**"This is so cool - radio at my fingertips!" Young people’s responses to Radio Garden[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Caroline Mitchell and Peter Lewis**

**Transnational Radio Encounters and the development of Radio Garden**

Six years after the end of the multi - partner Transnational Radio Encounters (TRE) research project,[[2]](#footnote-2) it is gratifying that its most well-known output, Radio Garden, has proved to have an enduring legacy. This chapter outlines the appeal and use of Radio Garden, particularly regarding young people. We explore how its characteristics have made it such an attractive radio platform to the generations who may be turning away from traditional radio listening and how young people have used it in different contexts before and during the pandemic lockdowns.

Radio Garden ([http://radio.garden/](about:blank)), an interactive website and a free app, gives access to thousands of live radio streams across the world. Its public launch in December 2016 immediately attracted a social media storm with 7.5m hits in its first week, as well as, over the next few months, hundreds of millions of page views. The designer, commissioned and briefed by the project team, admirably captured the ideas underpinning the TRE research and its findings - feelings of belonging evoked by radio, the importance of radio in preserving memories of home, and the surprise and excitement of crossing borders to experience random radio encounters.

At the time of its launch, Radio Garden had four distinct layers or sections: besides the Live section, a click on Jingles, History or Stories offered, respectively, a world-wide crash course in station identification, clips from radio history, or stories about first encounters with radio and radio journeys as they crossed the Radio Garden globe (Mitchell 2019).

Undoubtedly, the Live section was the main attraction and the tone of the following tweets drawn from the Twitter social media platform suggests that young people were early adopters

*“radio garden is probably the sickest thing we've found for discovering radio stations worldwide”*

*Fxxk this is cool: Move the map and listen to local radio stations. They are playing Craig David in Tanzania right now*

*Been enjoying listening to Radio Garden so much this week - loved listening to @StephenKing's classic rock station from Bangor, Maine, and also had my mind blown by hearing Abba for the first time in Swedish on a radio station in Vaxjo, Sweden! Bitchin'!*

*Say whaaaa, there's a website where you can hear what radios are playing right now, all over the world, and it's really neat.*

**Young people, radio, and pandemic listening**

Radio Garden’s continuing impact, judged by the take up outside academia, has been unquestionable. With 100 million hits in its first year, it is still used by 10 million listeners per month (RadioKing, 2020) and won the 2017 Webby Media Streaming award. But this success occurred after the end of project funding in 2016 and posed a problem for the academics in the TRE team. There were many questions to be asked about the reasons for the website’s popularity and its future development. For example, more work was needed to extend all the layers from the Eurocentric pattern which marked the early months of the platform. But time and resources for further research were not available since the team had disbanded and returned to their regular work. Even so, the present writers did apply for funding to the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council’ s Follow on Funding programme, proposing a year of impact activities with a range of partners, including the BBC, but the application was not successful.

The developer’s priority during 2017-2018 was to take on extra staff to keep Radio Garden running, fend off commercial predators and imitations, and fund the enhanced capacity needed to power the site, with new stations being added daily. But from 2019, the stated priority as laid out in the Radio Garden background information box on the site was “working on the future of Radio Garden: new features, better stability and most importantly simplicity.” (March 2019). The three educational exhibition layers (Jingles, Stories and History) were removed from the public Radio Garden website and app and from there on the research team were excluded from discussions about how to extend, improve, or further popularize the site. A HERA case study commentary stated it was ‘one of the most successful humanities public engagement activities ever carried out’ but at the same time acknowledged one of the major challenges:

‘Since the TRE project ended, the platform developer Jonathan Puckey has made some changes to respond to the lower take up of the specialist archive layers and to increase capacity to accommodate the growing number of new stations... The removal of the non-live layers highlights the need for projects to consider IP issues when working with external partners.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Academic discussion of Radio Garden has up to now been relatively sparse. Its launch in December 2016 occurred a few months after the Transnational Radio Encounters team had dispersed and returned to their university work. The editors of the project’s book *Transnationalizing Radio Research* (Föllmer & Badenoch 2018) were able to include an account of Radio Garden’s first format and its reception, but apart from passing mention in Western (2018), the present writers appear to be alone among academics to have covered the later stages of Radio Garden’s development and its impact (Lewis & Mitchell 2021). Press coverage was spasmodic after the 2016 launch (Coldwell 2016, Singh 2016, New York Times 2019, Hughes 2020, Radio.King 2020), until in February 2021 a mention of the app in the BBC World Service led to more Twitter activity, a discussion on BBC Radio 4, and several items in The Guardian about the increased use of Radio Garden during the lockdown in early 2021 (Marsh 2021, Penning 2021, Sarner 2021, The Guardian 2021).

