



Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique

French Journal of British Studies

XXVI-I | 2021

The BBC and Public Service Broadcasting in the
Twentieth Century

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/7681>

ISSN: 2429-4373

Publisher

CRECIB - Centre de recherche et d'études en civilisation britannique

Electronic reference

Peter M. Lewis, « “A Claim to Be Heard”: Voices of Ordinary People in BBC Radio Features », *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online], XXVI-I | 2021, Online since 05 December 2020, connection on 06 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/7681>

This text was automatically generated on 6 December 2020.



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“A Claim to Be Heard”: Voices of Ordinary People in BBC Radio Features

Les Voix des gens ordinaires à la radio de la BBC – expériences 1930-2000

Peter M. Lewis

Introduction

“In some stations I see periodically men down to speak whose status, either professionally or socially, and whose qualifications to speak, seem doubtful. It should be an honour in every sense of the word for a man to speak from any broadcasting station, and only those who have a claim to be heard above their fellows on any particular subject in their locality should be put on the programme.” (Memo from Director-General John Reith to Station Directors, 3 March 1924. Cited in Briggs 1961: 256)

“Radio could be the most wonderful communication system imaginable...could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting, but of receiving, of making the listener hear but also speak, not of isolating him but connecting him.” (Brecht 1930)

- 1 Two contrary opinions expressed at the start of radio broadcasting mark the scope of this article which traces the challenge to Reith’s edict by BBC radio features producers in the pre-WW2 period and the subsequent advance of their successors, aided by the technology of portable recording, towards Brecht’s hopeful vision.¹ The radio feature genre in the BBC developed in the late 1920s as an experimental wing of radio drama, influenced at first by Russian and European film documentary pioneers whose work embodied the modernism trending in the art world. Once established as a separate department in BBC Radio, features took on a particular British form, conceived of as a dramatisation of documentary material which combined music, poetry and scripted narration spoken by actors. Actuality and recorded voices, which began to be used in the regions, were rarely heard in the London-based national network before WW2 and came late to the BBC compared to mainland European practice. By the end of the period covered here, the mid-1990s, Brecht’s words had been adopted by community radio

activists as a battle cry against the fortresses of mainstream broadcasting. The story of those battles has been told elsewhere, but by the 1960s, BBC producers and their colleagues across Europe had absorbed and begun to respond to the *zeitgeist* which claimed the right to be heard by a wider range of voices. Nevertheless, access to the microphone was always something granted by the BBC, and decisions about who was allowed to speak continued to reflect the power structure and professional culture of the broadcasting organisation.

Northern dissidence

2 It was in Manchester, headquarters of the BBC North Region, that resistance to Reith's position began. E.A.(Archie) Harding had been banished there by Reith after his programme in December 1933, *New Year Over Europe*, with its reference to Poland's military expenditure, had offended the Polish Ambassador. "You're a very dangerous man, Harding," Reith said. "I think you'd be better off in the North, where you can't do so much damage."² As Programme Director there, Harding gathered a team sharing his left-wing views which included Geoffrey Bridson, Joan Littlewood and Olive Shapley. Shapley recalled assisting Bridson in a programme – live, as all programmes were at the time – which encouraged Durham miners to talk about their work. Shapley had to be sent into the studio with a placard saying 'Do not say bugger or bloody'. Silence ensued until Shapley was recalled.³ The incident contributed to the London ruling that, from then on, all discussions should be scripted.

3 Bridson, whose preparation for his programme, *Coal* (1938), involved spending a month living and working with miners in NE England in order to familiarise himself with the way they expressed themselves,⁴ recalled decades later the BBC's stance in this period.

It seemed to me that since its inception, broadcasting by the BBC had been the exclusive concern of 'us', and listening the lucky privilege of 'them'. That the man in the street should have anything vital to contribute to broadcasting was an idea slow to gain acceptance. That he should actually use broadcasting to express his own opinion in his own unvarnished words, was regarded as almost the end of all good social order.⁵

4 Shapley herself used the cumbersome recording van, newly arrived in Manchester in 1937, around the North Region to capture the words of working-class men and women in their own homes and settings where their response to interview was less inhibited than in the studio.⁶ In fact Laurence Gilliam, later to become Head of the Features Department, had been the first to include recorded voices, using a borrowed recording van from a film company for a programme about Londoners going to Kent to help harvest hops, *Opping 'Ooliday* (1934), "the first broadcast programme to realize that populist impulse at the heart of documentary which allows people to speak for themselves".⁷

Who spoke in the 1930s?

