsnet. With the notable exception of the umra group, most of the independent fan sites are now used by small groups. The official fan club site, the 'Archers Addicts' has a faithful group of around 20 posters.

For some, the BBC messageboards are an important social network, and they can be a lifeline. They can also intensify the pleasures of the programme by providing a 'double dose soap' in the form of the messageboard 'characters' and their exchanges. For some respondents, the 'anti-fan' and ironic fan postures adopted by some posters on the BBC boards are off-putting, and in these cases other spaces, such as the *Archers* Addicts and the Facebook *Archers* Appreciation group are sought out. The clash of different versions of fandom found here is, however, typical of fan cultures generally, and by stimulating discussion, it contributes to the liveliness of the boards. The presence of the BBC host 'Mr Keri' and the sense of connection with the programme and the producers that this provides make the posters feel at home and 'listened to'. This contrasts with Klein's findings in relation to the Radio 1 and 2 messageboards, where feelings of confusion and alienation were reported. Here passionate engagement, however critical, is the order of the day, and a marker and contributor to the programme's and the website's success.

The Archers has a unique relationship with its audience because of its longevity, and the fact that many have been listening since childhood. Words such as 'comforting', 'security', and 'domesticity' are associated with *The Archers*. One of the scriptwriters spoke of a bond with the audience, which consisted

of not allowing anything ‘too terrible’ to happen.²⁰ This research suggests that this is an important aspect of the programme’s success and of the complicity between producers and listeners on which it is based. Both producers and listeners are mainly middle-class, white British, highly educated women, who range from middle-aged to younger age groups (20s and 30s). The culture of the programme and of many of the online spaces we analysed is one of femininity, which of course does not prevent a minority of men from participating. However, for the mainly female fans, narrative trajectories emphasising the capacity to repair relationships and the role of community in supporting vulnerable individuals are likely to be pleasurable. These qualities of commitment to relational work are also found in some of the online spaces, alongside, particularly in the case of the BBC boards, a middle-class highly educated habitus which values critique. The ‘anti-fan’ and ironic fan postures adopted by some posters can lead to a strongly critical tone which those involved in the programme’s production may, quite understandably, find undermining at times. However, our research shows that the messageboard posters are a minority, even among online fans, and that these kinds of engagements are typical of fan cultures more broadly, particularly in online spaces. We would recommend that these discussions, like the website as a whole, be seen as a successful adjunct to the programme – a broadening of its cultural wings and a sign of the passionate engagement of some listeners. They also indicate that *The Archers* is part of a changing context where new technologies are blurring the boundaries between cultural producers and consumers. Fan cultures, as the independent development of the Facebook site attests, have their own modalities and conventions, and cannot be predicted or indeed controlled.

²⁰ Mary Cutler - interview with Lyn Thomas, 11 August, 2008.

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Specialist music fans online: implications for public service broadcasting

Tim Wall and Andrew Dubber, Birmingham School of Media, Birmingham City University

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a study into the implications for the BBC of the development of online fan communities around forms of specialist music. The investigation covers original research into the online activities of specialist music fans and the way that key BBC staff conceptualise and respond to changes taking place in the environment in which their listeners operate. We also engage with wider debates around ideas of ‘public service broadcasting’ and ‘specialist music’ and draw on the key concepts and frameworks used in academia to understand radio production and programming, music fan activities, and the transformation of both enabled by online technologies.

Central to this investigation is the proposition that provision to fans of differing forms of specialist music has been one of the central ways in which the BBC has been understood to distinguish itself as a public service broadcaster, but that the way in which this provision should be understood, and how this commitment can be maintained, has been transformed by the challenges of operating within the new media space created by online technologies. The paper reports the findings of the primary research through a wider discussion of ideas of ‘public service media’, ‘specialist music fandom’, and ‘online activity’. By placing these ideas in context of the historical development of the BBC and wider music culture, and then recontextualising them in an examination of the ways that ‘specialist music’ and ‘fandom’ operate in the formation of online communities and cultural practices, we reveal the challenges facing BBC staff in reinterpreting ‘public service’ and ‘broadcasting’ in these new, online, media forms.

The importance of specialist music to the BBC

In recent years, the programming of specialist music on its radio stations has been a key way in which the BBC has been justified, and has justified itself, as a public service broadcaster. For instance, the authors of the government 2006 white paper on the future of the BBC selected Radio 1 as a case study in its discussion of the future of the BBC as a public service broadcaster, and identified the provision of “new and specialist music” as one of the ways in which the popular music station should distinguish itself from commercial radio [1]. The corporation’s response to government policy on the BBC as a public service broadcaster has been primarily enacted through the development of a ‘service remit’ for each part of the BBC. Following through the case study of Radio 1, the station’s service remit clearly aims to distinguish it from other BBC services through its target audience and its broadcast content, and from other broadcasters in large part by the prominence of specialist music. So, according to the corporation’s public communication, Radio 1 is distinguished by its 15-29 year old audience and its “distinctive mix of contemporary music and speech”. Additionally, the same document sets the station’s priorities as the provision of “a mix of daytime programmes with wide appeal and specialist shows in the evening which operate at the forefront of new music”. Specifically, it aims to ensure that “at least 40% of the schedule is devoted to specialist music or speech-based programmes”[2].

For the BBC, specialist music is “music which appeals to specific groups of listeners – focusing on a specific genre of music or on cutting-edge music from a range of genres”[2]. This definition places an emphasis on the ordering of music by its listeners as definable groups, and the link of these social groups

to genre-specific music, or a notion of the music as innovative. Implicit in this definition is a distinction between a majority mainstream, and a series of minority 'taste groups'. This is, of course, made explicit in the BBC's practice, which reproduces this distinction within its broadcast schedule as daytime = wide appeal; evening = specialist (= small audiences). So fundamental is this calculus to public service broadcasting as it relates to music radio that it has been articulated in the statement "ratings by day; reputation by night". This phrase is widely used within the UK radio industry (across both public and commercial sectors) when justifying their practical steps to balance programming aimed to attract sizable audiences with a public service commitment.

Although the justifications for a public service mission, and the broadcast practices which have emerged from this mission, have been quite varied, historically they have most often been rooted in ideas of frequency scarcity, the need for cultural uplift and, more recently, the need to rectify market failure in the provision of public goods. The emergence of new distribution technologies based on the internet, the way that interaction is engineered into them, and the way that communities have been built around them, require a new analysis. As we will show, there have been some profound changes in relation to music broadcasting and the idea of specialist music resulting from this new online media. Specifically, from the perspective of the broadcaster, scarcity has been superseded by ubiquity; 'cultural uplift' by new sorts of relationships; and traditional broadcast models by new structures of political economy.

Both the real changes in distribution and consumption, and the ways that these have changed the forms of debate about the role of public service media, have major implications for a leading broadcaster like the BBC. Discussion about specialist music and public service is certainly only one aspect of the challenge which faces the BBC, and even when discussing music radio the specificities of the debates can only be generalised with great care. Nevertheless, lodged at the centre of this study there are some important changes in music fandom to be understood; some significant issues to be grappled with by policy makers, 'broadcasters' and 'listeners' alike; and, most importantly, some implications to be drawn about the way in which staff who work for an organisation like the BBC can and should relate and respond to music fans.