However, the listening context in which Radio Garden was launched had for some time been a concern of the media industry. Linfoot, in a report for the British Council, showed the steady decline in the radio listening habits of 16-24-year-olds, something well known to the industry (RAJAR Midas 2018, Ofcom 2020). YouGov’s finding that three quarters of 15-year-olds who consume music on a device use streaming services (YouGov 2019) is one among many that have noted the attraction for younger generations of platforms like Spotify and YouTube whose recommendation algorithms confirm listeners’ likes, in effect enclosing them in a bubble. But from the start of the pandemic lockdowns (from March 2020 in the UK) marked changes in listening occurred as a result of changed living and work conditions. An increase in online listening of between 15% and 18% was noted with an 8% desertion of music-streaming apps such as Spotify (BBC 2020).

The rise in popularity of podcasting among young listeners, before and during lockdown, has been noted by Best and Clark (2020). The relationship between podcasting and radio has been much discussed over the past decade[[4]](#footnote-4)and raises the question of the relevance of that debate to the Radio Garden phenomenon. A succinct footnote of Spinelli and Dann points towards Radio Garden’s most obvious characteristic: ‘[radio’s] own distinct advantages are clear – chiefly its “liveness” and its ability to deliver breaking events in real time. Whatever podcasting is, it is not “live”’ (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 7, footnote 13). As we have seen, the first phase of Radio Garden did include ‘layers’ which were not live and which directed listeners to radio history, personal stories and stations’ jingle identifications. There was, too, an attempt, since discontinued, to give a separate identification to community radio stations. But the proliferation of podcasting genres, the increasing interest, to take two examples, in emotional registers (e.g. Sienkiewicza & Jaramillo 2019; Lindgren 2021) and the voice of communities (e.g. Malik & Vrikki 2018; McHugh et al 2020; Piñeiro-Otero 2021) demonstrates that podcasting is the prime arena for specific searches while random discoveries and serendipitous encounters are what make Radio Garden attractive, especially as a change from the ‘sameness’ of lockdown.

Radio Garden is one of a number of internet-based technologies that remediate radio and which are used by stations. How many stations that appear as green dots on Radio Garden are web-only, another layer of remediation, is not a figure that has been made accessible, but a snapshot check on two medium sized cities - in Glasgow, Scotland, and Pretoria, South Africa showed that web-only stations outnumbered broadcast stations by, respectively,

25% and 50%.

**Radio Garden and Young people**

*The coolest link ever, radio from all over the world …Fantastic to use with our children from all over the world! Have a look together with your class! #ell #esl #eal #ellchat #langchat #exploreinyourclassroom*

In the years since Radio Garden’s launch, we have carried out small scale impact workshops with a range of people and organisations to introduce them to the platform, introducing specific groups to Radio Garden. For University students, geolocated streaming (“Radio meets Google Earth”) is immediately engrossing as easy access to radio output via mobile phones and tablets is more attractive than traditional receiving devices. The unlimited, free and exploratory nature of the platform appeals to people who reject traditionally formatted stations and platforms. “It’s opened up music radio to me – I’m no longer restricted to thinking about UK radio ‐ I want to work all over the world! I did a case study for my degree about a community station in Hawaii and after listening to it and exploring the website I felt I really knew the station.” (MA Radio student)

Between 2018 and 2020, teenagers from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds attended BBC STEM Ambassador workshops intended to excite their interest in a range of possible futures. At the invitation of the programme’s Project Manager, we ran workshops introducing Radio Garden at events in Bristol, Cardiff, London, and Sunderland. The teachers, none of whom at that time had met the Radio Garden, were confronted with their students’ reaction to the Radio Garden – for them too it was a first encounter: excitement as they heard the same language that is spoken by older members of their family, the mother tongue their generation was beginning to lose; and alongside the speech, music that carried deeply significant cultural meaning. Similarly, at a workshop with ‘Young Asian Voices’ in Sunderland, UK, young people squealed with excitement as they zoomed in to listen to stations in India, Pakistan and surrounding countries – “I’m in Bangalore! Listen to this” - there was a cacophony of radio sound and music as everyone found different stations on their phones. This workshop also motivated some participants to start making their own content for community media.

