Anne Karpf/**The sound of home? Some thoughts on how the radio voice anchors, contains and sometimes pierces** (pre-print version; published in *The Radio Journal*, vol.11, no.1, April 2013, pp.59-73)

## Abstract

This article argues that while psychoanalytic theory has been valuably employed by television, film and cultural studies, there has been no comparable 'psychoanalytic turn' in radio studies. It suggests that the concept of 'containment', as developed variously by Wilfred Bion and Esther Bick, might go some way to explain the powerful role that the voice of the radio presenter can play in the regular listener's internal world, with the capacity both to 'hold' the listener together, and to transform overwhelming fears into more manageable feelings. It argues that the disembodied radio voice does this partly because it recalls the prenatal power of the maternal voice, and partly through the temporal order that regular radio voices impose on the internal and external world. Both Second World War British radio catchphrases and Roosevelt's Fireside Chats are discussed in relation to their containment function. The article also explores the radio as a transitional space, as defined by Donald Winnicott, through which it can constitute listeners into an 'imagined community'. It ends by reflecting on the impact of the angry voice of

the 'shock-jock' which, it suggests, amplifies rather than contains overwhelming feelings.[1]

**Contributor's details**

Anne Karpf is Reader in Professional Writing and Cultural Inquiry at London Metropolitan University. A journalist, broadcaster and radio critic of The Guardian for seven years, her books include 'The Human Voice' (Bloomsbury, 2006; Ehrenwirth, 2007; Autrement, 2008; Soshisha, 2008). She is currently researching the BBC broadcasts of Donald Winnicott, 1943-62.

**Contact details**

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, London Metropolitan University, 166-20 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB

email: A.Karpf@londonmet.ac.uk

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When Nick Clarke, the presenter of the BBC Radio 4 ‘The World at One’ daily news and current affairs programme, died in 2006, BBC message-boards were overwhelmed by tributes from distraught listeners. One described Clarke’s rich baritone, regularly heard presenting the BBC Radio 4 lunchtime news and current affairs programme, as ‘the voice of home’. More recently a 15-year-old girl, invited to describe the voice of the former Radio 1 breakfast show host, Chris Moyles, replied, 'If I heard it on a desert island it would be something from home' (Sue, interview, 21.2.12). Another woman, asked to chronicle her listening habits, reports that 'when I'm feeling good 'Woman's Hour' feels like family. I feel part of it' (Tacchi, 2000).

This article explores the relationship that listeners have with radio voices such as these. Although the 'satisfactions' and tastes of the radio audience have been analysed extensively by broadcasting organisations over decades, there is a paucity of research − by both broadcasters and academic researchers − about audiences' emotional engagement with the voices of radio presenters, beyond the level of 'likes and dislikes'. This absence reflects the minimal attention generally given to the voice in radio studies. Since, I will be suggesting, the radio voice has the power to work on listeners in visceral and unconscious ways, many of the arguments made here will necessarily be speculative. Listening, of course, is a highly subjective experience, and may not

be readily accessible through simple interview. Furthermore, accounts that audience members give of their listening habits can be inflected by not only what they consciously enjoy but also the cultural status of their preferred programmes, and the need to destigmatise low-status programmes. Tacchi's ethnographic case study of radio consumption, for instance, demonstrated some of the discrepancies arising between two couples' declared motives in tuning in to particular programmes and her own interpretive understanding of their pattern of radio use (Tacchi 2000). Matt Hills found that online contributors to the website set up in connection with the BBC Radio 2 show of Terry Wogan exhibited a distinct, whimsical improvisatory humour that reflected Wogan's own, while at the same time emphatically disavowing for themselves the denigrated status of fans (Hills, 2009). In other words accessing and analysing the multiple manifest and unconscious ways in which we use radio presents a methodological challenge but, I want to suggest, this should not preclude us from exploring them, even if impressionistically and often, necessarily, anecdotally. Here I use myself and my own listening as a prototype, and the examples I give come almost exclusively from British public service speech broadcasting. The article, therefore, does not purport to be a systematic theorisation of radio listening; rather it is a reflective essay that hopes to stimulate discussion.