5 But these were exceptions; before WW2 the main source for voiced opinion was the Talks Department. This drew on 'the great and the good', well-known names in society and the literary world recruited by the first Head of Talks (1927-1932), Hilda Matheson, who set a tone that was progressive but not politically partisan. Matheson left in

frustration at restrictions by BBC management which increased in the run up to the 1935 report of the Ullswater Committee⁸, set up to consider the renewal of the BBC's 1927 Charter and Licence.

- 6 What producers had to contend with was a tradition of public speaking that was inappropriate at the microphone when addressing individuals listening at home. Very few of those invited to speak were at first able to adapt their speech to the kind of conversational, even intimate style that made for effective broadcast communication. Reith's ruling that all talk and discussion had to be scripted made the task even harder. Writing what Erving Goffman has called 'fresh talk'⁹ was a newly required skill, famously managed by Professor John Hilton whose many broadcast talks included 'On Giving a Talk'.¹⁰ More than anything else it was the style of continuity, the introduction to programmes and the concluding 'back-anno' that gave the BBC a distinctive voice. Wilfred Pickles, who spoke with a Yorkshire accent and is best known for his *Have a Go* show which ran for twenty years after the war, was an announcer in the North Region before the war and on occasions stood in as a relief announcer on the National Programme. He was coached by one of the regular announcers who, Pickles wrote later, had most of the qualities the BBC looked for: he was steady, correct, just a voice without emotion, and his announcements were precisely right in every detail, cold and without feeling¹¹
- 7 These criteria made it, of course, difficult and in many periods impossible for women's voices to be heard on the radio.¹²
- 8 The BBC was a decidedly male and middle-class institution. Tom Burns, in his study of the BBC, wrote of this period
- 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 not peculiar to itself but 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 upper middle class¹³
- 9 Even so, a number of producers in the Talks and Features departments, holding decidedly left-wing views, were committed to finding, as Scannell and Cardiff sum up, methods of presenting ordinary people, their experience and points of view part of a trend...to shift the relationship between communicators and audiences away from distanced, authoritarian patterns towards more relaxed, informal and interactive styles of communication.¹⁴
- 10 At this time, radio features programmes commonly used shorthand to take down what was said at interviews. An edited version was produced as a script for delivery live in the studio, either by actors or by the interviewees themselves. In the latter case the effectiveness of their contribution was inevitably reduced both by their inexperience of reading in such a situation and the requirement to 'perform' themselves. London-based control over what could be said, as well as the difficulty of working with the ponderous technology then available, led to an impressive collaboration between producers, writers, composers, actors, musicians and the technical staff responsible for creating 'sound effects'. Music, much of it specially composed, played its part in the development of the genre, as did poets like Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas, writing features that often lifted the narration to a declamatory level. And it was this British

version of the radio feature that delivered morale-boosting programmes during the war on the national network, the Home Service.

- 11 Two aspects of the BBC's wartime broadcasts contributed to the progress towards a wider range of voices in features: one was the coverage of military action by news reporters equipped with 'midget' disc-cutting recorders. Midget was a relative term: the machine was much heavier than later reel-to-reel recorders like the Uher, but it did enable reporters to relay the sound of warfare, the actuality providing background to commentary and interviews. The other was the BBC's contribution to government efforts to boost morale. The voices of 'ordinary people' were paraded in a variety of programmes to show 'Britain can take it'.¹⁵ One extraordinary 'ordinary' voice was that of the Radio Doctor, Charles Hill, whose plain speaking and blokish humour captured a devoted following among listeners as he delivered basic medical advice in regular programmes.¹⁶

After the war

- 12 From 1945, Features producers were given their own separate department, headed by Laurence Gilliam. In this period, Gilliam presided over a number of notable programmes - Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* was only one of those which won recognition with an award in the early years of the Prix Italia, started in 1949. At this time, diversity in the range of recorded opinion was not foremost in Gilliam's idea of the genre.