In 2021, for this article, we interviewed two young people under 30. Marial, who works for a global charity campaigning for tribal and indigenous rights, uses Radio Garden for both teaching and studying indigenous languages – Quechua and P’urhepecha[[5]](#footnote-5).

‘Aside from that, I've just used it personally. Primarily I like to listen to Quechua and Cumbia music, especially from Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador… When I was in Madrid [2019/2020], I didn't have access to my usual Spotify account, so I started using Radio Garden there during the pandemic. Being stuck in a very small room, we were not allowed to leave - unless to the grocery store. There were just so many challenges with that, but I remember using the Radio Garden to kind of travel around around virtually, and mentally escape the confines of my room. Also I’m particularly a nostalgic person and really attached to places that I've lived in or visited. So I was also visiting stations such as jazz in New York City, or others in Oakland, California, New Mexico, and South America. At that time, my fiancé was living in Italy, in Genoa, so I began to listen to some Italian radio stations there.’ [[6]](#footnote-6)

Nicole Austin, a student was introduced to Radio Garden by her stepfather[[7]](#footnote-7)

There’re only so many times I can listen to my own playlist over and over again. Whereas when you listen to radio, it's that excitement of you don't know what's coming next. it's fresh new material, you’re not expecting what's going to come. (In lockdown) radio was an element that felt normal, a lot of TV shows were on hold, a lot of music was on hold. Whereas with radio, I could still tune in…when you log on and it's got the planting seeds, and then it takes you into the world, it's like so bright, intriguing, you want to use it, you want to keep scrolling because it's exciting. It's like you're traveling, but you’re traveling in your mind… you’re able to explore and find new places- it's brill.…..when you are hovering over India or China, or going anywhere you haven't been, or feels a million worlds away, but when it’s on Radio Garden and it's so accessible… you can go anywhere and the radio will be on and people will be listening to music, or people will be talking about everyday life. It’s like normality that's straight across the world. (There) is a comfort element as well because having the world, shrunk down, to be able to access it and listen to any parts of it… I'd say comfort and unity (are) definitely the biggest things that I get out of Radio Garden.

The wonderment expressed by Nicole and so many others as they used Radio Garden to transport themselves into its contained ’explosion’ of green dots, each representing a different radio station, suggests a relationship to the concept of the ‘technological sublime’ (Nye, 1994) and the ‘digital sublime’ (Moscow, 2004). Sabine Le Bel describes the technological sublime as ‘One of the most powerful and enduring discourses associated with emerging technologies … in which technology is seen as intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually transcendent.” (Le Bel, 2012) Does Radio Garden enable a new ‘sublime’ radio experience where users feel a sense of control of their global listening experience?

The comments of Marial and Nicole typify the reactions of Radio Garden users, especially during the pandemic lockdowns. For perhaps a majority of Garden visitors, the pleasure is of travelling to encounter the unexpected. Marial represents those who are looking for sounds and sites that satisfy, whether it is for a type of music or music that can be a shared experience with a distant loved one, or for finding a language to learn or use in teaching.

For Nicole the positive effects of connection, travel and dropping in on the ‘normality‘ of people’s shared experienced of listening whilst in lockdown has been remediated by Radio Garden more effectively than other radio devices, platforms and applications.

In February 2021, when Twitter activity followed mention of the app on BBC radio, *The Guardian* obtained a rare interview with Jonathan Puckey, Radio Garden’s designer. “We had the idea to make a modern version of the old receiver radio sets … We hoped to recreate this magical feeling of travelling across the globe blindly, relying on the sense of hearing and the knowledge of location to bring these live radio stations to life.” (Marsh 2021).

As Nicole’s experience suggests, for younger generations, whose musical tastes are reinforced by systems like Spotify or YouTube, an escape from the bubble of ‘likes’ to new musical encounters and live speech are rediscovered experiences.

