**The appropriation of the local: public service radio past and present[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Public service broadcasting, what it means and how it has responded to the challenges of competition and, more recently, of digital innovation, is a topic which continues to engage those who, like me, see this form of broadcasting as an essential presence, but who have campaigned for a local, community-based contribution to the public sphere. I shall discuss the British version of this form of broadcasting and the continued attempts, largely unsuccessful as I shall argue, to apply the principles of public service broadcasting at a local level.

The BBC is, of course, central to the discussion and I must confess straightaway to feelings about the BBC that range at different times from despair and anger to pride and gratitude. Such feelings are commonly experienced in relation to the institutions and organisations whose task, we presume, is to give practical expression to our ideas and beliefs. In the case of broadcasting, they are rooted in personal, social and political histories that go back to the radio we were first exposed to in our early years (Lewis 1999).

But the discussion also concerns commercial local radio which, like British commercial television, has been regulated, hence understood, to have an obligation to provide an element of public service in its programming. The titles adopted by British commercial media need explanation. Independent Television (ITV) came first, breaking the BBC’s monopoly in 1955, and ‘independent’ hid what were then considered to be the vulgar connotations of ‘commercial’: so, ITV meant independent of the state, of the licence-fee, respectable, free-standing. Commercial radio followed in 1973 and, unusually among European broadcasting organisations, it was local for the first two decades and, following the ITV precedent, was known as Independent Local Radio (ILR). The regulator had a similar title – Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). In recent years capitalism has become much bolder, not bothering to hide its profit motive, so both the current regulator Ofcom and the stations it regulates have reverted to the title ‘commercial radio’.

In Britain, the campaign for community radio - *radios associatives* is the French equivalent – began over forty years ago and as in the rest of Europe had its origin in a critique of mainstream broadcasting, both commercial and public service. Asked at that time at a conference in France to consider the question *Quels services pour quels publics?* I chose then, as now, to explore the topic at the local level[[2]](#footnote-2). My intervention was later published in Sonovision (Lewis 1977) and began with the sort of appeal to the ‘rights of the listener’ which was typical of the period.

The airwaves are a national resource which belongs to us all and which advances in technology have now made it possible for a wider range of people to use…In the past, it has been part of what is meant by being a media professional to claim some authority to define the tastes and needs of the ‘public’. The definition is reinforced by the placing of transmitters, each of a certain power which, one might say, ‘create’ publics…..[But] don’t speak to us of public service, we want to serve ourselves, thank you very much!’

Much happened in that year, 1977, that is relevant to my topic. Just a month before, the Ecologists’ public unveiling (on *France 1*) of *Radio Verte* had announced ‘open season’ for *les radios libres*. Outre-Manche, the campaign for community radio had just been launched. I was involved from the beginning in that campaign: why did we launch it? What was wrong with the local radio that was there already, BBC and ILR, that made us want something different – community radio?

This is the story I want to tell. It’s a tale of imaginative ideas and their disappointing outcome – not all of which, certainly, can be blamed on the BBC. The story must also include the failure of commercial local radio, ILR, and its regulator the IBA, to deliver public service in a system whose raison d’être was private profit. “Public service, private profit, a lethal combination” as Raymond Williams prophetically remarked in the early 1980s.

Back to 1977. At that time there was opposition to monopoly on both sides of the Channel: in France, against the monopoly of Radio France; in the UK, the opposition was against the monopoly of professionalism and this was a mood shared across the Western world at this time.

In Britain it was a challenge to the claim of the public service broadcasting professional to diagnose need, anticipate demand, influence taste. That claim was first, famously, expressed by Lord Reith, the BBC’s founder:

It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need, not what they want. But few know what they want, and very few what they need. (Reith 1924)

Burns, in his study of the BBC – *Public Service, Private World*, described the result as a sort of colonisation:

The BBC was developed under Reith into a kind of domestic diplomatic Service, representing the British – or what he saw as the best of the British – to the British. BBC culture, like BBC standard English, was…an intellectual ambience composed out of the values, standards and beliefs of the professional middle class, especially that part educated at Oxford and Cambridge. Sports, popular music and entertainment which appealed to the lower classes were included in large measure in the programmes, but the manner in which they were purveyed, the context and the presentation, remained indomitably middle class (Burns 1977:42).