In so doing it uses ideas drawn from psychoanalytic theory, specifically object relations. Psychoanalytic perspectives have been curiously lacking in radio studies. While television. film and cultural studies have enthusiastically adopted psychoanalytic theory as a tool to help explain, among other things, the powerful feelings evoked by cultural products, such an approach is rarely applied to the study of radio. This is not to say that 'the psychology of the listener' has escaped study, nor that radio scholars have ignored the paradox of listening as a private activity simultaneously conferring membership of a collective audience, and its consequent emotional impact. In 1935 Frank Stanton and Hadley Cantril's book, 'The Psychology of the Listener' for example, identified the radio listener's

> imaginative sense of participation in a common activity. He knows that others are listening with him and in this way feels a community of interest with people outside his home... "a consciousness of kind" which at times grows into an impression of vast social unity... Each individual must believe that others are thinking as he thinks and sharing their emotions (Douglas, 1999:133).

The following year Rudolf Arnheim's discussion of 'the psychology of the listener' acknowledged the way in which the scheduling of different music at different times of the day, week and year 'meets the conditions, the needs and

the moods of the listener' (Arnheim, 1936: 266), although Arnheim was more exercised by what he considered the pernicious effects of ' the passive character of listening-in' (Arnheim, 1936: 271).

There also exist individual listener's accounts of the psycho-social experience of listening, such as that by an American self-styled 'compulsive radio driver', contemplating how 'sound either attaches you or detaches you from your surroundings' (Loktev, 1993). Mladen Dolar has developed the Lacanian concept of the voice as the embodiment of part of the superego, but not does not extend this analysis to the radio voice or listener (Dolar, 2006). The ideas of Freud, Klein, Winnicott, or indeed the post-Freudians and post-Kleinians have been seemingly overlooked in radio scholarship. While psychoanalytic theory is a rich resource with which to think about our internal world, radio scholars have been reluctant to use it to analyse the deep bonds that can develop between radio programmes and presenters; the theories behind 'the talking cure' are rarely applied to 'the listening medium'.

**Homeliness**

The examples given above of the 'homeliness' of the radio presenter's voice are not unusual. When listeners identify radio voices with 'home', it is not

merely – or even necessarily – because those voices are heard in the home: they may embody equally 'homely' qualities if listened to in the car, at work or even in a shop. Nor are they invariably presenting 'homely' programmes, as evidenced by the inclusion of Moyles, a presenter known for his coarse humour, in the list. Furthermore, unlike that of Nick Clarke, the voices they refer to may not sound especially welcoming or resonant. Indeed, even when the radio voice is at its most instrumental - spelling out wind direction, precipitation, sea conditions in the shipping forecast - it has the capacity to engender a deep attachment. A radio critic describes the power of the shipping forecast, broadcast after midnight on Radio 4. 'These forecasts ... and their hypnotically formulaic progression... have a talismanic haunting power... the velvety Radio 4 voices... an unchanging, formal sign-off to the day... can seem like prayers, a litany, especially in the dark if you're half asleep' (Mahoney, 2011). It has even inspired a Seamus Heaney poem:

'Dogger. Rockall. Malin, Irish Sea:
Green swift upsurges, North Atlantic flux
Conjured by that strong gale-warning voice.
Collapse into a sibilant penumbra.'

The power of the shipping forecast lies, it seems, not merely in the images it evokes but also in some extra-verbal quality. The fact that the 'homeliness'

singled out above is not simply an iteration of the locus of a programme's reception, nor even of the words and sentiments that it carries, would suggest that it is also, perhaps, a property of both the radio voice, and the relationship between voice and listener. Dolar has argued that the voice can be located at the juncture of the subject and the Other, as 'between the two' (Dolar, 2006:101). I want to suggest that the radio voice works on us so powerfully and viscerally that its non-verbal melodies are regarded by listeners as something belonging not purely to the speaker but equally in some sense to the listener themselves.

**Object relations**

Drawing principally from object relations theory, I shall be asking how the voice of a stranger, emanating from a small technological device, can feel like home. Object relations doesn't constitute a neatly delineated, unified field but is an umbrella concept: Ronald Fairbairn defined it differently from Melanie Klein, and Klein from Donald Winnicott (Fairbairn, 1962; Klein, 1986; Winnicott, 1971). Object relations theorists examine the connections between our external relationships and internal landscape. Our inner world is not simply a tracing of our external experiences, even though these are internalised by the infant. Our internal objects are made up of people, or parts of people, in which

we invest emotional energy, but they can also be a representation, memory or fantasy of a person, place or thing. Clearly, a radio programme, a presenter or even a presenter's voice can make up our internal objects, and object relations, in its focus on the relationship between the external and the internal, can be of use in helping us understand the dynamic, deep relationship that can exist between a listener and a disembodied radio voice. Here I want to focus on two particular aspects of object relations, that of containment, and transitional space, and think about how they can be applied to the voice of the regular radio presenter. By voice I mean what Barthes (1977) called 'the grain of the voice', the actual embodied physical instrument through which the radio presenter broadcasts.