The research

To make our task manageable we have focused our study in two main ways. Firstly, we have concentrated on a three major strands of specialist music. These are those associated with music of black origin of the last forty years, usually under genre terms like soul, reggae, or urban; with indie rock; and with jazz. Secondly, we have examined music fan practice, and the attitudes and practices of broadcasters associated with programmes on BBC Radio 1, 1Xtra, 2, 3 and 6Music because these specialist musics can be found across the output of these stations, and they offer significantly different identities as broadcast brands, and different policies on online provision. We examined online activity at just over 250 online locations, including 14 BBC web sites, discussion boards, and chat rooms, and undertook interviews with 12 members of BBC staff.

Through our research we have identified a range of online fan activity which could be more fully utilised by BBC staff to continue and deepen their public service commitment to a range of specialist popular musics. We have also been able to identify a number of ways in which this activity can be understood in terms of the BBC tradition of specialist music broadcasting, now extended to embrace new online technologies. Our work with BBC staff reveals that there are a significant number of people within the BBC operational teams who have started on this journey, but that different individuals are going at different speeds towards its realisation. In analysing the working concepts and professional practices of

BBC staff, we have identified two orientations which are commonly deployed both to understand how they should relate to a range of specialist musics and how they should utilise online resources. To emphasise the differences in these orientations we have called one a *broadcast* orientation and the other an *online interactive* orientation. As we will show, we believe that it would be a mistake to simply replace a broadcasting orientation with an online interactive orientation. Instead, we think that staff may find it useful to discuss and start rethinking the scope of the public service purpose of the BBC.

The organisation of the paper

The substance of the paper reports in three sections on the key areas of our research, followed by a recommendations section. In the first report section, building on scholarship in the field, we examine what exactly is meant by specialist music, and the role that it has taken within public service broadcasting. Second, utilising our primary research with staff within the BBC, we present an analysis of how BBC staff responsible for specialist music understand the opportunities provided by new online media. Thirdly, from our research into the way people engage with the internet, we map out the online fan practices around specialist forms of popular music that go beyond their activities as radio listeners. The recommendation section offers suggestions to BBC staff that we hope will promote discussion, give support to staff who are already thinking in creative ways about the challenges, and set these within a informed understanding of the opportunities and constraints on BBC staff as they grapple with these changes.

Specialist music and public service broadcasting

The idea of specialist music is widely used, and generally taken for granted. However, some clarity about how the idea developed, and an appreciation of its central place in the development of the idea of public service broadcasting, are essential first steps in thinking through the challenges for the BBC in providing for such specialist interests.

Specialist music as an alternative; and as a market

Primarily, the idea of specialist music is constructed through what it is not: mainstream popular music. As we will see, it developed out of a binary opposition between ideas of seriousness, commitment, and focused listening and ideas of triviality, transience and secondary consumption. The fact that this is an idea created through contrast should also alert us to the fact that specialist music is not simply musicologically different from mainstream music. Rather, we should see it as a cultural space created through the interaction of certain music fans, with the practices of sections of the music industry, and with the music and music-making itself. The particular usage was most likely developed in the record industry and radio to signal music that relates to particular groups of music consumers, and takes its designation from the idea of a specialist interest. Of course, record companies organise their activities around a general music divisions and other specialist divisions for smaller music markets, and radio stations use the idea to organise their programme schedules or formats around general and niche provision [3]. However, these activities, and the term specialist music itself, were (and remain) responses to the organisation of popular music fans. In turn, these fan activities have been the focus for the organisation of music-making and music itself. The creators of music are often drawn to work in distinct styles even though (and sometimes, because) they only have small, specialised musical communities [4].

Each of these elements operates in appreciably different ways. Record company and radio professionals distinguish between general consumers of popular music (where they make most money) and smaller, but often dedicated and more stable, niche consumer groups (which require specialist knowledge, but often provide consistent revenue) [5]. Music fans are unlikely to see themselves as “specialist music fans”, but fans of a named specialist music. Their fandom is exercised through the command of specialist forms of knowledge, and activities of collecting and sharing which define the boundaries of a community or scene. The music is usually understood to be purer, or more demanding, than mainstream popular music [6]. Musicians will be self-consciously associated with the music, and will see the fans as their audience, and the record industry and radio professionals as essential elements in providing a living. Senses of authenticity, notions of art, and/or communal practice are common [7]. Because popular music is profoundly dependent upon recorded music there are instances where there is no overlap between audience and music-makers. On the 1970s UK Northern Soul scene, for instance, fans selectively took recorded music from 1960s African American culture and remade it as part of a distinctively British set of cultural practices [8].

Jazz, indie rock, and urban as specialist music

Jazz, indie rock, and soul/reggae/urban are all historically significant forms of specialist music and they constitute important contemporary areas for specialist music broadcasting. A swift engagement with their

histories reveals something of the distinct roles of music fans, music-making and the music industry (including radio) within their formation.

Jazz was perhaps the first specialist music in the sense we mean it today, and the fans of the late 1920s valued the 'hot' musical features associated with black American culture. Jazz fans constructed themselves as aficionados and member of a cognoscenti [9]. They heard the music as the product of organic communities and the music-maker as an artist even though the music was made by professional music-makers in mainstream, commercial situations. When Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington visited Britain in the 1930s they were presented as part of variety performances much to the consternation of their fans who could not countenance such an association [10]. During the 1940s in the networks of small clubs and independent record companies musicians started to think of themselves as artists, and emphasised improvisation and instrumental mastery as defining qualities of their progressive agendas. Many jazz fans tried to recreate jazz as a pre-industrial folk form (Trad Jazz), but the association of post Be Bop jazz with modernity amongst a wealthy audience sustained a sizable industry of venues, record companies, and publication through to the late 1970s [11].

Both soul and reggae were given meaning within an African American culture. They both developed out of the earlier urban rhythm and blues industry which, in the 1950s, exemplified specialist music and independent record production [12]. While this earlier music became more sophisticated as part of the late-1950s bi-racial pop in the US, both soul and reggae musicians self-consciously combined elements of blues and gospel as signs of a powerful black identity, mixed using the technology of the recording studio [13]. This assertion of a strong identity seemed to have great cultural resonance for wider groups of mainly young people, and they became central parts of specialist music youth cultures in Europe, Asia and Africa. For some fans outside the country of origin this music became part of sub-cultural styles which articulated feelings of alienation from mass culture, continuing the practices connected to jazz: the acquisition of specialist knowledge, collecting records, building scenes around music and dancing, and the adoption of a posture of conscious marginalisation [14]. For others it offered the familiarity of traditional pop forms with a strong emotional power, and record companies attempted to cross-over the success of a record in the specialist black market to the larger and more profitable pop market [15].