This had to change. The wartime need to entertain troops based at home forced the BBC to develop a more popular style in a new channel known as *The Forces Programme*. It became renamed as *The Light Programme* after the war. And the huge popularity of the North Sea Pirates – *Radio Caroline* came on air in 1964 – was what prompted the launch in 1967 of Radio 1 and of the first eight BBC local radio stations.

Of course, strong motivation and inspiration for the community radio campaign came from outside Britain. COMCOM (the Community Communications Group) had been formed earlier in 1977 and published comments on the Report of the Annan Committee on the Future of Broadcasting. Annan thought that local broadcasting was “a different animal” from the mainstream and needed “a different keeper”. The Committee’s proposal for a Local Broadcasting Authority was supported by COMCOM and predictably opposed and successfully disposed of by what Annan called the ‘duopoly’ – BBC and the commercial sector.

COMCOM’s argument drew on

* UNESCO meetings and publications – including Josiane Jouët’s working paper for UNESCO’s Belgrade meeting on *Self-Management, Access and Participation in Communication* (Jouët 1977).
* A Council of Europe programme had commissioned reports on examples of community media initiatives across Europe, summarised by Beaud (1980)
* The American NFCB (National Federation of Community Broadcasters) generously shared three decades of experience and as did their more recently arrived Canadian counterparts
* A statement in April 1977 by the Australian Minister for Post and Telecommunications was encouraging:

It is accepted that public broadcasters [the Australian term for ‘community broadcasting’] should have a better appreciation of the interests, hence needs, of their broadcasting communities than anyone else, including government (Lewis Collection 6/3)

British activists benefited from advice from Australians, veterans of Australian community radio who were living at the time in Britain and had become valuable supporters of the campaign for community radio.

* Antoine Lefebure introduced the British campaigners to his magazine, *Interférences*, and the work of *l'Association pour la Libération des Ondes* (ALO)
* The 1982 AEIRI/IAMCR conference in Paris where the Local Radio and TV Section was launched
* The founding conference of AMARC (Association mondiale des artisans des radios communautaires) in Montreal in 1983.

Inspiration and advice from abroad certainly fuelled the campaign for community radio[[3]](#footnote-3). Why did BBC Local Radio disappoint?

When the BBC started in the early 1920s, the technical limitations of transmission and reception meant that coverage was confined to nine cities. By the end of the decade, the centralisation that was one of the four defining principles of Reith’s notion of public service resulted in a national service with regional opt-outs. Reith’s other three principles were: a non-profit, non-commercial approach (the BBC was set up in direct contrast to the American system), the maintenance of high standards, and the aim of national coverage.

It was this last aim that, after the end of World War 2 dictated the development of VHF (Very High Frequency, as FM was referred to in those days, ie MHz 88-108). This technical mission carried a lot of weight with BBC planners, and went hand in hand with the resistance to the commercial lobby for another TV channel. Decisions about television were the main outcome of successive government committees and recommendations about radio were not followed by the governments in power. But the first of these post-war committees, the Beveridge Committee, reporting in 1951, had some interesting things to say about the possibilities for local radio using VHF and urged the BBC to experiment.

This was the cue Frank Gillard had been waiting for. Gillard had been a war correspondent for the BBC. I think it is likely that the experience of recording in the field, working in a small unit, the need to improvise, led him to appreciate the approach needed in local radio. He set about making the case for local radio within the BBC. Later, as Director of Radio, when BBC management objected that they could see no public demand for local radio, he retorted “how the public could be expected to demand something of which they had no experience and no concept was not explained” (Gillard 1977). But Gillard’s persistence paid off. By 1958, a plan for local broadcasting was being discussed with the Post Office which authorised the BBC to run a number of ‘closed circuit’ experiments in different parts of the country. These showed listener interest and satisfaction among the radio broadcasters in the experience of working in a small team.