**Containment**

The concept of the container and the contained is useful in talking about the connection between listener and broadcaster because what it describes is a relational, interactive process in which the receiver is also the transmitter and vice versa. It is not exactly a reciprocal relationship, but both parties have a role to play in the evolution of meaning. Through the transformative act of

containment, in the first instance a parent, or later an analyst, can help a child or patient tolerate something that might feel intolerable. Wilfred Bion helped name, identify and theorise this process. In one of his earliest attempts to pin it down, he described the way that a patient strove to rid himself of fears of death which felt overwhelming, and 'put them into me' (Bion, 1959: 96). If they stayed there long enough, Bion surmised, and in the process were subject to modification by his psyche, they could then be safely introjected or taken back inside the patient or baby.

> Suppose the mother picks up the baby and comforts it, is not at all disorganised or distressed, but makes some soothing response. The distressed infant can feel that, by its screams or yells, it has expelled those feelings of impending disaster into the mother. The mother's response can be felt to detoxicate the evacuation of the infant; the sense of impending disaster is modified by the mother's reaction, and can then be taken back into itself by the baby (Bion, 1974: pp83/4).

The baby, then, by projecting its bad feelings onto the mother, literally dis-owns them; the mother for her part, presuming that she herself can tolerate the projected feelings (not a foregone conclusion), transforms them, thereby allowing the baby to introject them back into his or herself. The baby clearly plays an active part in this process, not just through its need to rid itself of the

unbearable feelings, but also in its search for a resilient, safe container for them.

Writing in 1967 the psychoanalyst Esther Bick saw containment from the unintegrated baby's point of view:

> The need for a containing object would seem, in the infantile unintegrated state, to produce a frantic search for an object – a light, a voice, a smell, or other sensual object – which can hold the attention and thereby be experienced momentarily at least, as holding the parts of the personality together (Bick, 1967:56).

Bion and Bick's ideas about containment differ: while to Bion the act of containment has the capacity to make unmanageable feelings tolerable through a process of transformation, detoxifying them, Bick sees the containing object or part-object as an integrating one, helping the baby deal with the fear of disintegration or annihilation by bringing together the split parts of the self. The radio voice, I suggest, can play a containing role in both these senses.

**The maternal voice**

Interestingly, Bick included the voice in her list of objects that can hold the voice together. I would suggest the voice is particularly suited to this ‘holding’ role. The foetus's auditory system develops early: babies begin to hear at around 28 weeks of gestation, long before they begin to see, and what they hear most regularly, most intensively and most insistently, apart from the growling, rumbling soundscape of the interior of the mother’s body and their own, is her voice. The mother’s voice has been described variously as a kind of umbilical cord (Vasse, 1974, quoted in Chion, 1999), a ‘sonorous envelope’ that 'surrounds, sustains, and cherishes the child' (ibid: 61), a ‘sound bath’, an audio-phonic skin, the first psychic space, in which the mother expresses something to the infant about itself that forms the basis of its own developing sense of self and ego (Anzieu, 1979:6). At its best, like a sonic version of amniotic fluid, the maternal voice has the capacity to contain the child.

One reason that the voice has such containing capacities is because the aural field is 360 degrees (Newham, 1998). Sound surrounds us and envelops us not only in the womb: in some real sense you can feel held in the warm embrace of someone’s voice, just as listeners to ‘The World at One’ felt about that of Nick Clarke. Interestingly, while radio and TV voices both still issue from a box-like device (even when accessed via a computer or digital television, or emanating from stereo speakers), television is always linear in its relationship with the

viewer (the viewer casts their gaze at a speaker or sound-producing image positioned opposite them); the experience of listening to the radio voice, by contrast, is much more encircling. We seem to look out at the world through our eyes, but take it in with our ears.

The prenatal impact of the voice of the mother has been intensively documented. Some studies have shown the mother's voice slowing down the fetal heart rate significantly (Fifer and Moon, 1995), which suggests that the soothing capacity is present even before the baby is born. In other studies foetuses got more and not less excited when they heard their mother speaking (Kisilevsky et al, 2003). Despite their contrasting conclusions, these studies suggest that the foetus is able to discriminate, even if 'only' physiologically, between the voices of its mother and those of other people, even of the same sex, and seems to respond viscerally to its familiarity already in the womb.