The significance of the feature programme is ... that it is the form of statement that broadcasting has evolved for itself, as distinct from those other forms which it has borrowed or adapted from other arts or methods of publication. It is pure radio, a new instrument for the creative writer and producer.¹⁷

- 13 This comes close to the notion of the *auteur*, prevalent in mainland European film and radio. Russian avant-garde film had been an influence acknowledged by Lance Sieveking in his production, *Kaleidoscope*, (1928), which he performed at what would now be called a mixing desk, the newly invented dramatic control panel.¹⁸ But London's administrative grip before long squeezed out experiments of this kind and subsequently Britain's wartime isolation, as well as the BBC's successful contribution to wartime morale, meant that its programme style and structure had emerged relatively unchanged in 1945. Bond, in an article comparing British and German radio drama in the two decades after WW2, has argued that the absence of any break caused by war, politics or ideology, and the large number of slots to be filled, meant that BBC schedules included much mundane radio drama which attracted less critical attention in Britain, while writers for the medium won less acclaim. By contrast, German radio had no difficulty in attracting, as it had done in the Weimar period, well-known writers.¹⁹ The *Hörspiele* of the 1950s and 1960s began to explore new forms and sounds, music and actuality. In France, from 1969, *musique concrète* was being developed by ORTF's *atelier de création radiophonique*, led by René Farabet. In Germany, Peter Leonhard Braun, a producer at Berlin's public radio station, SFB, and founder of the International Features Conference (IFC), wrote of this time

We learned how to write using acoustic sequences rather than language. We started to forget the typewriter, using the new tools of documentary production instead. We wrote with the microphone, the tape recorder, the scissors and the sound mixer.²⁰

- 14 The BBC radio feature ploughed its own furrow. It had won respect and awards in European competition with its grandiose, dramatic panoramas, but it did not fully embrace the new trend. It was in the radio play that the BBC first used *musique concrète* - for Beckett's *All That Fall* in 1957. This was the first project undertaken by the BBC's Radiophonic workshop which went on to support the surrealism in plays by Samuel Beckett and British dramatists Giles Cooper and Tom Stoppard.
- 15 Donald McWhinnie's production of *All That Fall* was the first of a number of plays in this new style (for which, he acknowledged, Pierre Schaeffer was the "guiding light"), describing it as
- An inextricable conception of word and special sound and an exploratory flight into a new territory of sound. The words were designed to evoke, and be reinforced by, new sounds, sounds never heard before, and to be themselves subjected to technical processes which would achieve emotional effects (with the human voice as a basis) quite different from anything the actor can do on his own.²¹

Recorded voices

- 16 "Sounds never heard before" might also apply to what a growing number of writers for radio drama were hearing from tape recorded speech. The portable tape recorder, reluctantly accepted by the BBC from the mid-1950s and already available domestically in its mains-fed version, had begun to demonstrate what ordinary speech sounded like, with its hesitations and pauses and the meaning they conveyed. It was a moment Ian Rodger has compared to the effect in the mid-nineteenth century of the invention of photography on the Impressionist painting school.²² Speech in the majority of BBC radio drama, in its soaps, *Mrs Dale's Diary*, *Waggoners' Walk* and *The Archers*, and even in, for example, *Under Milk Wood*, continued to sound like scripted, acted dialogue, but innovative radio dramatists and producers were learning lessons from across the Channel.
- 17 The use of recorded material by features producers began at this time in the regions. From 1954, in Newcastle, Richard Kelly's *Voice of the People*, which began in 1954, recorded people around the streets and slums of the city. A librarian remembered: "It's impossible to convey the shock of hearing Geordie accents coming out of the Rediffusion wooden wireless set which had hitherto spoken only in the voice of Whitehall and the occasional cockney comic."²³
- 18 Another pioneer was Denis Mitchell, later famous for his film documentaries. Mitchell arrived in the BBC in 1950 from South Africa, astonished to find "that nobody in the BBC even knew about tape"²⁴ Yet by 1955, a hundred Midgets were in use across the BBC's regions.²⁵ Mitchell used portable recorders in his *People Talking* series (1953-58) to gather the experience of marginalised people, "making conventional narration almost redundant, letting the voices of ordinary Northerners tell the story".²⁶
- 19 It was Charles Parker's use of portable recording in his *Radio Ballads* that has received most attention in academic writing. Researching *The Ballad of John Axon* (1958), about the death of a railway engine driver, Parker had taken a recorder "intending to record our conversations simply as source material for an eventual script, with perhaps occasional direct quotes from tape to substantiate a documented sequence or to give 'local flavour'".²⁷ The voices he heard were, in his words, so authentic that they formed a much more important part of the programme than he had originally planned. Ewan

