

## **Beyond the consulting-room: Winnicott the broadcaster<sup>i</sup>**

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Between 1943 and 1962, the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott gave more than fifty broadcasts on BBC Radio. Mostly taking the form of scripted talks, they covered a wide range of subjects - from guilt and jealousy to evacuation and step-parents - and later formed the basis of a bestselling book - *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, first published in 1964, and two other volumes, *Talking to Parents* (1993) and *Winnicott on the Child* (2002). They began life as radio broadcasts, however - most famously the series "The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby" (1949-52).

In these talks Winnicott laid out the fundamentals of his theory: that the baby is a person from the start, that it is through the intimate relationship with an attentive, "devoted", "good enough" mother - a mother who can be loved, hated, and depended upon - that the baby develops into a healthy, independent, adult individual. And that when mothers try to do things by the book - or by the wireless - "[T]hey lose touch with their own ability to act without knowing exactly what is right and what is wrong" (Winnicott, 1993, p. 5). On the other hand, "When things go wrong, as they must do from time to time, you are at a disadvantage if you are working blind. If you know what's going on you become less sensitive to criticism and to chance remarks from passers-by" (Winnicott, 2002, p. 131) - the *raison d'être* of his talks.

Adam Phillips (1988) has argued that for Winnicott, the non-prescriptive mother in her relationship to the baby formed a model for the non-impinging psychoanalyst - both of them creating a setting of trust in which development could take place at its own pace. In some sense Winnicott extended this same practice to the broadcast, hoping to engender in the listener not compliance but a space in which to think about her baby and his needs. Winnicott provided a "holding environment" for listeners, and his producers provided a holding environment for him.

Winnicott's broadcasting career was shaped by two pioneering female producers in the BBC's Talks Department, Janet Quigley and Isa Benzie, from whom he was eager to learn and remarkably open to criticism. Winnicott's talks are often described as though they were somehow pre-existing and simply needed to be "decanted" onto the wireless. Nothing could be further from the truth. Janet Quigley and later Isa Benzie were formative in guiding both the choice of subject matter and approach, and in ensuring that he didn't make listeners feel guilty.

What is remarkable is how quickly he established himself. He started broadcasting only in 1943 and yet by 1946 Isa Benzie, discussing a project, declared: "We think the programme is likely to stand or fall by your participation."<sup>ii</sup> By 1949 he had *carte blanche* in his choice of subject matter. He was also learning to think like a broadcaster - which ideas would work on air, how many talks they would need, and even how topical they were. Yet Winnicott never stopped being self-critical and tried, to the last, to develop his skills as a broadcaster. In 1945 he wrote to Quigley: "Use the blue pencil or any other colour. Or say if it's no good."<sup>iii</sup>

The new cultural form of the radio talk suited him beautifully. In 1933 Hilda Matheson, director of Talks at the BBC, had urged broadcasters not "to address the microphone as if it were a public meeting ... The person sitting at the other end expected the speaker to address him [sic] personally, simply, almost familiarly, as man to man" (Matheson, 1933, pp. 75-76). Winnicott managed to sound simultaneously authoritative and (relatively) conversational. Unlike many of his colleagues, who regarded broadcasting as an exercise in narcissism or exhibitionism, or feared (as Anna Freud did) that appearing on the radio would seem like advertising their services, he did not believe that popularising diminished the seriousness of his work.

One factor contributing to his success as a broadcaster was the clear conception he had of his listeners. Winnicott believed it was to mothers that he "deeply needed to speak" (Winnicott, 1986, p.123), and one of his most powerful stylistic devices was to address them in the second person, as "you". "You will be relieved", he reassured them, "that I am not going to tell you what to do ... I cannot tell you exactly what to do but I can talk about what it all means" (1964, pp. 15-16).

Winnicott had an acute understanding of different audiences, and the different registers they called for. He had no hesitation in writing outspoken and provocative letters to the *British Medical Journal* on controversial subjects like ECT, leucotomy, and evacuation, but on radio his tone was always non-judgemental. He intuitively understood the dangers of focusing, to an undifferentiated radio audience, on the pathological rather than the ordinary, especially because it brought the risk that listeners would feel bad but would have no access to therapy. And from his earliest broadcasts onwards, they wrote to him in great numbers, occasionally "fiercely critical"<sup>iv</sup> but more often highly appreciative, praising the fact that, as one listener put it, "He holds no one guilty."<sup>v</sup>

He was helped by his strong sense of when to use psychoanalytic terms and when to translate them into a demotic language accessible to lay listeners. So, for example, in his 1960 broadcast "What Irks", he was able to allude to the argument he made in his paper "Hate in the Countertransference" without ever using the clinical term (Winnicott, 1993, p. 75) and in the 1962 talk "Now We Are Five", he describes the transitional object as a "special object" (Winnicott, 1993, p. 118).