To the foetus, of course, the maternal voice is louder and more audible than all other voices because it is conducted not just through the air but also through the mother's body, passing from abdominal tissues into amniotic fluid, via her spine and pelvic arch (Petitjean, cited in Thurman and Welch, 1997). One psychoanalyst has suggested, intriguingly, that the foetus experiences sound as contact, possibly because sound waves from a person's voice create tiny, yet distinct impressions on the eardrum and skin, so that vibrations are felt as well

as heard (Niederland, 1958). When mothers speak, therefore, they really are engaged in a body-to-body experience with the baby in their womb, and are not just producing some localised vocal or auditory experience. This suggests that the relationship between hearing and touch is closer than we realise, and the idea that the human voice can exert some kind of holding function is not merely an abstract conceit or psychoanalytic caprice. Our prenatal experience predisposes and readies us to feel embraced by a voice, touched by it in a more than metaphorical way. The body remains somewhere in the voice.

The importance of the maternal voice, far from abating once the baby is born, increases. By the second week a human voice has become the most effective way of calming a baby, and by the third week the female voice is more effective at doing this any other sound or even the sight of the mother's face. One experiment found that small babies are so attuned to their mother's intonation that they suck faster when they hear their mother if, and only if, *the mother has recorded a message specially addressed to them* (Mehler and Bertoncini, 1979). (Intriguingly listeners, asked to identify the most important attribute of their favourite broadcaster, frequently single out the presenter's ability to suggest that they are specially addressing them.)

Lacan identified a mirror-stage of development in which the ego constitutes itself based on the mirror image (Lacan, 2004), though he also singled out

voice, along with gaze, as a crucial object (Lagaay, 2008). Other analysts have proposed an earlier 'sound mirror' stage (Anzieu, 1979). For our purposes the most interesting theory comes perhaps from the Italian psychoanalyst Suzanne Maiello, who posited the existence of a prenatal 'sound-object' (Maiello, 1995). The sound of the mother's voice, she suggests, which comes and goes and is not under the control of the baby, gives the foetus the first experience of both presence and absence, and can be considered the precursor of the postnatal maternal inner object. Melanie Klein judged the breast to be the first object but, following Maiello, one could argue that in some sense the voice is our first object.[1]

**The invisible medium**

Listening to the radio, then, to some extent repeats our earliest listening experience: just as the foetus can hear but cannot see its mother, so the radio presenter cannot be seen by the listener − the radio voice is disembodied. The special powers accorded the disembodied voice have been analysed by Michel Chion, who calls a sound heard without its being seen the 'acousmetre' (Chion, 1999). The acousmetre is capable of exciting all sorts of desires. (Numerous anecdotal accounts of listening to the radio in the dark have described a sense

[1] I'm grateful to Gianna Williams for this suggestion.

of being suffused with a feeling of safety, almost swaddled by the voice − the sibilant penumbra identified by Heaney's poem quoted above.) Since radio, as Chion acknowledges, is acousmatic by its very nature, this lends the radio voice omnipotence and omniscience. It might even be that, bombarded as we are today by images, the disembodied, invisible voice has become more, and not less, potent. Even in an era in which we are saturated with films and photographs of media 'personalities', and where a radio actor or broadcaster's face may be familiar from television or magazines, the radio voice can never be 'exposed', its quasi-mystical power never debunked or uncurtained, its meaning never fixed to an image, never stabilised by a face. And so, although the actress Judy Bennett is far older than Shula, the character she plays in the BBC Radio 4 daily drama serial ‘The Archers’, the aura of the character will never be punctured by the age of the actress who plays her: Shula cannot be unmasked. (Unlike the Wizard of Oz, whose formidable booming voice is eventually revealed as belonging to an unimpressive, unwizardly human frame.) The potentially omniscient disembodied voice − whether it belongs to the mother, the analyst or the radio presenter − is thus a good choice of container, seemingly strong enough to absorb anxiety and transform it.

**Fireside comfort**

This containing function of the radio voice is not always incidental but is sometimes deliberately structured into broadcasting, the most famous example that of Roosevelt. The strong, confident acoustic of his 31 'fireside chats', from 1933 onwards, was enormously effective in soothing the American public and containing them during the Depression. His measured pace and level tone, his paternal timbre, seemed to guarantee American safety, no matter how volcanic the events raging in the world. The philosopher T.V. Smith argued that 'Roosevelt's voice knew how to articulate the everlasting yea' (Smith, 1949, quoted in Leuchtenburg, 1997: 7). Roosevelt spoke far slower in his Fireside Chats than any other political orator on the air in the 1930s, but after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941 (Roosevelt, 1941,http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrVI6ENDL8Y, accessed 30.09.12) his rate dipped to 88 words per minute – the normal radio tempo of the time was 175-200 wpm (Miller, 2003).