In the US, radio was central in allowing white youngsters in the 1950s to hear the music of cultures which, in a segregated society, were geographically inaccessible; and radio even re-named the music rock and roll [16]. In the late 1960s, the civil rights movement was culturally articulated in the soul radio and soul music which were indivisible parts of black urban culture [17]. By the 1970s the popularity of black music stations amongst a proportion of white listeners (especially as discos became the centre of night time city entertainment, led formatters to re-brand black stations as 'Urban'. The associated music of black origin was from that point increasingly named after the format [18]. In Britain, reggae and soul became a key way through which the sons and daughters of Caribbean migrants constructed an identity as black Britons, served by unlicensed radio stations in most major cities [19].

Finally, rock music can be first discerned as a conscious effort to mark a difference with mainstream pop music in the late 1960s. Primarily a fan culture created amongst post-war middle classes, and built on the initial pursuit of authenticity in an earlier generation of urban American blues, rock culture was initially another example of the re-contextualisation of someone else's music for cultural reasons outside the intentions of the original producers [20]. As the idea of the master instrumentalist became more prominent and self-composition replaced covers of venerated blues records, a new form of 'progressive' music emerged. Drawing on repertoires of art, the art work and the artist from western bourgeois culture, the musicians explored new recording and reproduction technology, including multi-track tape and the long playing record, to build a music culture which co-existed with that of mainstream 'tin pan alley' entertainment [21]. Looking back over forty years of the rock tradition, it is apparent how important the

regeneration of the music is amongst fans, where tendencies for increasing sophistication are in tension with the desire to keep the emotional power and energy of the black music forms on which rock was based: punk in the late 1970s, indie or alternative music from the 1980s onwards [22]. Embedded in the very terminology of indie and alternative rock is the conceptual distinction from mainstream pop and rock forms which is so important to its fans and many of its music-makers.

From the 1990s scholars have increasingly talked about a post-modern hybridity of music-making across the fields of specialist music, and the ironic use of mainstream pop. European dance music has certainly taken equal parts from the traditions of jazz, soul/reggae and rock, bands perform in hybrid styles, and club nights play music across the board. However, hybridity is most apparent in the massive increase in sub-genres, and in the ever increasing range of scenes [23].

For all that fans of jazz, soul/reggae/urban music and rock (and their hybrids) think of themselves as distinctive, each is built around an economic and cultural infrastructure in which both music-makers and fans can operate. This infrastructure includes record companies, shops, live and record-based venues, publishing and radio stations. In their different ways radio in both the US and UK has made a significant contribution to forming and sustaining both the idea of specialist music, and the fan and music-making cultures associated with specific specialist musics [24].

Specialist music within public service broadcasting

In our introduction, we highlighted statements made in current BBC documents about the importance of specialist music within the corporation's public service mission. Such assertions are not new, and they can be found at all points in the history of the BBC. In particular, the treatment of music within the organisation of the BBC, and in its broadcast output, has been a key way in which the corporation has defined what public service broadcasting meant. That is not to say that attitudes to specialist music, and the way it is understood to serve the public, has been consistent. It has changed over time and, in single moments, there have been a variety of views.

As we will show when we outline our findings on music fan online activity, there has been a significant change in the way such fans relate to music. Equally, our account of the views and practices of BBC staff reveal that differences of emphasis prevail today. A historical analysis suggests that moments such as these are pivotal in setting the agenda for the next two decades of the corporation's activities. Just as BBC professionals previously needed to renew their sense of specialist music fandom, so there are now indications that an extended period of reflection on, and experimentation with, the link between the BBC's production practices, its output, and fan activity would reap rewards for a sustainable idea of public service. This can be illuminated by a few points about the history of music within the BBC.

So important is the role of music within the development of the BBC that it is possible to write the corporation's history by chronicling the different policy positions on the broadcast of music. At the risk of over simplifying a set of sophisticated debates within the corporation, music culture, and broadcasting policy, it is possible to identify four broad historical periods, each of which contained distinctive policies, practices and competing positions around music and the public service ideal. From the birth of the corporation until the reorganisation of its radio broadcasting services in the late 1940s, the core policy was to sustain the BBC's role as a national broadcaster in order to achieve a cultural project. This project was defined by normative notions of universality, quality, and 'cultural uplift'. In the words of the BBC's first Director General, John Reith, the purpose of the corporation was "making the nation as one man"[25]. The establishment of separate Home, Light and Third programmes from 1945 onwards

represented a major shift away from the Reithian ideal of national cultural homogeneity, and towards separate targeted services for different sorts of broadcasting (possibly even different types of people) within an overall monopoly as the nation's broadcaster. In these first two periods, music was organised, and made meaningful for the corporation's staff, within the structures of the different broadcast services, but in the mid-1960s music took a central role in defining the differences between services. Although music radio had been a staple of North American radio broadcasting since the 1950s, the commitment to mixed programming in the BBC delayed this innovation within the UK until 1967, when Radio 1 and 2 were created out of the Light programme. Here age became a defining category used to delineate different types of audiences, which were perceived to have different cultural needs.

The BBC's treatment of specialist music 1927 to 1967

Throughout these changes, though, there was a consistent division between what today we might call specialist and mainstream music. More importantly, this distinction was in part the basis of the way that the BBC was organised, as well as the way that music was presented on air. In the early corporation, music was created in two organisational divisions – a Music Department (for serious music) and a Variety Department (for popular music as entertainment) – but then broadcast as part of mixed programming of the National and regional services [26]. This determined the meaning of BBC music as: serious music for a discerning minority of aficionados heard in the main part of the evening; undemanding music as a relaxing distraction from a turbulent world broadcast after that; and a breadth of music as part of an educative process.

Overall, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the BBC output constructed music as a form that was for listening to (preferably with discrimination), rather than for dancing to, or participating in as a musician. Alternative music cultures, like folk music, were left to the regional services in documentary-style programming, and significant musical movements like community singing or accordion playing were ignored [5]. By the late 1940s, the distinction was even more ingrained into separate 'stations'. Most noteworthy in this discussion was the formation of the Light Programme as part of the tripartite, post-war re-organisation of broadcasting [27]. Its output reflected the commitment of staff in the Variety Department to fashion a 'mainstream' form of relaxing popular entertainment that was 'domestic' in the sense that it would be welcome in people's homes, and in the sense that it could be understood as British [28].

Although continuing the distinction between specialist and mainstream music, the establishment of the Light Programme represented a move from the idea of public broadcasting through universality of service to a commitment to providing for diversity. This idea was further developed when the Light programme was subdivided to create a youth-orientated Radio One in 1967 [5]. Of course, the changes paralleled the increased complexity of music within the domain of popular music, where an increasing number of genres were known and enjoyed as specialist music forms. The Light Programme extended the idea of the specialist music programming by featuring jazz and other musical forms presented by individuals well-known within the musical communities which supported the music. Humphrey Lyttleton's BBC Jazz Club is a good example, and reflects the form of broadcasting of specialist jazz and folk music in North American University and Public Radio stations at the time [29] and the regional service practice of presenting jazz as a recital for 'the connoisseur' [5]. To some extent, defining jazz as specialist music resolved an earlier institutional problem that BBC staff had with the genre, as it did not fit comfortably into the serious/light distinction. Although in the 1930s the corporation supported the popularity of 'dance music', and significant work was put into developing British 'light' forms, this also led to the marginalisation of the 'hot' forms associated with black American musicians.