MacColl's folk songs, composed with an ear to the rhythms and turns of speech of the interviewees and in the region's musical tradition, carried equal weight and Parker's micro-editing positioned the voices as if in a musical composition. Sean Street's summary of a discussion about Parker's work by contemporary BBC producers concluded that

the finished product is far from raw; these are poems, full of technique, aesthetic judgments and formed decisions and *selection*, self-consciously developed towards an ultimate cultural and emotional effect...works that are ultimately crafted celebrations.²⁸

- 20 What was unusual at the time, in *The Radio Ballads* as in Denis Mitchell's documentaries, was the lack of a narrator guiding the listener through the programme, although the Corporation voice, in the person of the well-known presenter, John Snagge, was, to the irritation of *The Observer's* radio critic, used by the BBC to introduce and conclude this first Radio Ballad.²⁹ Over the next six years, Parker, with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, went on to produce seven more radio ballads which, in similar style, crafted music with voices of people not usually given a hearing. The programmes explored the fishing industry (*Singing the Fishing* won the Prix Italia in 1960), the work of coal miners and motorway builders, the lives of Roma people, people with disabilities, boxing, and the feelings of young teenagers.
- 21 By this time, commercial television (ITV), launched in 1955, had been making an impact on BBC audience figures: millions left BBC radio – and BBC television – to enjoy a more popular style of programmes and presentation. BBC budgets switched to fight the ratings war, and the Features Department became a casualty – the cost of the grand feature was considerable compared with straight documentary, key figures had died or 'gone missing', and a "torpor" had descended on those that were left.³⁰ In 1964, the Department was closed and its remaining producers, a little under twenty in number, were divided between Talks and Documentary Department, and the Drama Department.
- 22 As we have seen it was a fruitful time for the radio play. In the same Department, a handful of features producers were exploring a way to dramatize human experience reached through listening to, and recording, the voices of 'ordinary' people. A number of forces were at work in effecting this trend. Working class culture had been celebrated in the widely-read *Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart (1957); more widely-viewed, working class voices were the staple of popular TV soaps like *Coronation Street*, and in shows like Rediffusion's *Ready Steady Go*, presented by Liverpool-born Cathy McGowan, brought in straight from the company's typing pool to present the show. The folk movement on which *The Radio Ballads* had drawn for its inspiration had now began to use portable recording to rescue the memories and performances of older singers and story tellers; the pirate *Radio Caroline*, first heard in April 1964 had, with other North Sea pirates, brought an American informality of presentation style that appealed to young listeners bored with the BBC. When the Labour government closed down the pirates this young audience was appeased by the creation, in 1967, of the pop channel BBC Radio 1. The same year, older listeners were able to hear their own regional accents in the first wave of BBC local radio stations whose mainstay was the phone-in. 1969 saw the publication of *Broadcasting in the Seventies* which outlined plans for a changed shape of networks, including *Radio 4*, the renamed *Home Service*. Hendy, in his definitive study of the new network, summarises its

further step along the road to a less elite and more demotic style of broadcasting. If ordinary people's *opinion* was still treated warily, their *experiences* and their *feelings*

were now central to the broadcasting mission. As the BBC's Assistant DG put it, producers were now simply "less inclined to take pundits at face value". 'Ordinary' people- 'real' people - were in favour. Programmes were after authenticity.³¹

International influence

- 23 Another influence on BBC features producers was the opportunity to regularly exchange experience with colleagues in other European and anglophone public broadcasting organisations after the launch by Peter Leonhard Braun of the International Features Conference in 1974. The IFC, meeting each year in locations across Europe and in Australia, created a regular meeting place for the sharing of ideas.