Interestingly Roosevelt's long pauses never felt like holes through which the listener could fall, although a slow speaker runs this risk. (Churchill's voice was similarly containing, despite his celebrate 'loaded pauses'.) For if the voice can help listeners to feel contained, it also has the potential to draw attention to a lack of containment, as we shall see. But Roosevelt's voice was so commanding that, despite his pauses, it managed to bind his talk together, as well as his

listeners to him and to each other. The containing function, here, operates therefore not only between speaker and individual hearer, but also between listeners, turning them into an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983).

**Resilience, British style**

The impact made by a voice is not easily differentiated from that made by words and voice acting together; hence the usefulness of 'speech' as term that conflates them. Words, of course, have a significant role to play in the containing function of radio. During the war catchphrases played a major role in binding individuals together as well as providing something for listeners to hold on to – an audio home front. The audience came to anticipate catchphrases, such as those in the BBC's most celebrated radio comedy series, ITMA ('It's That Man Again'), which aired from 1939 to 1948: for example ‘I don’t mind if I do’, ‘It’s being so cheerful as keeps me going’ (uttered by the show's most lugubrious character, Mona Lott) and 'Can I do you now. Sir?’. When these were eventually delivered listeners felt gratified, often joining in, and they quoted them so liberally in their conversations that the radio voice became, in a sense, their own. But catchphrases were not just about words; their reassuring qualities also resided in their timbres. Listeners would mimic the accent, pitch and intonation of an actor, integrating the melody of the

catchphrase into their daily speech (as, later, they would with other successful radio series, such as 'The Goons'). The first of ITMA's popular catchphrases was that of a diver, feebly mouthing the words 'I'm going down now, sir.' This phrase was then deployed by fighter pilots as they swooped down on the enemy, young men conscripted to work in the coal mines during the war (the so-called Bevin Boys) and Londoners going to shelter in tube stations (Parker, 1977). The programme's producer, Frank Worsley, recalled that practically no lift at the time descended without someone in it saying, in precisely the same timbre used by the actor in the radio show, 'I'm going down now' (Partridge, 1986). Similarly the two parts of the catchphrase 'I go - I come back' were so entwined in popular consciousness that when the actor playing Ariel in a production of 'The Tempest' in Manchester spoke the lines 'I go, I go', the whole audience responded collectively by shouting out 'I come back!' (Farkas, 2002: 150). So, at a time of collective fear, these comic motifs seem to have acted as a national containing resource, into which fears could be projected, modified if not transformed through humour, and then introjected back into daily discourse shorn of some of their terror. Listeners in some sense ventriloquised the catchphrases, and found a shared comic way of ironising individual anxiety.

Broadcasters, through their very voices, can act as a hedge against chaos. The tone, tempo and pitch of the 'Today' presenters on BBC Radio 4, for example, speak of rationality but also of joshing, of a capacity to be unfazed and unhurried by the buffeting of current events. Whatever appalling things are happening in the world – and recently there have been a fair number – I know that, by hearing them mediated through the voices of John Humphrys, James Naughtie, Sarah Montague, etc, they will lose some of their potential to overwhelm me, and be reconstituted as something that can be contained within the timetable of everyday life − anchored and lent coherence partly through the agreed conventions of news but also by the speaking style of the presenters. It was also apparent to me, through interviews with 50 respondents in the USA and UK about their voice-reading practices (Karpf, 2006), that the voices of regular radio presenters become as recognisable as those of friends and family: not just familiar but also familial. These accounts seemed to suggest that so attuned are listeners to the timbre, pitch and tempo of regular presenters that they learn to read and interpret them as they do the voices of their intimates, and integrate the vocal melodies that they hear on radio into their own internal soundscape.

Radio presentational styles emerge over time: they are a culturally- and, more particularly, network-specific psycho-acoustic. In the case of BBC speech

radio, changes in accents and delivery notwithstanding, this can be traced back to the Second World War when, as in the case of ITMA, radio played such a major role in raising the morale of the home front. The style of Charles Hill, who broadcast health advice under the soubriquet of the Radio Doctor, became another marker of British resilience and pragmatism. This was partly through his fondness for the demotic (as he admitted, 'I did once define pathologist as a man who sits on one stool and examines others' (Karpf, 1988: 45), but also through his blokeish, jocular timbre. Not for Hill the stentorian lecture, the usual broadcasting style of the day: instead he addressed the listener individually, with familiarity. He came to play a mythic, even ideological role in British culture – an emblem of how stalwart the British remained, no matter how greatly provoked. For those who heard him at the time, the mere sound of his voice, like that of 'Monty' (Field-Marshal Montgomery), or Churchill, or again Roosevelt, retained an evocative power, an audio equivalent of Proust's madeleine, with the ability to resuscitate almost visceral old feelings of safety and containment.