The BBC's treatment of specialist music 1967 to 2007

It is common to present the establishment in 1967 of Radio 1 and Radio 2 out of the Light programme as a significant change at the BBC. However, Radio 1 was far more an extension of Light Entertainment values than a recreation of American music radio, which dominated radio in the USA from the mid-1950s [16]. More significant was the way in which the idea of jazz as a specialist music was extended to rock music in the evening and weekend programmes. In the early 1970s, the programming was packaged as Sounds of the Seventies and associated with the earlier idea of classical art music: higher quality FM transmission, significant independence in production, and presentations styles somewhere between earlier BBC deference and then-contemporary US FM radio. The same division can be found in the commercial stations which started in 1973, where evening strands covering rock, folk, soul and reggae programming were common. It was popular in both the BBC and commercial stations to talk about 'ratings by day; reputation by night' [5].

There was little change in the structure and practice of Britain's licensed music broadcasting for two decades, even though the number of broadcasters increased significantly. Accordingly, the way that specialist popular music was seen as part of a public service mission did not change significantly. It was certainly the case that the BBC's specialist music provision was presented as a defence for the continuation of Radio 1 when the station came under somewhat relentless criticism from politicians, who wanted to reduce or remove the licence fee that paid for the BBC, and commercial company owners, who felt that the BBC had an unfair advantage, particularly as a national broadcaster. At the same time, the responsibility of commercial radio stations to meet public service commitments to specialist musics and their audiences were relaxed or removed, and instead stations catering for distinct, often ethnic minority, audiences were licensed [30]. The main areas of innovation during this period were probably amongst unlicensed broadcasters whose output offered far greater variety of specialist music forms. Both BBC and commercial broadcasters now tended to understand specialist music through the notion of genres and specific music scenes. Shows were almost always programmed by specialist DJs, who were known as taste makers outside their broadcast role, most often as clubs DJs or journalists.

By the mid 1990s the commercial regulator was focused on trying to reduce unlicensed broadcasters by licensing more commercial stations that offered services for specific niche tastes, or minority communities. The regulators (first the Radio Authority, and then Ofcom) saw this policy as a way of rectifying the market failures of ever increasing competition amongst local broadcasters. However, in the era of lighter regulation there is evidence that stations did not always meet the commitments to the music and audiences they had made in their license bids [18].

In this context of greater competition, BBC management undertook a major re-organisation of both structure and broadcast practices. These can be summarised for specialist music output of the BBC as: a reformatting of Radio 1 with a major role for new and specialist music, particularly strongly linked to indie and dance music cultures; the establishment of Radio 1Xtra and 6Music with strong specialist music commitments; and a greater diversity of specialist 'distinctive' music programmes on Radio 2 and Radio 3. Latterly this was extended into a wide range of online provision.

Understanding specialist music fandom online

In researching this area we undertook an extensive survey of the sorts of online activities undertaken by fans of indie rock, jazz and urban music. We have interpreted these activities by using some of the academic work on online communities and on fandom, and by thinking through the role of BBC specialist music radio programming and online services within these activities. We were particularly mindful to develop concrete suggestions for utilising insights into online culture for the BBC's aim of making public service provision for specialist music beyond the radio programmes currently offered.

We sum up our findings as: communities participate in an online environment in distinctive cultural ways. This statement seeks to extend an appreciation of online activity beyond the concept of an individual sitting at a computer doing something with online technologies. That is to say, we found that the online activities were communal rather than individual; set within a virtual environment rather than determined in any simple way by technologies; and involved cultural activities which were developments of, but distinct from off line fan activity. It is necessary, therefore, to place contemporary radio broadcasting in a wider context than seeing the internet as a new channel through which radio can be broadcast, or a new medium to promote those broadcasts.

The most significant finding of this area of research is that the BBC's specialist music radio output plays very little part in the online activities of specialist music fans. We found very few references to the BBC output online, and almost all of these were in dedicated BBC message boards. Secondly, the BBC's own online material did not appear prominently within the wider online activities. Of course this could be because online fans tend to use BBC sites as a distinct and separate part of their online activities. However, both these observations, and our longer analysis of online activity suggest that there are a wide range of ways that staff at the BBC could further exploit the online infrastructure, communities and activities to develop the corporation's public service remit.

In structuring an account of our findings, then, we concentrate on the idea of an online environment, on the nature of online fan communities, and finally on the distinctive cultural activities associated with these communities.

Online environments for specialist music fandom

Following Marshall McLuhan we can understand communication media like radio, music and the internet as cultural environments, in which any environmental changes shift the operations of producers and consumers, altering the ratio of possibilities within which participants can engage [31]. Thinking along these lines, we should understand online audio streaming as reshaping (rather than replicating or replacing) traditional radio broadcasting. Any study of online fandom, therefore, must explore the audience/fan relationship to the whole environment, not just to a single technology, broadcast or internet.

The array of internet and web technologies used by specialist music fans to explore and consolidate their enthusiasms will be familiar to anyone with any experience with music online. These technologies are deployed for specialist music content in exactly the same way that they are for more mainstream music, and specialist music fans almost always use existing technologies and applications, rather than establish their own. We will not find the distinctive characteristics of online fandom in the technologies or applications, but in the way that they are organised, and in the purposes for which they are used. The most prominent technologies and applications in our survey were blogs, discussion boards and fora,

dedicated web site pages, online radio stations and other forms of streamed and downloaded audio and video services, including Last FM, YouTube and My Space.

Each of these technologies forms part of an infrastructure created by the particular activities of music fans. So, for instance, while some of the technologies are used to provide access to professionally-produced content, others provide space for fan contributions. For specialist music, the quantity of fan-established locales is many times greater than professional providers, but the latter tend to attract more visits, probably because of their strong brand identities, often associated with off-line activity in publishing and broadcast media. The professional providers are therefore most often associated with commercial exploitation of the web or other internet technologies. However, it would be mistaken to see the space available for fan activity to be non-commercial space because commercial providers tend to utilise content from unpaid contributors as a way to lower costs and encourage participation.

While there are certainly examples of niche provision – especially in web sites that are aimed at visitors interested in specific forms of specialist music – in most cases content utilised by specialist music fans is made available through generalist platforms. The more niche provision tends to be organised by commercial companies and is more likely to use professional editorial staff, while material uploaded by fans is more likely to be found through highly branded applications most often associated with ideas of Web 2.0. For instance video material of specialist music performances can be accessed through the same technologies that offer more mainstream content, for instance YouTube.