³² Piers Plowright, who joined the BBC Drama Department in 1974, went to his first IFC meeting in Sydney in 1988:

For me, the experience of going to the IFC...[was the realisation] that what Europe was saying about British BBC features was quite true... that we were very conservative. We had a presenter, and cut away interviews, and a little bit of sound, but not much. I think we learned a great deal from these conferences - I certainly did.³³

- 24 Discussions in the Drama Department in this period echoed this comment about plays and features from other countries, either heard at IFC meetings or circulating among European stations. At the 1999 IFC meeting in Amsterdam, for example, the time was mainly spent in small listening sessions with each programme being followed by discussion, continued in informal conversations throughout the days of the conference. The pleasure taken and impression made from the discovery of both novel approaches and shared experience were very evident.³⁴ Plowright's further remarks reflected the majority BBC opinion back in London

At the same time, I think there was something very good about the BBC tradition. It's always rooted in *what people actually say*. I felt quite a lot often with European features - and actually also the Australian - it seemed to be an *auteur* piece, the producer having fun, but not *really moving you*, and I do think...if you don't touch the listener, and you don't care yourself and it's just a game, fun as that can be, and there's room for it, as there is in music, then I don't think you've really made a programme that will stand time. And I think the BBC brought a sort of grittiness to the oyster - to the pearl of European IFC tradition.³⁵

- 25 The use of people's words and the emotions they invoke - the points italicised above - are, for Hendy,

the signatures of his [Plowright's] oeuvre: closely observed portraits gently lobbed in the listeners direction in the hope of starting a few ripples of emotion and thought³⁶

- 26 Hendy describes Piers Plowright and his colleague, John Theocharis, a few years into their assignment to the Drama Department,

worrying away at the blurred boundary between drama and documentary...with a whole succession of more intimate location recordings where people's voices, people's stories and the little things in people's lives all predominated...Radio was discovering that...no matter how little 'ordinary' people knew of high politics or great literature, each every one of them was undoubtedly the leading expert of his or her *own life*.³⁷

- 27 With features producers Peter Everett, Piers Plowright, Matt Thompson and others,

the temptation to add layer upon layer of sound was often eschewed for programmes "as transparent as a glass of tap water"³⁸

- 28 On hearing this comment read to him, Plowright was prompted to recall the first time he realised the value of letting people speak.

Well, that's very nice. I think it happened to me almost accidentally. And I can remember the programme which was called *Nobody Stays in This House Long* [11 June 1983] which won an Italia Prize to my amazement because it was a very simple programme. This was two old people living in a house, and it simply began as that – an interview with two old people living in a house... And out of this I realised I hadn't made a programme about people in a house, I'd made a programme about time, history, loss, change – social change, but all within a half hour piece in which two people spoke and took us round this ancient house.

So all these metaphors that came rolling out from ordinary life was what I thought was powerful and I don't think you needed to do a great deal of elaborate [explanation] – I used to mock the French because – they've done lovely things – but there was always this rather intense voice in the front philosophising, not letting you get through to the people who you were hearing.³⁹

Managerial shackles

- 29 How did Plowright and his contemporaries choose who would speak? We have seen that, in Hendy's words, " 'ordinary' people- 'real' people – were in favour", but the extent to which producer's choice was based on their own judgement began to be reined in by administrative change, ironically by a system known as 'Producer Choice', introduced in the mid-1990s. Reflecting in 2013 on his 1983 programme, Plowright said

In those days – and this is something that *has* changed – you could simply swan off with a microphone and possibly an Outside Broadcast engineer and do what you like. I hadn't even proposed this idea, I don't think...The change for the bad, I think, in terms of commissioning is that you have to go through so many gates to get to the heavenly kingdom, to get a result⁴⁰