Susan Douglas, describes the “exploratory listening” in 1920s America:

‘the anticipation [which] rested on *not* knowing who or what you would

hear or from where… (cp. Nicole Austin’s ‘excitement…you don't know what's coming next’) the sense of mastery exploratory listening seemed to provide…in which one defied gravity, had the country laid before one’s feet.. and the

pleasure of eavesdropping.’ (Douglas 1999: 74/75)

Rudolf Arnheim, writing as broadcast radio became established, praised

‘the great miracle of wireless. The omnipresence of what people are singing or saying anywhere, the overleaping of frontiers, the conquest of spatial isolation, the importation of culture on the waves of the ether.’ (Arnheim 1936:14)

As the radio networks, commercial and national public service, became established, their schedules, the BBC’s at least, assumed what Cardiff and Scannell have called “a calendrical role…which marked out the unfolding of the year” (Cardiff & Scannell 1987:160), providing

with its “everydayness” “a sense of anchorage in an otherwise changing world” (Lacey 2013:193). Lacey here is discussing the German word *Erfahrung* which in its root brings together the notions of listening and travelling, both appropriate to “the networked and global scale of contemporary politics” and in which Lacey’s “listening out” is a key element. She goes on to consider, long before pandemic lockdowns, the use of music devices which deny choice and offer instead moments of thrilling serendipity, “meaningful chance encounters with the unknown and the unanticipated” (ibid. 195). We are close here to

the French situationists’ *dérive*, referred to by Radio Garden’s designer (Marsh 2021), and described by Guy Debord, one of the movement’s leaders as

‘involv[ing] playful-constructive behaviour …. quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop…their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.” (Debord 1956).

In January 2021, when the pandemic was forcing lockdowns across the world, Radio Garden recorded fifteen million users, a 750% increase in a month’s normal usage. The reason lies in the feelings and conditions experienced by Marial and Nicole – and millions of others. A Guardian leader writer praised

‘the miraculous quality of Radio Garden, which richly deserves its growing

cult status, lies in its agenda-free offer of somewhere else; its ability to

spirit a listener from a lockdown afternoon in Manchester to the sounds,

mood and preoccupations of a sunny morning in Monterrey.’

(The Guardian 2021)

“Stuckness” is the word used in some studies of the experience of incarceration which show very similar mental and emotional reactions to isolation in a situation that has no definite prospect of ending. An introduction to a special issue of *Ethnos* proposes that

‘stuckness refers to the way confinement is experienced, sensed and lived…To be existentially and socially stuck is not just a question of being stuck in place but equally about being stuck in time. It is the sense of not making progress, of not seeing a future, which leads to a sense of stuckness that may linger.’

(Jefferson et al, 2019:2-3).

Lockdown is a kind of imprisonment. What we have missed are the unexpected visits of friends, the randomness of encounters in shops and pubs, the overheard conversations, often in foreign languages (if you live in a city), in the streets and on public transport.

Looking to a future dominated less by the emergencies of a pandemic but more widely by the effects of climate change, we may have to accept that working from home and participation in virtual meetings and conferences will become normal. The ‘bubbles’ created by restrictions on physical travel might then merge with those that come from algo-rhythmic choice to increase the need for virtual escape of a kind that Radio Garden offers. Then it would not only be children and young people who are attracted to its ease of use and its ability to help explorations of new radio, music and linguistic soundscapes perhaps moving all of us closer to cultural radio ‘homes’. Does the acclaim for the ease and joy of fingertip control of so much radio, all in one globe, represent a desire for a kind of radio harmonisation amongst the 21 Century Babel of radio formats, platforms and programmes? Might this audio globe be as influential as the ‘Earthrise’ photograph taken from Apollo 8 in 1968?

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1. Some of this chapter draws on an article in *Interactions* (Lewis & Mitchell 2021). Thanks to Dr. Rachel Ramsey for her work surveying literature about young people and radio listening. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [http://www.transnationalradio.org/](about:blank) (click on ‘The Project’). TRE involved six linked but independent projects, a partnership of academics from the fields of radio studies, media history, musicology and community media worked with broadcasters and archives including the EBU, BBC Archives, The British Library National Sound Archive and Deutsche Welle. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://heranet.info/assets/uploads/2019/09/Toolkits\_13Dec2019.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See for example podcasting issues in *The Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, Vol. 22:2, 2015; ***Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media***, Vol. 14:1,2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quechua is an Indigenous language of the Andean region of South America, spoken within six countries, and internationally. P’urhepecha is predominantly spoken within the state of Michoacán, Mexico, as well as a significant number of speakers in the USA [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marial Quezada, Research and Advocacy Officer for Survival International, interviewed by Peter Lewis, 19 July 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nicole Austin is a BA Communication Studies student at the University of Liverpool, Interviewed by Caroline Mitchell, 5th July 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)