Central to the internet's infrastructure is the interactive nature of the activities which it allows and enables. Although radio has always enabled a response from its listeners in the forms of letters and phone calls making comments or requests, internet technologies allow a far wider range of interactions, between professional content providers and their recipients, between fans themselves and, most importantly, by structuring interaction into the media texts themselves. This latter quality is apparent from as simple an application as the discussion board, when the content itself is the interaction of the participants, to the more complex engaged communities of blogs. As fan culture in general, and specialist music fandom in particular, is built around activities of sharing and the formation of fan communities, interactivity is key to the way in which fans have utilised the internet.

Specialist-music fan-communities online

The online environment in which specialist music fandom takes place utilises technologies formed into an infrastructure. The environment is particularly amenable to communal activity. Although fandom is often presented as a decidedly individual activity, its key activities are more often social [32]. Although it is possible to understand specialist music fans' use of the internet as very personal search activity through a forest of information sources, the majority of the fan activity we observed can be seen at some level to be social [33]. This communal aspect to fandom online has clear precedent in the offline environment, where the activities of specialist music fans were primarily, if not exclusively social. For instance, the making of mix-tapes for friends and fellow music lovers prefigures the online creation of mixes and playlists; the practice of writing, copying and distributing fanzines provides the prototype for webzines and fan blogs; and, where like-minded music enthusiasts would gather together, sit and talk, online fora and other online social media have arisen to enhance and amplify that impulse [34].

Given that specialist music is accorded such a small amount of time on mainstream media, and makes up such a small part of total record sales, its prominence on the internet is notable. It is common in the academic literature to portray this social online activity as evidence of the basically democratic nature of

both fandom and online activity. We certainly found many examples that could be understood in this way. Perhaps the most obvious were those associated with what has come to be called folksonomy [35]. This is the notion that the tagging of items of digital data by individuals in aggregate creates a categorisation system that enables others to find your contribution. Because both the system of categories, and the order the categories give to information, is the result of many individual actions, rather than a definitive system created by an authority, these locales of folksonomic activity (it has been argued) provide an ad-hoc and participatory method of organising information useful to a community.

For example, users of Last.fm can assign tags to the music they listen to. While many of the tags will be meaningful only to the person who applied them, many of the tags will be shared by a wide range of other users and, in aggregate, they create a folksonomy. This 'cloud' of tags represents a communal semantic map that allows users to explore music. Likewise, video site YouTube allows users to apply tags to individual videos, which are then grouped and can be navigated by topic of interest in a manner that allows for a meaningful system of organic terms, rather than simple genre classifications. Bookmarking website del.icio.us applies this tagging system to websites all over the internet that can be annotated, tagged and stored for ease of reference, and for other members of the service to easily locate and connect with other, similar sites. At the most developed, it has been suggested that such aggregated ideas embody the 'wisdom of crowds' characteristic of Web 2.0 environments [36].

However, the online fan communities we studied were more prominently characterised by the social hierarchies termed powerless elites by John Tulloch [37]. Within music fan communities, file sharing sites, fora, bulletin boards and mp3 blogs, there exists an unofficial and fluid hierarchy of esteem and prestige, ordered around knowledge and around the provision of access to music. Opinion leaders, taste makers, specialist music 'savants' and people possessing expertise concerning specialist music share their knowledge and provide routes to otherwise inaccessible assets of fandom, and in so doing are accorded respect and deference by members of their peer communities. On file sharing peer-to-peer sites such as Kazaa and Limewire, members who have comprehensive catalogues of certain subgenres and scenes of music are known and referred to as reliable sources of introduction to unfamiliar albums and tracks. In discussion groups, people who regularly share expert knowledge are often elevated to the status of moderator, and given positions of responsibility and stewardship within the community. Knowledgeable commentators on mp3 blogs, as well as the bloggers themselves, inhabit status positions within the communities those sites inscribe. On Last.fm, Mog and other music taste-sharing communities, esteem can be measured by the number of 'followers' a user can lay claim to.

To some extent these tastemakers constitute a similar group to the one defined as 'curator-savants' by the authors of a media industry market research report [38]. The term is somewhat unhelpful in analysing music fandom, derived as it is from common ideas of savantism as indicative of individuals with poor social skills and exceptional ability to store and recall significant amounts of information. This value-laden term connects to a wider perception of male attitudes to record collecting as 'nerd' behaviour. However, the Phoenix project's less negative definition of this group as having a self-identity determined by extensive musical knowledge, relates far better to the sorts of public display, 'dandy', activity apparent in record collecting and online forums [39].

If we set aside the terminology of the Phoenix project as the result of their attempt to map commercial markets for products and adverts, their analysis has some analytical value in relation to ideas of online taste-making. The larger 'savant' group is understood to constitute 7% of adults under 45, for whom music is a major preoccupation, and this proportion is broadly similar to the proportion of online music fans we identified in our research who run blogs, moderate message boards, or are given esteem within online debates. A larger group – perhaps broadly similar to the Phoenix project's enthusiasts (21% of adults) – participated in these social media [40].

Online activities

Forms of specialist music are particularly fruitful for the production of self-identities, where the music's discursive separation from the 'mainstream' allows the music fan to distinguish themselves from the everyday of the non-fan. As we have noted, the online activities often develop practices of music consumption which are found offline, and most often these are built around recorded music. Public discussions of the online environment have also concentrated on digitised music, but because the debates have been dominated by the fear of record companies that the way digital files of music are manipulated online undermines the economic foundations of their industry, the detail of this activity is vague. It is not surprising that record companies should understand online consumption of music in the same way that they understand offline consumption: as the acquisition of recorded music.

Our research indicates that online activity is far greater than the story about 'file-sharing as theft' would suggest. We have argued elsewhere that the music industry will have to come to terms with the new artefactual form of music and its distribution on the internet, but here we want to concentrate on the details of online fan-activities around specialist music for radio. Three clusters of activity are particularly relevant: listening, ordering and framing, and repurposing.

If we want to understand online fandom in its own terms, rather than as an adjunct of record buying or radio listening, models in which music fans are seen as individual 'listeners' or 'record buyers' are inadequate. It is particularly easy to translate the idea of secondary listening which is part of the professional framework of radio professionals to listening through online media. Such a perspective is reinforced by the large proportion of radio output, and music distribution, which is made up by the simulcasting of over-the-air radio. However, this ignores the significant way in which listening is integrated into practices of sharing and interacting, and the way these activities fit into the community hierarchies of the social media in which the music is listened to. In addition, it ignores the way in which most online radio takes a far more narrow-cast orientation than that found in over-the-air radio.

Unsurprisingly, online radio tends to organise narrow-cast stations at niches of specialist music, and in pursuit of new business models often uses the interest, knowledge and commitment of tastemakers to produce 'programmes' [41]. Such 'programmes' or 'stations' often replicate the mix-tape culture of earlier forms of music culture, and perhaps the most successful online development of the idea of music radio, Last FM, integrates the idea of sharing personal maps of musical meaning, with the idea of a radio playlist/mix-tape, and automated output.