- 30 Research in the Radio Drama Department in the mid-1980s and the following decade allows a comparison between the two kinds of commissioning process and confirms Plowright's remark. In the first period, the weekly Script Unit meeting allowed ideas to be debated among peers before they were formally submitted to the network Controllers. It was not uncommon for an idea that was initially rejected to be reinstated after argument. These debates, and the idlest exchanges in a lift or a corridor, were marinated in rich mixture of shared cultural capital and institutional memory. 'Producer Choice' changed all that. An internal market similar to that introduced in Britain's National Health Service, it was implemented in April 1993 and was intended to create a level playing field, both for BBC producers and those outside in the new sector of independent production. Inside the BBC, each area – production, facilities, support services like the library – had to charge for their use, and in turn had to count in their budget the cost of facilities – e.g. studio time – and overheads. The commissioning process controlled ideas in much the same way. Production units had to pitch their programme proposals in accordance with the 200-page Commissioning Guidelines to Commissioners who themselves may not have had experience of drama or features. The Drama Department was having to make four or five offers for every production that won a commission. A combination of reliance on computer-based systems of control, a belief in the benefits of a free market and the political requirement to accept a quota of independent production led to restructuring and routines which were largely

inappropriate for radio. Above all, findings based on focus groups threatened to replace editorial judgement.⁴¹

Conclusion

- 31 Over the years since Reith's definition of 'the claim to be heard', radio features have joined other radio formats in opening the microphone to a wider range of people. At first, despite the pioneering work of producers like Bridson, Shapley and Mitchell, a middle-class, Home Counties⁴² view of voice and accent predominated in the BBC, one which reflected the British preoccupation with accent as a marker of class and regarded regional accents as inferior. The change in the tone and range of the voices heard on BBC radio was dramatically affected by the arrival of portable recording, and at the same time responded to changing social and cultural structures. More women began to be heard, both as interviewees and as hosts and journalists, although recent complaints have exposed the pay gap that continues to exist between male and female broadcasters.
- 32 By the mid-1990s, the radio feature had found a style which reflected the more informal discursive exchanges to be found in everyday life. A combination of speech and actuality subtly conveyed authenticity, with stories carrying the messages individual producers wished to make. But at the highest levels of management, the interpretation of the social *zeitgeist* had to be balanced with the need not to incur criticism from government, which controlled the level of the BBC's income – the licence fee – reviewed at intervals usually of five years. A particularly ruthless reform was carried out between 1993 and 2000 by John Birt, whose mission as Director-General was to save the BBC from privatization by the Conservative government. Managerial systems were introduced that relied on internal competition ('Producer Choice') and outsourcing, and, through market research, also on a calculation of audience needs that dominated policy. Individual producers had to launch their proposals through a complex series of filters, uncertain as to who finally was making the decision about their ideas. It was as if the 'claim to be heard' had shifted from the potential contributors to the producers themselves, having to repeatedly justify their creative choices according to managerial criteria, their claim ultimately handicapped by self-censorship.
- 33 Over the past quarter of a century, a range of social media has become available on the internet, now the vehicle for myriad voices. These days there is no lack of space to voice opinion, but does it provide 'connection' in the Brechtian sense? We have seen that the BBC's search for the voices of ordinary people has had its limitations. Today, it is perhaps more important than ever to investigate *who* the ordinary person is understood as being, and who decides whose voice matters.

