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Current Affairs Radio:

Realigning News and Comment

Hugh Chignell

“In the 1970s some people in Broadcasting House were asking how are we going to put into the network something which people would find more challenging, less superficial, more demanding, more authoritative, more first hand.”

Michael Green, current affairs broadcaster

There are some questions about journalism which require us to look back to achieve an answer as well as studying the present and speculating about the future. This is certainly the case in that most British form of radio, the single subject current affairs programme. Separated from the day-to-day noise of news and tasked with explaining the world to the listener, programmes like the BBC’s *File on Four* and *Analysis*, set about analysing their subject with a degree of seriousness and commitment which is hard to find elsewhere in radio or television. Where does this curious radio genre come from? Does it really have a place in the modern fast-paced world where we demand not only to have things explained but also to engage in interaction? Can serious, demanding and difficult radio survive in the radio landscape of the twenty-first century? For the current affairs producer, finding answers to some of these questions is essential for the survival of the genre. Their quest is to make the demands of difficult ideas and policies digestible for the modern listener.

This chapter will look at the origins of radio current affairs in the old BBC tradition of radio ‘talks’ from the late 1920s. It will chart the rise of the talk and the impact of the Second World War on talks style. Although British radio has been greatly influenced by American approaches the chapter will

show that the development of current affairs radio in the late 1960s marked a departure from the American approach by splitting news from comment and in particular in the creation of single subject current affairs programmes. The two main examples of the genre are *Analysis* and *File on Four* and these are examined in detail. The chapter concludes by looking at the way *Analysis* has tried to address the challenge of maintaining the innate seriousness of its content in a 'fast food' and interactive culture.

Some key concepts

Current affairs broadcasting is mainly associated with British radio and television and implies a division between the factual statements of news and those programmes which include comment and analysis. This division is uncharacteristic of American broadcasting where news and comment have quite happily co-existed, although there are 'public affairs' programmes these are normally confined to National Public Radio. Now largely confined to the BBC, current affairs radio can be found in two places in the schedule. In news magazines (or 'sequences') most notably the *Today* programme, there are short comment items that go beyond news reporting to provide comment and analysis. A more distinctive and exceptional form of the genre, and the subject of this chapter, are the single subject current affairs programmes of which Radio Four's *Analysis* (since 1970) and the same network's *File on Four* (since 1977) are the main examples. Both programmes take a single issue and devote either 30 minutes (in the case of *Analysis*) or 40 minutes (*File on Four*) to a carefully prepared examination. In the case of *Analysis* the focus is on ideas and ideologies whereas *File on Four* is much more conventionally journalistic in its attention to social problems and policies. So, for example, in the summer of 2010, *File on Four* produced programmes on the lessons of oil spills; arms smugglers and banks not offering loans while *Analysis* featured programmes on the survival of the Euro; the 'dictatorship of relativism' and whether the older people should bear the brunt of government spending cuts.¹

The radio talk was the main vehicle for the communication of comment prior to the establishment of current affairs programmes in the 1960s.² Talks were usually scripted, and there-

fore carefully controlled, and delivered by non-BBC staff. These expert contributors were free to express their views without tarnishing the BBC's reputation for impartiality. Typically, talks ranged from five to twenty minutes in length and covered every conceivable subject. The idea of impartiality is central to BBC radio news and current affairs and refers to the importance of objectivity or lack of bias in broadcast output. For the long-running single-subject current affairs programmes a strict adherence to impartiality may be difficult to achieve in one programme, especially, as in editions of *Analysis* if the presenter is brought in and has a particular political position. In this case impartiality is more likely to be achieved over a run of programmes by having a balance of presenters and other contributors over time (Starkey, 2007:99).

One way of thinking about current affairs radio, and especially on its principal home, the BBC, is as an expression of the corporation's commitment to public service broadcasting. The BBC, funded by the annual licence fee is bound by the terms of its ten-yearly charter which guarantees the independence of the BBC from government control (although in fact the BBC's history is full of attempts by governments to influence the BBC) while at the same time insisting on output which 'informs, educates and entertains'. One revealing extract from the charter reads; 'The Public Purposes of the BBC are as follows— (a) sustaining citizenship and civil society'.³ Current affairs radio in all its forms is explicitly concerned with serving the needs of the citizen and the wider civil society.