Listening online, then, is almost always a form of interaction at a number of different levels, and it usually takes place within the context of two further activities around organising music and knowledge. Digital music files, especially in the areas of specialist music, are hardly ever simply downloaded. Firstly, they are increasingly accessed through sites which offer social fora, large amounts of metadata, and the ordering agency of the tastemakers who control them. Secondly, these sites are largely understood to constitute spaces for sharing, for actively linking the music and metadata, and for making sense of the specialist music form. Finally, the music is actively collected and ordered on local computers in such a way that the individual's computer is conceived to be part of a wider plane of music culture activity.

These characteristics can be seen on both Last FM, and the increasingly important phenomenon of file-sharing blogs. In their own way both of these technologies also represent the final area of online fan-activity: repurposing and modularisation. As the blog technologies have developed they have given a particular emphasis to a model of modularisation, where the blog owner can build the content of their blog through a series of widgets. Although many of the modules which are used to build a blog are offered as technologies, provided commercially or through open source development, we can understand other aspects of the blog as modular. While file-sharing is often simply organised as the opportunity to download music files, the links to file downloads are increasingly set within the context of a range of other activities, which include the presentation of information on the music being shared, for which it is expected that the blogger will be thanked, or comments made about the music being shared, including additional information. Some bloggers produce original accounts, often built around placing the music within their own maps of meaning, or evaluating the worth of the music against other available options. More often, though, evaluations originally published in online sources are reused, the artwork for the record release is copied and pasted into the blog, and widgets that allow video of the artists performing part of the music from YouTube or equivalent online sources are included.

Probably the single most used source for this information is All Music Guide, and bloggers tend to offer contextualising remarks on the reviewers comments. There seems to be a preference for more factual information, and bloggers will tend to select the paragraphs which offer this sort of detail, and edit out evaluations. Part of the value to the repurposing blogger is clearly the ease of access, but there also seems to be a sense that sources have different levels of reliability. Although radio specialist programmes would seem to offer similar content, it is interesting to note that excerpts from radio programmes are hardly ever made available, perhaps because they are less easily available in modular form, and not systematically tagged, so they are harder to find. The issue is even more apparent when looking at messageboards, where contributors may use excerpts from, say, the Guardian, but not from broadcast sources. Given the time-bound nature of live-to-air broadcast programming, and the atomic unit of downloadable and on-demand radio content being 'the programme', it is far more difficult to repurpose and refer to radio broadcast content within the course of online discussion in the complex online media environment. As a result of all this, radio is seldom referred to in discussion of online music fandom, and it also seldom provides the appropriate context for this sort of discussion to take place.

BBC staff and specialist music

Existing specialist music output.

At present, the BBC provides a range of services for the specialist music fan. By and large, these are spread across the radio brands, and for the most part cater to fans of broadly popular specialist music forms.

Radio 1's weekday evening output features dance, indie rock, hip hop, electronic, jazz and urban specialist music, and these are divided up into themed programmes. While these programmes are diverse in themselves (both Gilles Peterson and Zane Lowe play a variety of musical subgenres), taken individually they each broadly represent and give voice to a specialist music scene.

On Radio 2, genre-specific programmes are scattered throughout the programming. Soul, folk, blues, and reggae programmes are included, as are feature programmes about and concerts by artists who bridge mainstream and specialist music interests (for example, Paul Weller, REM, Morrissey).

Radio 3 could be described as a specialist music radio station in and of itself, and, as well as traditional classical and romantic period music, features contemporary classical works, jazz, 'world' musics and new music that often defies categorisation, but which could be grouped together as 'art' music.

6Music is another specialist music radio brand that caters primarily to fans of indie rock music, though with more of an emphasis on the music's development over time than simply presenting new recordings. Aimed at an audience of older music fans, the programming prioritises an encyclopaedic knowledge of the music's history and context. Fans are assumed to be knowledgeable, and in return, presenters are required to be.

1Xtra is a digital-only radio brand targeting young black audiences. It specialises in urban specialist music forms like hip hop and R&B, and particularly British dance forms of music such as Garage, Dubstep, and Grime.

In order to support the existing specialist music radio output and online provision mentioned above, the BBC has organised its broadcast practice around the central notion of brands and stations. Put simply, specialist music takes place within programmes on stations, and both the programmes themselves and (more usually) the radio stations are referred to as brands that target specific audience segments.

The interviews and discussions we held with members of both interactive and production teams revealed a very clear understanding of the relationship between BBC radio stations and the notion of brands. On this subject, there is a strong and well-understood corporate position within the BBC. All of the people we met, regardless of what we considered to be their orientation, were able to articulate the 'brand'. On first hearing, the two terms radio station and brand seem almost interchangeable. The significant exception to this, and the aspect that clarifies the relationship between the two, is the way in which radio stations are targeted to specific demographic and psychographic audience profiles at different parts of the broadcast day.

The position of the BBC staff appears to be that they understand specialist music as ordered by the radio station it is on. That is to say that the radio station - in its different incarnations and through its different shows - performs the brand, which is the primary message of the BBC, at least as far as music is concerned.

When we spoke to the work of radio production staff and managers, and to the interactive teams that answer to those brand managers, there was a general understanding that the BBC's online presence was to 'extend the brand' and 'bring audience to the brand'. The internet was used to reach out to new places, and then bring the people found there back to the radio brands. Indeed, this ideology seemed so pervasive that it was possible to surmise that all content put out on the radio or on the internet was intended to serve this function.

In any event, our studies were restricted to specialist music, and it was clear that, in this area, the broadcast text was seen as the primary expression of the brand, and that the online components 'extend and reinforce' this. To that end, radio shows on the BBC and the online interactive elements that support those radio shows are subservient to the over-arching notion of the brand: a broadcast-orientated, one-to-many conception of the relationship between the Corporation and what it considers to be its audiences. These audiences are understood in terms of their allegiance to a brand: Radio 1 listeners, Radio 2 listeners, 6Music listeners and so on. We came to think of this strategy as the 'broadcasting orientation'.

This distinction was important, as we came to notice a difference in the way that online-oriented staff related to the idea of brand extension, and that that understanding related to the way in which they understood the notion of public service with regard to specialist music.

From our observations, radio production staff appeared to focus almost exclusively on the audible output of the programme; that part of the brand that constitutes the broadcast element of the communication. The extent to which the online element of the text is considered is in relation to the ways in which that can inform and contribute to the performance of the radiophonic qualities and attributes of the show. For instance, feedback from SMS and discussion boards is evaluated in terms of whether it should be read on air – in other words, its *presentability* rather than the value of its content.

Online material is used as reference to either feed into or inform the programme. In one specific instance, a title of a track considered for airplay was dropped after a news item was discovered online that highlighted potential sensitivity. A third way in which the broadcast production staff use the interactive media is to 'take the temperature' of the listening audience ("They're loving this track", etc.). However, on the whole interactive media were seen as secondary to, or at best supportive of, a 'primary' text – that of the radio programme.