Gillard’s evidence presented to the next committee on the future of broadcasting, the Pilkington Committee, was successful in persuading the committee in its report of 1962 to recommend that the BBC be allowed to develop local radio in up to 250 locations. But once again, radio took second place to television. The government ignored this recommendation and authorised the one that the third TV channel should go to the BBC (becoming BBC 2). ITV was severely criticised for its lightweight programming. Undoubtedly the presence on the Committee of Richard Hoggart, writer and academic, influenced this dismissal of popular, commercially financed television, and Hoggart continued to sound the alarm about the possibility that local radio should be commercial - the commercial lobby had been gaining strength from the huge popularity of Radio Caroline and the North Sea pirates. Hoggart used, surprisingly, *Peace News* (August 1964) to argue for BBC control of local radio. Hoggart had recently set up the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham and co-authoring this article was Stuart Hall at the start of a distinguished career in sociology. Two reasons why, they suggested, local radio was needed were (1) “to reverse the trend towards centralisation” and (2) “to make the relationship between audience and media a more equal one”.

[if local radio is to] reflect the real needs which arise locally, then democracy needs to be quickened at its roots…. People will only feel their effectiveness in relation to such issues as urban renewal, the housing and property squeeze, transport or hospital or educational or welfare services, community amenities, if their voices can be heard.

 (Hoggart & Hall 1964)

(All these years later, we are still saying that after the tragedy of Grenfell Tower in London[[4]](#footnote-4)).

The following year, 1965, the CCCS published the first in an influential series of papers on cultural matters, Rachel Powell’s *Possibilities for Local Radio*. This was the year when the Labour government finally cracked down on the North Sea pirates with the Marine Offences Act giving the signal to the BBC to prepare for the pop music channel, Radio 1 and local radio.

Gillard’s thinking can be seen in the BBC paper *Local Radio in the Public Interest*, the high point of the BBC discussion on the topic.

The opportunity to speak on air would come to great numbers of people who had never broadcast before….A great many new programme forms and techniques would quickly emerge, based on community participation….Much of the time [of station staff] could well be spent in giving training to volunteers…There is no particular mystique about the making of simple radio programmes.

 (BBC 1966)

The next year, the first wave of eight BBC local stations began to launch and in those early days most did indeed follow the principles outlined in *Local Radio in the Public Interest*, but a number of factors worked against their full implementation.

First, was the arrival of commercial local radio in 1973. By the end of that decade Margaret Thatcher had formed a Conservative government and a Local Radio Working Party, which under the direction of the Home Office (the government Department then responsible for broadcasting) had been overseeing a cautious development of local radio, responded to the political zeitgeist and authorised an expansion in which commercial stations greatly outnumbered the BBC. The BBC had to make do with 20 stations instead of the 250 envisaged by Pilkington. As a result, the coverage area was increased to the size of ‘counties’ (départements) thus reducing the intimacy of local content and contact.

Second, a lack of co-ordination at government level between the allocation of VHF/FM frequencies and the manufacturing industry meant a slow start to the take up of VHF/FM by listeners – the first wave of BBC stations broadcast *only* on FM. This was linked to the very high technical standards which at that time defined reception. Both Post Office and BBC engineering were at one in this and so it was not till much later that it was possible to “find” frequencies, for example, for community radio.

Third, with the BBC wholly dependent on the licence fee and needing to beg successive governments to raise it to match increased expenditure, there were constant budget cuts. Radio, with lower status compared to TV, suffered, and local radio suffered worst of all.

Fourth, the dominance of the newsrooms in BBC local stations, and the importance attached to them by BBC top management (at that time journalistic in background) as a source for national news, meant an attitude at odds with community participation of the kind foreseen by Gillard in *Local Radio in the Public Interest*. A report of research carried out by the University of Leicester’s Centre for Mass Communication Research confirms this (Wells & West 1971: 215).

Fifth, the fact that the broadcasting unions at national level struggled to save jobs made for difficulties locally when the BBC experimented – as it did in Wales and the North West of England – with small-scale projects in which there was flexibility in jobs with roles being shared or swapped, and reliance on local non-professional contributors (Lewis 1976a). This way of operating ‘threatened’ jobs, the unions claimed.