Radio Talks

In 1928 the BBC, under the ambitious leadership of its Director-General, John Reith, obtained from the government the right to deal with controversial issues having previously been thwarted in its attempt to do so by the newspaper industry. This created the opportunity for the Talks Department to cover a much wider range of subjects including the 'current affairs' issues of the day (although that term was not commonly used until after the second World War). This opportunity was also a challenge for the BBC which had to produce talks for the rapidly growing number of radio listeners with their modern valve radio sets around which families would congregate to

listen. While talks in the 1920s featured how to catch a tiger or the pruning of fruit trees, talks in the 1930s were far more ambitious. This was partly due to the pioneering work of Hilda Matheson, the visionary Head of Talks until her rather abrupt departure in 1932. Matheson developed a style of talking which was a more informal and intimate mode of address (Avery, 2006). Matheson persuaded her talkers to address the listener as an individual and not, as was previously the case, talking to the microphone as if addressing a crowd or, even worse, delivering a sermon. This more intimate style echoed President Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous 'fireside chats' of the 1930s in which he spoke to the American people about the government's New Deal and the economic crisis facing America (Loviglio, 2005: 1-37). Despite Matheson's innovative approach BBC talks remained primarily concerned not with informing listeners about national and international events of the 1930s (such as the crisis of high unemployment and poverty or the Spanish civil war and the rise of fascism) but were mainly educational in nature. Listeners were much more likely to hear a talk about the novel or works of art than they were about the rise of the Nazis in Germany.

When the Second World War began in 1939 it prompted a major and defining development in the radio talk. The BBC had never really lost its reputation for being both stuffy and boring. Too much improving and cultural uplift and not enough fun. The result was that listeners acquired an appetite for listening to European stations like Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandy which carried English entertainment programmes. When the war began the German radio station Radio Hamburg broadcast the Nazi propagandist 'Lord Haw-Haw' whose sneering and risqué messages were surprisingly popular in Britain (Street, 2006: 191). In response, the BBC eventually found the Yorkshire novelist, J.B.Priestley to deliver a Sunday evening talk after the 9 pm news at the same time as the Haw-Haw broadcast when almost 16 million people were listening (Nicholas, 1996: 53). Priestley revolutionized the talk and paved the way for the creation of current affairs radio during the second half of the century. How did he do it? Priestley wrote about big issues; war, death, nationalism but did so in a way that connected with the listener. He showed it was possible to use radio to explain a deeply troubling situation

to the radio listener. In his famous first talk he commented on the very recent evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk in Northern France. The talk centred on the role of the small boats and ferries used to rescue the troops, it was clearly meant to raise morale and contained some rather sentimental references to the English seaside. This certainly was not current affairs radio but it showed the enormous power of talk on radio to explain events in the world without patronizing or lecturing the listener and so paved the way for later developments.

The Origins of Current Affairs Radio

A distinctive feature of radio news and talks prior to the 1960s was the separation of fact-based news from the more speculative comment and analysis to be heard in radio talks (Chignell, 2011:16). This formal separation owed a lot to anxieties within the BBC about tainting the objective facts of news with the subjectivity of comment. Radio listeners liked to have their news 'straight' as one critic wrote at the time and her views that 'the BBC should keep news and comment absolutely distinct' (Richardson, 1960) were commonly held. But the sixties was a decade of change and under the radical new Director-General, Hugh Carleton-Greene, the BBC was prepared to experiment with news and comment; and so it was that the Ten O'Clock News featured both news and comment in something much closer to a modern radio news programme.

The managers of BBC radio in the 1960s were far more populist, more audience aware, than their ultra-cautious predecessors. Men like Frank Gillard, who was responsible for radio at the time, realized the grave threat of television and the need to make radio more responsive to the listener. The success of the Ten O'Clock News led to the launch of a lunch-time equivalent, *The World at One*, still a feature of the Radio Four schedule. This new programme had a regular presenter, William Hardcastle, a hard-drinking, cigarette-smoking former Fleet Street journalist who delighted in the urgency and flexibility of the news and comment format (Hendy, 2007: 48). Hardcastle was a radio innovator who pioneered the use of the 'vox pop' to gather public opinion and the use of the telephone interview, for example with a local newspaper editor to gather information. This approach to what came to be called a news 'sequence' combined the journalistic skill of

the presenter with modern radio techniques and in so doing mirrored the American use of famous news anchors (such as Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow). This ‘transnational’ quality of radio broadcasting was also present in television where BBC output influenced, for example, US approaches to drama while US game shows appeared on ITV. As Michele Hilmes has argued, British public service and American commercial broadcasting ‘represent two sides of the same coin’. (Hilmes, 2012: 3). So it is no surprise that radio news and comment should become ‘Americanised’ at a time of widespread cultural exchange (not only in broadcasting but also of course in film and popular music). The result of Hardcastle’s approach at *The World at One* was to initiate a shift in Radio Four’s identity with brisker and sharper edged news and current affairs at its heart.

There is a clearly a problem with this historical account of an increasingly transnational form of radio. If comment on radio was successfully absorbed into programmes like *The World at One* (and later *The World This Weekend*, ‘PM’ and most importantly, the *Today* programme) how did it then disentangle itself to create single subject current affairs radio? What was the route from Americanised, anchored news and comment to a very much more British form of current affairs? The answer lies in that inconvenient truth that history is not linear, not a one-way street. Sometimes innovation can produce a reaction which reaffirms traditional values. This is precisely what happened towards the end of the 1960s in BBC radio and led to the launch of that most challenging, even elitist, of programmes, Radio Four’s *Analysis*. Disillusioned with the news-and-comment journalism which had become so dominant, two men, a producer and a presenter⁴, created something so different from William Hardcastle’s *The World at One* that it was anti-journalist! On 10 April 1970 a programme was born which rejected conventional journalism and replaced it with the carefully, and expensively, crafted opinions of experts and people called ‘current affairs broadcasters’.