This is part of what Raymond Williams called ‘the structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1976), although such structures, as Williams himself noted, are not universal in any culture, and are subject to change; how you are positioned within a culture will shape what kind of internal object a radio voice assumes.

Although I have no more than anecdotal evidence, in discussion my young students, many of them from ethnic minorities, profess themselves them utterly estranged from the very idea of speech radio: for them, more specifically, the rich, baritone, middle-aged, bourgeois male voice of a BBC Radio 4 presenter connotes not safety and resilience but an oppressive authoritarianism. Such voices, far from being containing, only serve to remind these listeners how marginal they are. They hear them as the apotheosis of the dominant culture, an audio reminder of their own otherness.

**Our daily calm**

One of the ways through which the radio voice develops its capacity to contain is by virtue of its regularity – its dailiness. Paddy Scannell has written eloquently about how our day is 'zoned' by broadcasting, and daily life structured by imposing upon it a temporal framework (Scannell, 1986). I would suggest that this is achieved in part by the association of a particular radio voice with a specific time of day: individual voices mark out the hours, days, weeks and seasonal pattern of the year, giving it an audio structure. If I hear James Naughtie at 10 am, for example, where I expect to hear Jenni Murray, or at 5pm where Eddie Mair belongs, the building-blocks of my day in some deep sense would be disturbed, the very order of things transgressed. A particular

voice comes to contain and embody a specific quartile of the day: there is morning in one voice, early evening in another. Our reactions to them are not just Pavlovian, in some obvious associative way. If, as one of my respondents has for many years, a listener drinks her morning cup of tea in bed each day while listening to the 'Today' programme, then, I want to suggest, it's almost as if tea-ness becomes embedded in the presenter's voice, one of their vocal characteristics. If this is the case (and inevitably, what follows cannot be more than speculation), then containment comes not just from hearing one's favourite presenter but also from the actual programming schedule, and even the individual slot which, like the consulting-room and the analytic 50-minute session, itself does some of the work of containment. The rhythm and pattern of the radio day and season then provide a temporal anchor, a bridge between our internal world and diurnal rhythms.

Indeed for individual listeners, these patterns exist not just horizontally but also vertically and historically. When sports writer Frank Keating today, at the age of 72, listens to cricket commentary on the radio, he remembers being eight, on his first holiday back home from a freezing monastery boarding school, and hearing - through hiss, crackle and static - the BBC world service commentary on the bedside wireless. 'That was Sydney, December 1946, and tonight, more than three-score winters on, I'll be re-enacting that boyhood

initiation' (Keating, 2010). Each subsequent broadcast contains, nesting within it, the earlier ones, and yet implicit in such listening is also a poignant consciousness of not only continuity but also change: the cricket commentary continues, although the reception is now crispy-clear and Keating 72.

**Transitional space**

Object relations theory, as we've seen, is particularly interested in the relationship between internal and external reality. Radio voices, as in the case of Frank Keating and the cricket commentary, enmesh private time with public time, and in the process, I want to suggest, create a distinct psycho-spatial position.

This psycho-spatial position is a transitional space, between me and other. Winnicott saw the transitional object as the first not-me, the first possession, a mental space that partook of both the objective and subjective, an inner and outer object (Winnicott, 1971). He used the term originally to denote an intermediate area of experience which helps the child move away from a sense of omniscience and towards the Reality Principle. Later, however, he went on to argue that cultural experience develops out of 'the potential space between a child and the mother' (Winnicott, 1986: 36), and that as adults 'in health we devise ways and means for recapturing the feeling of meaningfulness' (ibid: 50) that Winnicott associated with transitional phenomena: this could turn out to

be the cultural life of an individual. I use the term here in this sense, not clinically or literally but symbolically, as a space which we recognise lies outside of our own subjectivity, and yet which creates about an encounter between me and not-me. Robert Young amplifies this idea by describing some of his own cultural experiences.