Finally, transparency and accountability were lacking. An example of this became evident when I was doing research for the Council of Europe – a study that compared Stadt Radio, Amsterdam, Thames Valley radio (a commercial radio at the edge of Reading, a city 50 km west of London), and BBC Radio Bristol (Lewis 1976b). In Bristol I attended a public meeting of Radio Bristol’s Local Advisory Council. Afterwards I asked what the BBC did with the comments they received. “Oh”, said a PR man, “they’re passed inwards and upwards.”

What of commercial radio? I return to the question I began with: what was wrong with this type of local radio that provoked the demand for community radio? In 1977, ILR had been in existence for four years and 19 stations had come on air. Launched at a time of economic recession, some required foreign ownership (mainly Canadian and Australian) to get to the starting line.

An important voice at this time in the critique of ILR and the IBA, and an ally of COMCOM, was the Local Radio Workshop. The Workshop contributed to COMCOM’s Comments on Annan; joined COMCOM in giving evidence to a Parliamentary Committee investigating the regulator of commercial radio, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) (House of Commons 1978); helped local groups make programmes which were offered, unsuccessfully, to the three London Local radio stations (BBC Radio London, Capital and LBC); organised local groups to survey the provision of these three stations and found, in the title of their report, ‘Nothing Local About It’; attended the public meetings of the IBA and in their interventions tried to expose the ineffectiveness of the process: the failure of companies to deliver on their promised programming and of the regulator to enforce the companies’ commitment.

In this period and for most of its later history, local radio in its commercial form, ILR, claimed to be serving communities, but this was what Raymond Williams called “the public-relations version of ‘local community’…[in which] ‘community’ stations will be mere fronts for irresponsible networks which have their real centres elsewhere” (Williams 1974:150).

The BBC too claimed its local radio stations were ‘community radio’ although it was more a case of the BBC moving into community to appropriate the local than the community using a medium to improve local communication. But the irony is that the British version of local radio was born at a time when contemporary limitations on frequencies allowing only one service per locality meant that local radio had to carry the baggage of public service which demanded that the whole audience be catered for rather than different interests. And this was at the very time that sociologists were exposing the myth of the geographically defined community which took no account of the social divisions within it. In the struggle for the sign (of community), it was the community radio movement which introduced the idea of community of interest and the North Sea pirates whose audiences demonstrated its reality (Lewis & Booth: 92, 95).

That was the story at the end of the 1970s. Fast forward to today. Where are we now? In terms of structure and organisation the British local radio landscape includes 40 BBC stations, 352 commercial stations and about 250 community radios. All now come under the regulation of Ofcom which is also responsible for BBC regulation. Very broadly one can say that the commercial sector is lightly governed, while, interestingly, it is the community radio sector which has adopted procedures (promise of performance, evidence of ‘social gain’) of the kind for which COMCOM was lobbying so long ago. It is in this sector that ethnic minorities and age groups, young and old, have been given control of their own stations.

In terms of structure, that should mean that British community radio offers democratic control of local radiophonic space even if the government has not devised a funding system as logical as the French FSER. Regulatory control of the other two types of radio is more remote. But when all radio is live-streamed on the internet the space is global and the transmission competes with millions of others, as well as the myriad channels of social media. Appropriation in this context is hardly the word to describe a local radio transmission.

So can we say what the local sounds like? The main requirement on commercial local radio has to do with ‘localness’. This is defined by the regulator, Ofcom, as

* A listener should get a feel for an area by tuning in to a particular station, and have confidence that matters of local importance, relevance or interest to the target audience in the area will be broadcast
* This should include programming of specific local relevance which also offers a distinctive alternative to UK-wide or nations' service;
* Programming should be likely to give listeners a feeling of ownership and / or kinship, particularly at times of crisis (snow, floods etc).

(Ofcom 2010)

This is little different from what research found listeners to BBC local radio expected.

Audiences felt it was important that they “had a voice”…. and that their local news and information was being presented and delivered to them by people who live in, and understand, the region.