Winnicott could describe phenomena that were "outside the realm of the written or spoken word until he came to grips with them" (Rodman, 2003, p. 44). He came up with arresting phrases - such as "good enough mother" - which then became part of both specialist and popular discourse (Schwartz, 1999). He was also a famously playful communicator. Benjamin Spock praised "... the surprising contrasts in his language. It is predominantly grave, deeply thoughtful and analytical. Then suddenly he gives way to earthy folk talk" (2002, p. 7). He had an instinctive feel for what has been described as "the curious fusion of these two technologies of dislocated identity ... ether and unconscious" (Sconce, 2009, p. 33).

Through his broadcasting experience, Winnicott developed the skill of writing to speak. The published versions of his scripts hardly needed editing (C. Winnicott, Bollas, Davis, &

Shepherd, 1993, p. xvi). Paragraphs added by hand in the studio to his scripts are as fluent as any of his other writing. Winnicott wrote words that he could speak easily on air, and his scripts were then published - the cycle from written to oral back to written forms reflected the fact that he regarded the process as a single one. Unlike John Bowlby, he did not need to be instructed "to make all one's points ... not only with pictures and examples and concrete nouns but literally with words of one syllable."<sup>vi</sup>

His actual voice was high-pitched and slow (although most broadcast speech of the period sounds painfully slow to modern ears) and did not reflect his vitality. According to BBC audience research, many listeners judged it unpleasant, or even "awful".<sup>vii</sup> He himself was deeply critical of the way he sounded. He wrote to Benzie in 1960, "I've just listened to Jealousy, and while I liked the script I HATED the voice."<sup>viii</sup> It wasn't until a studio manager moved the microphone closer to Winnicott in 1960 that he declared "For the first time I did not hate hearing myself."<sup>ix</sup>

Various explanations for Winnicott's voice have been advanced. Benzie speculated that one reason was his "lifelong professional habit of talking to mentally sick small children in a very very quiet way."<sup>x</sup> A producer who worked with him remembered that "He told me that ... when he was talking to the children they related to someone with a high voice better - someone like their mother, or a woman anyway."<sup>xi</sup>

Yet Winnicott's voice also helped him communicate with mothers so that he did not sound like a declamatory male expert: it positioned him instead midway in pitch between a man and a woman. This vocal "no man's land" made him, in a sense, androgynous, combining the authority of a male doctor with a more supposedly "female" empathy.

It's curious that his talks engendered so little resistance when other psychoanalytically orientated broadcasts of the time almost invariably trailed controversies behind them. This is partly because he was championed by Benzie and Quigley, but also because he fitted the cultural renaissance represented by Penguin Books, the documentary film movement, and Mass Observation social research, as well as the BBC.

There were a number of other factors sheltering Winnicott from criticism. Until 1959 all his talks were transmitted on the Light Programme or the Home Service, and so were much less likely to be reviewed in the press than Third Programme broadcasts, especially if nestling under the rubric of daytime magazine programmes such as "Woman's Hour". His talks were also less likely to incite hostility because he did not advocate a rigid or novel child-rearing regime.

Winnicott broadcast anonymously, as was the custom of the time (Karpf, 1988), and was usually described as "speaking anonymously, as a psychologist",<sup>xii</sup> although at other times as "a doctor caring for children",<sup>xiii</sup> and only infrequently as "a psychotherapist",<sup>xiv</sup> even though he was president of the British Psychoanalytical Society from 1956 until 1959. The camouflage of medicine and psychology suited him: it prevented listeners from being scared of what he had to say, or placing him within a particular analytic tradition, emphasising instead his medical expertise and his focus on normality.

Another reason that Winnicott found such a secure berth in the BBC was because psychoanalytic ideas had already begun to percolate into British society, with terms like Oedipus complex and ego common among intellectuals. The collective trauma of the First World War, as well as attempts to treat shell shock, had made the British public receptive to anything that might help explain the “fragility of reason” (Richards, 2000). Psychoanalytic ideas were also disseminated by the Bloomsbury set (Rodman, 2003): Lytton Strachey's younger brother, James Strachey, was Winnicott's analyst.

The spread of the child guidance movement in the 1920s and '30s, with its developmental view of childhood, had laid the foundations for Winnicott, while the arrival in Britain of Melanie Klein in 1926 and Freud in 1938 brought psychoanalysis more public recognition. By 1939, as W. H. Auden remarked, Freud was "no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion" (1966). Campaigns by interwar criminologists for penal reform, saturated with psychoanalytic thinking, also proved influential, helping to shape popular conceptions about how to treat delinquency (Waters, 1998) - an approach famously satirised by the 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story* in Stephen Sondheim's lyrics for “Gee Officer Krupke”: "This boy don't need a judge, he needs an analyst's care."

Zaretsky (1999) has called Winnicott “the first English analytic media celebrity”. Certainly, as part of the British school of object relations theorists, his broadcasts offered a psychoanalysis that wasn't introspective (Thomson, 2006), or full of the dark Jewish mittel-European drives of Freud and Klein's destructive infant. He understood Englishness: "The Englishman", he wrote, "... does not want to be upset, to be reminded that there are personal tragedies all over the place, that he is not really happy himself, in short - he refuses to be put off his golf" (Phillips, 1988, p. 48).