An example of this support relationship between programme production and interactive teams could be seen in the studio during the creation of Zane Lowe's show. Simply in terms of workflow and production practice, interactive staff provided a role that was in a subordinate power relationship with that of broadcast staff. For instance, the role of one member of the interactive team was to verify the playlist and type the name of the songs being played as they were broadcast into the show's official website. Another team member's role was to monitor, moderate and engage the IRC channel where the live chat was being conducted. Printing out the best comments and passing them to the broadcast production team to select what would be read by the host was one of the more directly influential activities the interactive team had on the programme's output.

With respect to the production staff's consideration of interactive media as secondary to the core text of the programme, it is unsurprising to observe that the interactive staff's activities are considered as supplementary and supportive of the primary role. The online component of the show is something to be 'handled' – and while there is enthusiasm expressed for the new technologies by all concerned, interactive staff are either performing the unwanted but necessary tasks (police the message board, write out and post the playlist on the website, print listener comments and bring them to the production team, etc.), or they run the risk of imposing and getting in the way, as was the case with a handheld video intended for

distribution on YouTube and inclusion on the programme's BBC website. The interactive staff member's role was to be as unobtrusive as possible while the production staff, presenter and guest continued with the 'real' business at hand of making the live radio show. Once the video had been filmed, the interactive staff's role was to edit and post it online as quickly as possible, so that the programme's presenter could include it as part of the text of the show.

While the interactive staff were keen to express specialist music public service in a way that understood specialist music fans as not merely members of an audience, but as participants in a network of knowledge, their activities were configured in relation to their service role in support of the production team. In our discussions with interactive teams, it appeared that this orientation was a source of frustration that more could have been done to address specialist music fans in more interactive ways.

The rest of Audio & Music Interactive and the associated Future Media and Technology team operate in relation to the interactive teams for the radio stations and are, in a sense, at arm's length from the broadcast orientation, in that they are not directly involved with the production of radio programming. The role of these teams is to provide strategic direction and support for the interactive sites and services and to produce the tools and services that enable them.

The BBC Music site (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/music>) provides an avenue for a broadcast-independent engagement with music on the BBC's website, and in effect offers a non-broadcast brand for the provision of specialist (and generalist) music content, information and engagement. For that reason, the BBC Music site has only an interactive team, and no broadcast production team. As a result, there is a high degree of autonomy for that team, and the radio brands cut across all of the different music genre pages, with a clearer focus on music itself as the public service, rather than the radio brands fulfilling that function.

The BBC Music site is a platform for music related news, information, metacontent (such as reviews), and samples of music. The site is integrated with the open source and wiki-powered music database MusicBrainz, and integrates content selected from across the BBC radio brands. For example, a genre page about jazz and blues on the BBC Music site references and cross-promotes jazz programming on Radio 2, Radio 3, and the specialist jazz programme on BBC Radio Scotland. However, the content on the BBC Music site is largely presented as brand-independent.

Over the course of our study, we became aware of what we came to think of as discursive orientations within the BBC concerning public service and specialist music. The first of these is what we call the broadcasting orientation, characterised by a recurrence in discourse about the online activities being in service to the brand, or extending the brand. The other orientation is what we have called the online orientation, which considers web activities around specialist music programming as providing a space independent of (though not exclusive of) those radio brands. The two orientations are not polar opposites and nor do they represent a conflict of purpose among BBC staff around specialist music. They do, however, represent two different ways of considering the role of the BBC, the purpose of specialist music as public service commitment, and the function of the technologies available.

By following the broadcast orientation, one considers that music fans are listeners, and that the internet is a promotional avenue and a larger transmitter for broadcast content. The online orientation considers the web on its own terms, and seeks to explore ways to provide a specialist music public service using the medium's native characteristics. We believe that these two orientations can be both encapsulated and enhanced under a new, additional orientation: that of Public Service Media, which incorporates and uses the strengths of both the broadcast and the online media environments.

Most importantly, we believe that the BBC is in a unique and exciting position, because it has the capacity to bring together those two orientations in a way that no other media organisation has. Nobody else has the commitment to specialist music as a public service in that way.

Implications and recommendations

In our research, we have identified the need for a conceptual shift from a framework of Public Service Broadcasting to that of Public Service Media. The difference may seem a semantic one at first glance, but the distinction between Media and Broadcasting is one that allows for different configurations of communication. Broadcasting implies an allocutionary ‘one-to-many’ model, whereas Media embraces the ‘many-to-many’ forms of communication evident online. Moreover, the term Broadcasting denotes media formations that do not include popular music recordings as media themselves.

Our recommendation is that the BBC should keep the broadcast orientation as a strong part of what it does for fans of popular music, but reconceptualise it as part of a broader Public Service Media (PSM) mindset that also includes an online orientation. This is a different approach to that of adding online services that enhance and extend the reach and impact of broadcast programming. Instead, encapsulating broadcasting, online and music media as equals within a PSM framework allows the corporation to use each medium on its own terms, to leverage the strengths and complementarities of each, rather than simply prioritise one aspect, and employ the others in an ancillary support role.

It is important to note that many of the people we encountered within the BBC operational teams have intuited this important shift, and that all staff have started this journey, but are going at different speeds towards its realisation.

Specialist music as media

While it is true that specialist music fans listen to music on the radio, that act of listening neither defines or describes the boundaries of their music consumption practice. While a broadcasting framework for public service suggests that music fans are purely and simply ‘listeners’, audiences of specialist music can be catered for and engaged more fully at every level of their music consumption and fandom experience within a PSM framework.

By reframing music fans as ‘people’ rather than just ‘listeners’ (that is, as both active and passive users of different media forms, rather than as simply recipients of programming content), a richer, more nuanced and rounded service for music consumers can be imagined, designed and implemented.

From the BBC’s perspective, one way to work towards this goal is through the organisation of online integration and deployment of existing media assets in new ways. Some examples of the ways in which this asset deployment may be reconfigured can be found in the area of opinion leadership.

As we showed in the third section, a key part of the way the BBC carried through its commitment to specialist music as a public service was through the employment of presenters who carried authority within particular specialist music domains. At the moment, though, this asset tends to be restricted to the broadcast orientation, and when utilised online tends only to serve to strengthen the brand. For example, programme playlists function as reference tools for programme listeners, and the music selections have the quality of a ‘recommendations list’. However, the overall brand of the BBC and the individual personal brands of the presenters can be strengthened through online media in many other ways by deploying these tastemakers differently. By adopting a stronger online orientation, a range of ways in which the ability of these presenters to be opinion leaders become available.

The broadcast platform and the scarcity of airtime necessitates the restriction and editing of tastemaker activities. Zane Lowe, for instance, can only play a certain number of songs on his radio show, and because of the mass simultaneous audience of such a show, a balanced, measured and broadly appealing programme must be constructed – as much to retain casual listeners as to serve fans.

However, with the abundance of space and the long tail of attention online, it is possible to increase the power and value of the opinion leader by allowing them space to indulge their enthusiasms, and act as focal points for discussing, sharing and making meaning from music.