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NOTES

1. This paper covers ground which is part of current research examining the history of the inclusion of ordinary voices in different radio formats. It is a collaboration with colleagues at London Metropolitan University, Professors Jenny Harding and Anne Karpf - to whom I am grateful for comments on this article - and with Professor Tiziano Bonini (University of Siena), and Dr. Gaia Varon (IULM University of Milan).
2. D.G.Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel. The rise and fall of radio: a personal recollection* (London, Gollancz, 1971) p.22.
3. Olive Shapley, interview with author, 1989.
4. Paddy Scannell & David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, Vol One 1922-1939, Serving the Nation*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991) p.343.
5. Bridson, pp. 52-53.
6. Scannell & Cardiff, p.345.
7. *Ibid* p.147.
8. Ullswater was the first of a succession of Broadcasting committees, named after the Chair, which reviewed, usually at five-year intervals, the renewal of the BBC's Licence and Charter. The effect of these reviews, even before their reports were published, has been to induce pre-emptive caution on the part of an organisation which is dependent on the government for its funding via the licence fee.
9. Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1981) p. 227.
10. John Hilton, *This and That: the broadcast talks of John Hilton*, (London, Allen & Unwin, 1938).
11. Wilfred Pickles, *Between You and Me*, (London, Werner Laurie, 1949), p. 94.
12. Anne Karpf, 'Constructing and Addressing the 'Ordinary devoted Mother'', *History Workshop Journal*, (2014) p.159
13. Tom Burns, *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World*, (London, Macmillan, 1977) p. 42.
14. Scannell & Cardiff, pp.176-177.
15. Ieuan Franklin, *Folkways and Airwaves: Oral history, Community and Vernacular Radio*, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bournemouth, 2009).
16. Karpf 2014, p.89.
17. Laurence Gilliam, *B.B.C. Features*, (London, Evans Bros, 1950), p.10.
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 37. *ibid.* p. 224.
 38. *ibid.* p. 381, citing Matt Thompson.
 39. Plowright, interview with author, 2013.
 40. *Ibid.*
 41. This paragraph draws on Peter M. Lewis, 'Opening and closing doors: radio drama in the BBC'. *The Radio Journal* Vol.1 no 3, (2004) (pp.165-166) which covers the period 1993-2000.
 42. Home Counties, a term little used nowadays, refers to the counties in South East England surrounding London.
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ABSTRACTS

The BBC radio feature, originally influenced by the documentary film movement, combined music and sound with speech that at first was scripted, later recorded on location, along with 'actuality'. This paper will ask 'whose speech?' A memorandum from BBC Director General, John Reith, in 1924, had insisted that "only those who have a claim to be heard above their fellows on any particular subject... should be put on the programme". Nevertheless, from the 1930s onwards, there was a continuing effort on the part of more politically-minded producers to extend the range of voices heard on the air. The BBC's North Region, where it was easier to escape Reith's centralising control, led the way. Pioneering initiatives used the cumbersome recording apparatus of the time to reach into people's homes and work-places to capture working class voices. After WW2 this example was followed in other regions, until, belatedly in the late 1950s, the BBC began to accept the use of portable recording. By this time a Europe-wide culture of radio feature-making had developed, influenced by the French exploration of *musique*

concrète and the flourishing German *Hörspiel*, and fostered by the Prix Italia and the International Features Workshop. British features producers contributed to this movement and won some success with highly-crafted, aesthetically innovative features. The paper concludes by examining examples of the voices heard in BBC radio features in the last decade of the 20th century.

Une instruction écrite par le premier directeur-général de la BBC, John Reith, en 1924, souligna qu'on devrait entendre à la radio "seules ces personnes qui méritent d'être entendues davantage que leurs pairs, sur un sujet particulier". Néanmoins, à partir des années 1930, on voit un effort continu de la part de producteurs plus politisés de faire entendre une gamme plus large de voix à l'antenne. Les producteurs de la "North Region", éloignés du contrôle centralisateur de Reith, en furent les pionniers. Ils se mirent à utiliser les enregistreurs encombrants de l'époque afin d'entrer chez les gens et dans leurs lieux de travail, pour capter des voix de la classe ouvrière. Après la Deuxième guerre, d'autres régions firent de même.

A cette époque on vit émerger une culture de production radio dans toute l'Europe influencée par la musique concrète en France et le *Hörspiel* en Allemagne. Les producteurs britanniques y contribuèrent. Dans cet article nous explorons des exemples de cette période, ainsi que d'autres de la fin du XXe siècle.

INDEX

Mots-clés: BBC, enregistrement, classe ouvrière, gens ordinaires

Keywords: BBC, radio feature, BBC policy, recorded speech, ordinary people

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