BBC Local Radio is felt to be performing well and is seen as distinctive from commercial competitors due to its speech content….There were some differences in views between older and younger audiences. This mainly centred around the music versus speech balance…. All valued the information it provided, but ***older listeners*** were driven more by a companionship need, which meant they preferred extended speech content. ***Younger listeners***, however, were often looking to relax with radio and so had a preference to hear more music on their respective station. The most important areas …are felt to be impartial, independent, and up-to-date, accurate news. These were important factors across all age groups. (BBC Trust 2016)

Both these statements evidently draw on audience research in an attempt to define localness. In this they are in line with de Gournay’s argument, in her report on French local radio in the mid-1980s, that

there are many levels of appropriation[[5]](#footnote-5) involved in the use of aural media. The local emerges from the contextualisation of the aural product which happens at the moment of reception…the site of reception is also the site of the ‘local’ when we acknowledge that the user may combine the sounds heard with his or her use of space and idea of place. (de Gournay 1986:16,18).

In this section of her report, concerned with methodology, de Gournay's discussion was an implicit criticism of the brief she had been given, and the time and budget available to her, which only allowed her to use content analysis to assess the performance of the 15 radios associatives, rather than do field work to conduct some qualitative assessment. Her interest in the reception of media messages as a major constituent of meaning was in line with contemporary work in media and cultural studies. In Britain it was the encoding/decoding concept of Stuart Hall which some ten years before launched a series of ethnographic studies of audience reception.

To go back to the words of de Gournay that I quoted: English cannot capture the French 'imaginaire'. But the words *espace* and *lieu*, like the word *voice/voix* have both a literal, aural meaning, and a political one.

It brings us back to that 1977 manifesto - " the airwaves belong to us". On both sides of La Manche we have had the same demand: we want space for our voices, and we have persuaded the authorities – the French long before the British - to create systems where that is possible at the local level. This radiophonic space is public, more public than the sphericules of Twitter, because locally all can hear it and have their voices heard. This public appropriation is democratic, locally based and does not need the invasion of mainstream broadcasting

I referred earlier to the tragedy of Grenfell Tower and Hoggart & Hall's prophetic words. The image of the tower has become an iconic reference to the gulf between rich and poor throughout present-day British society. In the municipality of Kensington and Chelsea the rich have an average annual income of £140,000 and the council is spending £7m om an art museum. In the same municipality, 4,500 children live in poverty. A rich man can expect to live till 94, a poor man till 72. (Kennedy 2017).

The residents in Grenfell Tower and the surrounding estate had for years warned of the failure of the property managers to remedy faults that endangered lives - lack of emergency lighting on the stairs, no water sprinkler systems in place. Their voices were not heard and the questions now being asked across the country about the safety of high-rise blocks are revealing the labyrinth of layers of unaccountable responsibility and concealment when public money is given to private contractors who then sub-contract to other smaller suppliers.

I am not suggesting that community radio solves such problems. And clearly social media have an important role to play in mobilising opinion and as a source of information in emergencies. Both are needed at this level: to each according to their space, for all to imagine their place.

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1. This article is based on the presentation of the same title at GRER’s 8ème Colloque international, *La Radio au service des publics; enjeux, statuts, missions, programmes.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Quels Service pour quels publics ?’ *Les Rencontres Internationales des Rives de l’Étang de Berre, June 1977*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A fuller account of the British community radio campaign can be found in (Lefebre & Poulain 2016; see also Lewis 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On 14 June 2017, a [fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Building_fire) in the 24-storey [Grenfell Tower](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grenfell_Tower) block of [flats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_housing_in_the_United_Kingdom) in [North Kensington](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Kensington), [West London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_London_%28sub_region%29) caused the death of 72 people, the worst fire in occupied buildings in Britain since the [Second World War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II). A public inquiry, coroner's inquests and criminal investigation by police have done nothing to satisfy the demand of the surviving residents for justice and an explanation of why their warnings that this could happen were not heeded. Funding promised by the government to make safe hundreds of other tower blocks, endangered by similar unsafe materials, has not yet been forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I am aware that de Gournay's use of 'appropriation' is more about interpretation of sound than the connotation of invasion and occupation used in the title of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)