Other opportunities for deploying existing assets in new ways online have already been explored by parts of the BBC, but these principles have not been uniformly or widely dispersed throughout the organisation, and there is a lot of room for these ideas to be progressed further for specialist music, at the level of operation.

These include:

- Identifying and empowering the ‘savants’
- Providing a platform and a degree of online social hierarchy for people who possess (and can communicate) high levels of specialist knowledge of popular music;
- Opening archives and building a public media ‘library’
- Indexing, tagging and making available all music-related content in a modular form, whereby BBC-created content about artists, genres, record labels, scenes, etc. could be navigated and discovered in ways that were separate from the individual radio brands, presenters or programme slots. Material that had been edited for the needs and constraints of broadcast programming could be made available, both for use by the public and also for ‘recycling’ and repackaging for future broadcast programme makers.
- The BBC Music site as media brand
- Developing the BBC Music site as a media brand in its own right – just as 6Music and Radio 1 are media brands – so that it provides a focal point for online media engagement around popular and specialist music forms.

Format and platform independence

As media becomes decreasingly linked to the means of distribution, audiences are able to find content in a range of different platforms. Not only that but, increasingly, audiences are becoming media outlets themselves as the practices of music blogging, social networking and personal web publishing increase in popularity.

The notion of BBC 2.0 advanced by former BBC Future Media & Technology manager Tom Loosemore, and espoused publicly by BBC Director General Mark Thompson, is predicated on principles such as linking and leveraging externally produced content, as well as providing content to external platforms;

adopting a conversational and informal approach rather than an authoritative one; linking content permanently and deeply; searchability and providing many routes to the same content; accessibility; and linking to, rather than hosting, discussion.

There are many clear opportunities to advance the BBC's media offering in these ways in the area of specialist music. The provision of open archives, the modularisation and metatagging of spoken content, and the aggregation of opinion leadership amongst BBC presentation personnel as well as the 'savants' of specialist music fandom are just some of the ways in which these objectives can be approached. However, some aspects of the BBC2.0 vision are problematic from the perspective of Public Service Media – in particular, that of the corporation's non-commercial mandate.

From a BBC2.0 perspective, it makes perfect sense to create both BBC content and upload it to sites like MySpace and YouTube on the grounds that this is where the relevant audiences congregate online, and where the content can be integrated into a daily experience of online media. While this prevents a walled garden approach that could only restrict the public value of the content, it does raise the issue of commercialisation, since that popular content provided on those platforms generates traffic and advertising revenue for corporations like Newscorp (MySpace) and Google (YouTube).

While it is outside the scope of this report to offer ready solutions to difficult problems such as this, it is an important issue to consider while working towards a fully online-compatible Public Service Media model. Opportunities exist to provide or work with a commercial-free alternative space, as well as ensure that BBC content can be discovered in all of the most popular or salient online environments.

Another issue to consider here is one of proprietary formats. At present, much of the BBC's online audio content is delivered using Real Audio formats, which dictates the necessary listening platform to audiences who wish to receive that audio content. Making a shift towards open or, at least, player-independent audio playback and distribution technologies (such as mp3) will enable users to more easily work and engage with BBC specialist music content – particularly meta-content. While distribution and performance rights issues around music recordings can be problematic and expensive for the BBC, BBC-generated content about specialist music does not provide these challenges, and so platform and format independence is an attainable and worthwhile target.

Organisation of production

From observations of music radio practice, and of the relationship between the broadcast and the radio teams in terms of distribution of tasks and the approach to media-specific content, we noticed a particularly broadcast-centric workflow. That is to say, the broadcasters make content and then the interactive teams 'panel-beat' it for the internet.

While we do not underestimate the importance and the reach of the broadcast programming, we see opportunities to alter the workflow in such a way that content created for the broadcast medium is designed so it can be naturally repurposed for online delivery.

For instance, rather than conceive of the production of a broadcast programme as purely a continuum that is locked to time, considering it as also being made up of discrete components that can be treated individually for indexing, repackaging, semantic markup, archiving and later compilation will not only improve the balance of focus between media forms, but will also provide a massive increase in online media appropriateness for very little, if any, extra effort on behalf of the broadcast production team.

One example of a way in which this could be approached would be for a technical solution to be introduced which created a separate recording every time the microphone was turned on in the studio. When the microphone was switched off, thereby completing that recording, a dialogue box would prompt the online team to identify and add metadata to that discrete piece of content, which could then be named, tagged and archived as a modular and searchable piece of online content.

While a broadcaster will prefer to remain in a broadcast mode, they are always considering other factors when they develop their continuity and talk. Hearing modularity in action will accustom the broadcaster to thinking about other ways of contextualising their speech and this will be taken into account in the same way that time constraints, news of the day and knowledge about related factors are currently integrated intuitively into the content.

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Project partners



Andrew Dubber is an AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellow in online music and radio innovation Studies at the Birmingham School of Media at Birmingham City University



Dr Bethany Klein is Lecturer in Media Industries at the University of Leeds



Tristan Ferne is Senior Development Producer (R&D) for BBC Audio & Music & Mobile



Lyn Thomas is Deputy Director of the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University



Dr Matt Hills is a Reader in Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University



Tim Wall is Professor of Radio and Popular Music Studies at the Birmingham School of Media at Birmingham City University

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BBC Future Media & Technology focuses on what comes next for the BBC in terms of technology and services. The department concentrates on innovative platforms and content and is involved in the development of search, navigation, metadata, on-demand, mobile and web based applications including the emerging BBC i-Player on demand service and Web 2.0 initiatives, as well as the BBC Open Archive. FM&T aims to keep the Corporation on the cutting edge of the industry at a time where the boundaries between producers and audiences are fast disappearing and the entire landscape of the large scale broadcaster is changing dramatically.

The AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange Programme is led from within the BBC by the Innovation Culture team. Innovation Culture provides a central support resource for a wide range of BBC divisions, making it more effective to undertake collaborative work. It forges partnerships outside the BBC as well as internally enabling the transfer of ideas, knowledge and prototypes into the business. By encouraging best practice across the whole of the BBC's Future Media and Technology (FM&T) division, of which BBC Research and Innovation is part, the team brings a strategic overview to a range of innovation techniques. It also drives forward a variety of early stage research projects in key strategic areas, bringing

a user centered design approach to emerging technology practice.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange>

The Blog is the place to go for any new announcements, outputs, musings from the KEP team. There will also be posts from project partners involved with the current round of funded projects.

<http://beebac.welcomebackstage.com>

beebac is the online knowledge network for the BBC and academic community. It is a place to find likeminded individuals and a resource for ideas, projects and people. It enables you to find people and projects you want to be involved with, explore areas of mutual interest and exchange ideas and resources.

AHRC/BBC KEP Contacts:

rowena.goldman@bbc.co.uk

brendan.crowther@bbc.co.uk

adrian.woolard@bbc.co.uk

j.pollock@ahrc.ac.uk

s.amor@ahrc.ac.uk