> 'That sense of intermediateness is exactly what I feel sitting in a theatre, listening to music, reading, watching a sunset. I cannot say where my hopes, dreams and longings end and what I am taking in from the experience begins. There is a merging, a congruence, a suspension of boundaries. I am in the theatre, in my mind and in the cultural experience − all at once... For me, much the most satisfying experiences of this sort come from favourite music played at a home or in-car stereo, where one is bathed in totally enfolding sound. The experience is both soothing and ecstatic, like a return to the womb, and certain pieces of music make the experience almost overwhelmingly comforting'(Young, 1994).

The radio voice can be similarly enfolding. It originates outside of the listener, but then arrives in our houses, our cars, our workplaces − the spaces that we think of as ‘home’. Like Young's sunset, or his experience of reading or watching a play, it brings together the external and internal worlds. Listening to the radio allows us to both tune out of our own subjectivity − our cacophony

of internal voices − and connect with that of other people, but also to integrate their subjectivity with our own. This is not to imply that radio and listener become one undifferentiated being: on the contrary, it indicates a third space, one that is quasi-public, partaking of both the objective and subjective, through which the listener can move from a wholly internal world to one that is not yet entirely outside its control . Or alternatively, as Jo Tacchi has argued, 'radio sound can be used to create a non-public social space, making it a safe environment in which to work on one's sociality' (Tacchi, 1998:3).

Some of Winnicott's list of special qualities attaching to the transitional object map surprisingly easily onto the radio:

1. 'The infant assumes rights over the object' (Winnicott, 1971: 5). Ethnographies of radio and television consumption (Morley, 1986), as well anecdotal accounts of radio listening, document struggles within families over control of the dial and the choice of radio station: if the radio set is situated in the kitchen it is frequently seen as coming under the purview of the mother, as though it were another kitchen appliance, such as the oven or blender. Tacchi's respondents described in detail their contrasting radio habits, with one woman conceding that she occasionally managed to persuade her partner that 'you ought to listen to this, and I could tell he didn't like it, but oh, he was listening under protest' (Tacchi, 2000)

2. 'It must never change, unless changed by the infant' (Winnicott, 1971: 6). Perhaps this helps explain the outraged protests from listeners whenever a Controller of BBC Radio 4 threatens to tamper even slightly with the schedule. In the 1970s and early 1980s uproar greeted proposals to introduce 'rolling' news and discussion programmes. The loyal audiences of existing programmes felt affronted that some hireling had the nerve to tamper with 'their' programme. (The possibility of traditional radio slots in speech radio being eroded might also have created anxiety about the loss of boundaries and consequent reduction of radio's capacity to contain. Unzoned radio, the haphazard scheduling of radio voices − these have the potential to create a deep dis-order.)

3. 'It must survive instinctual loving, and also hating' (Winnicott, 1971: 6). I am clearly not the only person who shouts at my radio set; many of my respondents (Karpf,2006) admitted to cruelly (albeit only privately) imitating the accent and timbre of presenters and contributors they did not like.

The transitional space created by radio is distinct from actual, embodied, geographical space. Few listeners, I imagine, think of radio broadcasters as sitting in a small room, but rather disembody and displace them so that they belong equally, if not more, to the place in which they are heard: the breakfast show turns into the bathroom programme, or a lunchtime bulletin

metamorphoses into the kitchen news. Despite being an experienced broadcaster, I was shocked, when I took part in BBC Radio 4's ‘Start The Week’ a few years ago, to discover that it emanated from a small studio in Broadcasting House, when I had imagined it somehow issuing forth from a collective space in the ether, a junior common-room of the air. This was my own Wizard of Oz moment.

Roosevelt’s radio talks were called fireside chats, even though it was his listeners and not he himself who were gathered round the hearth. Nevertheless, as I suggest above, Roosevelt managed to construct a kind of collective hearth. In contrast to those early days of radio, listening these days is usually a solitary experience, with radio sets infinitely portable, and sometimes no more than another app on the mobile. Families no longer listen together; indeed today it is most peculiar to be listening to radio with more than one other person. In an increasingly atomised and customised society, symbolic and collective spaces become all the more important and meaningful. One example is ‘Terry's Old Geezers and Old Gals’ (TOGS), the surrogate family of listeners dreamed up by Terry Wogan, the BBC Radio 2 presenter. Describing himself as the 'TOGmeister', Wogan used his self-deprecating humour to play on stereotypes of age and infirmity, a theme sustained in the bad jokes that the TOGS would phone in, and at special TOG conventions. When Wogan

retired from his daily breakfast show in 2009, some of his most ardent fans gathered outside Broadcasting House to send him off. They identified, among his special qualities, 'He has this knack of making everyone part of the programme' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8420769.stm). Hills (2009) has documented how the TOGS constitute themselves, both as part of the discursive world of Wogan, but also as relatively autonomous. The programme and website have thus became another imagined community, a shared public space, a network as determinedly social as any Facebook group.