If Winnicott was populariser-in-chief of psychoanalytic ideas about parenting, his was not a lone voice. Susan Isaacs and Ruth Thomas also took to the airwaves while *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, the 1946 bestselling childcare manual by Benjamin Spock - an admirer of Winnicott - found a public eager to read about liberal child-rearing practices, and magazines such as *Childhood, the Magazine for Modern Parents* launched in 1947, followed.

But probably the most significant factor in creating a public receptive to Winnicott's broadcasts was the Second World War. Gone were the old certainties and traditional beliefs. Family life became a site of absence as well as presence: with men recruited and children evacuated, a public space was created in which the family could be thought about, and thought about differently. Women's role as keeper of the home and hearth became symbolically more important and more visible. People wanted to understand the origin of individual destructive instincts at a time when the consequences of collective aggression were so terrible. Perhaps Winnicott's wartime broadcasts, through their analysis of babies' feelings, acted also as a medium through which to express adults' confusion and fear, something otherwise hard to speak about in wartime when it was felt that public morale needed to be kept high: discussion of infants' angry and anxious states could therefore serve as a conduit through which their parents' similar emotions might be safely articulated and contained.

Indeed, the same medium, as Farley has noted (2012), that blared out Hitler's hate-filled speeches and news of the progress of the war became the channel through which Winnicott could explore human vulnerability and sadness.

In 1940, as psychiatric consultant to the government evacuation scheme in Oxford, he supervised hostel workers' care of children separated from their mothers. For both Winnicott and the public, the removal of children from their homes and mothers threw into sharp relief what constituted good mothering - and what the reliable, continuing presence of a mother contributed to a child's emotional growth.

Among the many later criticisms of Winnicott is that he sounded patronising, as if he were talking to children and not just about them. It was rather the case, though, that he became one - his identification with the infant was uninhibitedly visceral.

Most mothers are probably neither as ordinary nor as devoted as Winnicott depicted them, but he must be read and listened to historically. His conception of “the ordinary devoted mother” is implicitly contrasted not with an “ordinary un-devoted mother” (Winnicott was rarely normative or judgemental about mothers in his broadcasts) but with an “extraordinary devoted mother”: he was attempting to make visible, name, and hymn the routine practices of mothering, which he felt had been neglected and demanded wonder and respect. Yet he was also sensitive to the frustrations and even hatred that could be generated by caring for a baby - the sense of "Damn you, you little bugger" (2002, p. 7). And he could be radical in his attitudes to women: his view that a fear of women often followed from the refusal to acknowledge our early dependence on mothers was a startling idea for a male doctor in the 1950s (Winnicott [1957] 2002).

Winnicott stopped broadcasting regularly in the early 1960s, partly because of ill health, but also because his ideas were also increasingly out of sync with changing social currents. Post-Spock, liberal parenting itself came to be problematised, with women beginning to critique the notion of maternal sacrifice (Thomson, 2012).

But by then the BBC and Winnicott had taken psychoanalysis out of the consulting room and onto the airwaves (Shapira, 2012). Anna Freud herself enthusiastically endorsed the broadcasts. "I admire your 'Devoted Mother' talks very much, and I feel no student of our subject should miss either reading or hearing them (Rodman, 2003, p. 271).

Winnicott, the quintessential Englishman among Europeans, with a talent for metabolising psychoanalytic ideas for lay listeners, had found a post-war female public for whom the home and mothering had become emblems of “normality”. Winnicott was their guide through this new normal, and its eloquent rhapsodist.

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<sup>ii</sup> BBC Donald Woods Winnicott Dr RCONT 1 File 1a 1943-1959 (hereafter TWa): Isa Benzie (IB) to Donald Winnicott (DW), 18.4.46.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. DW to Janet Quigley (JQ), 15.1.45.

<sup>iv</sup> BBC Microfiche, script (as broadcast) of "The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby - My Fan Mail", 20.2.52.

<sup>v</sup> BBC RCONT1: TALKS - WINNICOTT, DONALD WOODS, DR. File 1b, 1960-1962 (hereafter TWb): quoted in IB to DW, 13.4.60.

<sup>vi</sup> BBC RCONT 1 John Bowlby Talks 1946-1962, File 1, IB to John Bowlby (JB), 15.4.46.

<sup>vii</sup> BBC Audience Research, "Parents and Children", op. cit.

<sup>viii</sup> TWb: DW to IB, 7.3.60.

<sup>ix</sup> TWb: DW to IB, 26.4.60.

<sup>x</sup> TWb: IB to JQ, 3.5.60.

<sup>xi</sup> Personal communication, Sally Thompson, 13.1.13.

<sup>xii</sup> "Happy Children", *Radio Times*, 10.12.43, 4.2.44.

<sup>xiii</sup> "How's The Baby?", *Radio Times*, 30.9.49; "The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby", *Radio Times*, 9.1.52.

<sup>xiv</sup> "Difficult Children in Difficult Times", *Radio Times*, 26.1.45.