

# Introduction

This is a book about radio and the relatively new subject of radio studies. In fact, it is the first book to have the words 'radio studies' in its title. Radio itself has been the subject of research and writing since it was invented at the beginning of the last century. Much of that published work concerns the technical dimension of radio, but there is also a significant body of work on, for example, radio history, on the nature of speech on radio, on radio drama and so on. This body of writing is fairly puny in comparison with the literature on film and television but it is important nonetheless. Turning to the slightly more introspective aspect of this book, the consideration of radio studies itself, the published literature is almost non-existent. Very few writers have turned their attention to the nature of this subdivision of media or communication studies and I hope that what follows will help take a step in that direction.

There are many reasons why radio has been neglected in media studies, at least in British academic life. Media studies was principally the creation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University under their director, Stuart Hall. As Scannell explains, 'work in the centre explored the press, radio and television, but the last of this trio received most attention, because it had become, in the 1960s, the most popular everyday source of entertainment and political information and debate for most British people' (2007: 199). Some of the most influential research carried out in the centre was on television, for example the study of the television programme, *Nationwide* and the detailed analysis of one edition of the current affairs programme, *Panorama* (Scannell, 2007: 212). Hall's colleagues and students went on to dominate media studies in the UK, but as scholars of visual media and especially television, little wonder radio was temporarily neglected. The state of radio studies in America appears to be a lot healthier and I discuss below some of the American influences on this book. There is a tradition of studying American radio which goes back to the pre-war era; a good example is the work of the Princeton Office of Radio Research which published Hadley Cantril's study of Orson Welles's famous broadcast, *War of the Worlds* and its remarkable public reception.

It used to be the case that books about radio would begin with a rather apologetic justification for writing about the 'neglected' medium.

We lived in a visual culture, television was dominant, radio was ignored but should not be. It is certainly true that radio was ignored; books on the media were often in reality books on television, the importance of radio drama was ignored as was radio news and current affairs. 'The media' was in fact shorthand for 'the visual media'. The situation today is rather different. There will be no justification here for a book about radio because none is needed. Radio, and here I mean not just broadcast analogue radio but digital radio, internet radio and podcasts, has asserted itself to such a degree that excuses are unnecessary. Some readers might think that I am stretching the term radio to include audio and indeed the new technologies of the Internet and podcasting. I think this is splitting hairs. No medium can be defined by the technology of its delivery: a podcast remains radio because of the way it is produced. A film, after all, is still a film even when it is shot using a digital video camera and watched on a television set.

In writing this book I have made the rather presumptuous claim that there are central concepts used in radio studies. This is open to question: there is no agreed conceptual framework for a subject area in such an early stage of development. My choice of concepts barely reflects common usage but instead is an attempt to list and describe what seem to me to be some useful and often used ideas and terms. A different author would have produced a different selection of concepts and for that reason I need to explain the thinking behind my own.

The concepts chosen here are derived from two sources. The first source is the business of producing radio itself; this includes the genres and styles of programming (the phone-in, news, comedy and so on) and other central ideas and practices of the radio industry (for example the radio format, the audience, radio journalism). These are terms which are used in the radio industry itself and so have a professional currency. The second source for my list comes from writing about radio from within the academic field of media studies, including radio studies. So, for example, the idea that radio is an 'intimate' medium is a recurrent theme in the radio studies literature, as is the 'liveness' of radio and the idea of the radio DJ's 'persona'. These are not terms, however, often used in the radio industry but belong to the critical discourse about the medium which tries to make sense of it from the outside. In addition there are a few concepts here which are not radio specific; the concept of the 'imagined community' was not developed with radio in mind but appears in a number of books on the subject. Other examples in this category are public service broadcasting, propaganda and development and

I would argue that adding a radio perspective to these topics adds to our understanding of the media more generally. Finally, I have also added some concepts which have barely been written about at all but which seem to me to be full of potential for radio studies: I have used what might in other circumstances be called 'poetic licence'. There is no consensus about what terms like 'radiogenic', 'radiocracy' and 'radio world' mean, but they are clearly useful concepts and I have made a rash attempt to define them and explain why they are important.

My approach to writing the individual entries also needs some justification. There are two main influences here: first, my own interest in radio history; and, second, the belief that it helps our understanding of radio to consider the British and American experience at the same time. Most of the entries include some sort of historical context which includes 20th-century examples if they help us to understand radio today. As for the use of both American and British examples and experiences, my reasons for this transatlantic approach are partly intellectual and partly personal. I would argue that in almost every aspect of the medium we can understand it better if we study both sides of the Atlantic. So regulation, the DJ, the localness of radio – an understanding of all of these is so much more complete if both the American and the British traditions are considered. These two national examples are sufficiently different and sufficiently similar to make comparison rewarding and, as previously mentioned, there is a strong tradition of radio scholarship in America which has produced a significant literature. My other reason for acknowledging the American case is that I am a member of the 'baby boomer' generation which grew up at the height of American cultural influence on Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. Jack Kerouac, Ken Kesey, The Grateful Dead, these were my cultural influences and so when I started the research for this book I found myself turning to the two most important cultural histories of US radio, Michele Hilmes's *Radio Voices* and Susan Douglas's *Listening In*. Both of these sources, together with Christopher Sterling's excellent *Encyclopedia of Radio* are widely used here and indeed made this book possible. I should add here the continued importance and influence of Andrew Crisell's groundbreaking book *Understanding Radio* first published almost quarter of a century ago. There are repeated references to Crisell's book here and, like him, I have tried to write about the 'distinctive characteristics of the radio medium' (Crisell, 1986: xv).

Radio is a remarkable subject for students and scholars alike. There is something incurably fascinating about the oldest broadcasting medium.

Once the only form of broadcasting, then the victim of television's success, reprieved as the natural voice of popular music and youth culture and now on the crest of the wave of more democratic, user-generated forms of audio. Radio seems to be both ancient and modern; so yesterday and yet so tomorrow. In our visual culture, radio persists without pictures as the 'blind' medium but in this invisibility it retains a special power to communicate. Important, even dominant, though the visual is, sound communication through chat, the phone, in music and on radio remains both different and extremely important. We no longer live in oral societies where all communication and knowledge was through speech, but we do live in the age of 'secondary orality' (Ong, 1988) where the electronic media, including radio, thrives on the immediate and intimate qualities of speech and sound. This book reflects and even celebrates radio's unique and somehow irrepressible voice.

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Cross-reference to other entries in the book are **emboldened**.

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