The radio, of course, is a real material object as well as an internal one. For my former neighbour, a woman in her 70s who lived alone, BBC Radio 4 was a lifeline. On two occasions she phoned me in a highly anxious state. Her radio had run out of batteries and she begged me to run to the shops round the corner to buy her a replacement. The second time I asked her whether it would not it be better – and ultimately cheaper – to have a plug-in radio set in the bedroom, living-room and kitchen, which would also free up her hands when moving between rooms. She refused, however, and I wondered whether it was holding the radio set – and not only being 'held' by it – that was a significant part of what she valued so much.

**Uncontained**

Radio does not always contain. There are occasions when listeners, far from feeling supported by a radio voice, have the sensation of being penetrated by it. This might be because of the acoustic qualities of a particular voice, or the characteristics of a particular listener. Few voices were more penetrating or piercing than Hitler's. In her diary of 1938 Virginia Woolf described listening to a Hitler speech on the radio:

> Hitler boasted and boomed but shot no solid bolt, mere violent rant, and then broke off. We listened to the end. A savage howl like a person excruciated; then howls from the audience; then a more spaced and measured sentence. Then another bark… the voice was frightening (Woolf, quoted in Beer, 1996).

Hitler’s harangues were so aggressive that at times they seemed to leave his German listeners with only one option: if they were not to become the object of his attack, they had to identify with the aggressor. This is the very opposite of containment: listeners became the receptacles for Hitler’s rage and frenzy, permeated and saturated by his venom.

When we hear the voice of a speaker with whom we violently disagree, attention frequently focuses disproportionately on their timbre. The American right-wing broadcaster, Rush Limbaugh, one of the earliest so-called 'shock jocks', excites powerful reactions from listeners. One said of him, 'The sound of

his voice is fingernails on a chalkboard, feedback from a microphone' (http://www.cleveland.com/business/index.ssf/2012/03/rush_limbaugh_show_is_no_place/2311/comments-8.html deerhunterdave 3/3/12, accessed 23.3.12). What listeners introject in cases like this is the speaker's rage. Instead of detoxifying fear and anger, such broadcasters retoxify them, and then repeatedly project them into the listener. To a listener struggling with fear and anger of their own, this might feel (temporarily) like a supportive and even containing process, but the feelings returned to them – although they may feel legitimised – can never thereby reduced in destructive power. On the contrary, they are fortified and amplified, and so the programme needs to be returned to again and again because the projected and then introjected feelings can never fully be tolerated (or contained) by the listener.

Even measured voices can engender hostility. When the Radio 4 presenter Robert Robinson died in 2011, the obituaries judged that 'the sound of Robinson was part of the fabric of the BBC' (Thorpe, 2011: 12), while a BBC commissioning editor claimed that he had 'one of the most recognisable and pleasurable voices on radio' (Thorpe, 2011: 12). And yet to those who did not like him, Robinson was 'Smuggins', the embodiment of the superior, complacent educated middle classes.

Our reaction to radio voices is always over-determined. A particular radio programme or voice can become associated with a relationship that has gone sour, as in the case of some of Tacchi's respondents. It can be shaped by the listener's social class, age race, gender, sub-cultural affiliation, or indeed the speaker's. But it is also determined by our own receptivity: some listeners are more sensitive and porous to a radio voice than others. And where we are positioned in this spectrum takes us back, in every sense, to where we began − with infancy. As the title of a collection of Winnicott's essays puts it, 'Home is Where We Start From' (Winnicott, 1986).

**Conclusion**

The dominant critical discourse about the radio voice is still mostly aesthetic − a voice is beautiful or ugly, grates or is resonant, has good elocution or poor. This paper has tried, using object relations theory, to reflect upon the relationship between speaker's voice and listener in a more dynamic way. It suggests that the power of radio's invisible voices resides partly in their deep echo of our earliest, prenatal experience of hearing a disembodied voice − our mother's. By using the concept of container and contained, and seeing the radio voice as occupying a transitional space and psycho-spatial position, it has explored some of the ways that radio can soothe and comfort, unite subjective

with collective experience, and through sound impose a temporal structure. Finally, we have seen how the broadcasting voice, at its least containing, can serve to increase the volume of our angriest and most fearful voices − those that come from the radio sets in our head.

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