Analysis

The launch of *Analysis*, over forty years ago, was full of deeper significance for those who made it and the BBC itself. This was a time (1970) of considerable uncertainty about BBC radio. The

controversial policy paper, *Broadcasting in the Seventies* was seen by many as a rebuke to traditional ideas about public service broadcasting and especially those associated with the first Director-General, John Reith. There was general feeling that standards were dropping and traditional Reithian ideas were being rejected as BBC radio tried to provide for audiences in the age of television (Hendy, 2007: 67). The response of the BBC to this now very familiar ‘dumbing down’ argument was to start making deliberately challenging and difficult radio programmes, especially on Radio Four. Enter *Analysis*. This was a single subject current affairs programme that would be based on rigorous research and would deal with difficult ideas about social issues. In the words of the Controller of Radio Four at the time this would be a ‘tougher’ programme; it would be ‘more thoughtful, tougher in intellectual terms’. (Whitby, 1970) So this was proof, if it was needed, that the BBC could still produce challenging and serious programmes.

The first *Analysis* was broadcast on a significant day for music fans. 10 April 1970 was the day that Paul McCartney announced the break-up of the Beatles. It was the end of one era, the ‘swinging sixties’ and the beginning of new, more serious, times; and *Analysis* was certainly serious. The presenter, Ian McIntyre, announced that the subject of the 45 minutes, pre-recorded programme, was ‘a general look at the current state of the economy and its future prospects’. What followed included a rather academic summary of an American Brookings Institute report on the British economy and then contributions from a Harvard professor and an Oxford economist, a Swiss banker, the Director-General of the Confederation of British Industry, and two MPs. There was no music or any sound other than the voices of the participants. In subsequent editions of the programme (there were typically 30 a year) both national and international topics were covered and occasionally the format of the programme changed when there was a long interview with one person. These *Analysis* ‘conversations’ often featured Prime Ministers, Leaders of the Opposition (including Margaret Thatcher), Chancellors of the Exchequer and foreign heads of state (such as Israel’s Golda Meir).

An intriguing aspect of *Analysis* in the 1970s was an implied critique of journalism in the approach to researching and producing programmes. It is hard to believe forty years later

but there was a belief in BBC Radio that journalists were simply not the right people to make proper single subject current affairs programmes. Journalists were typified by *The World at One's* William Hardcastle; rather uneducated and vulgar hacks who relied on secondary sources. Fine for Fleet Street and tabloid press but not for BBC current affairs. This view is well expressed by the first *Analysis* producer, George Fischer;

*“The distinction that Analysis had – and people sometimes don’t seem to get this – we worked only with primary sources. In other words: we didn’t work from news cuttings. If there was a House of Lords report we did actually read the thing from beginning to end. I don’t recall many occasions when we had journalists in the programme. It was always ‘from the horse’s mouth’.”*²⁵

So, on *Analysis* in the 1970s journalists were deliberately excluded from programmes to make way for politicians, academics or other people with direct, relevant experience or knowledge. The use of the BBC reporter, so widespread in news and current affairs today, was seen as a second rate or derivative approach to current affairs. For people like George Fischer and Ian McIntyre, the use of that stock technique of radio news, the ‘two way’ between presenter and reporter would have been an anathema.

Analysis and politics

Analysis established itself during the 1970s and beyond as a serious, single subject current affairs programme, as indeed the ‘flag-ship’ radio current affairs programme. Its focus was on ideas rather than on policies and that unique approach has continued to this day. Once a week for most of the year, *Analysis* continues its thoughtful and intellectual approach to current affairs and the challenges that this now presents will be the subject of the final part of this chapter. There is however, another dimension to the *Analysis* story and that is its intervention in the public sphere. Or to put it differently the way *Analysis* helped in the formation and articulation of new political ideas. The first instance of this was at the birth of what we now know as Thatcherism in the mid-1970s. The programme had established something of a right-wing

flavour in its early years. The principal presenter, Ian McIntyre, was a fully signed-up Conservative and his producer, George Fischer 'an unreconstructed Right-Wing Hungarian'.⁶ Added to this was the programme's keen interest in political ideas, and especially new ones; so it was perhaps unsurprising that when radical neo-liberal ideas started to appeal to members of the Conservative party that Analysis should examine them.

The way this materialized was in the choice of subjects covered, the choice of presenters and contributors. A good example of this was the programme's coverage of one of the mainstays of Thatcherism, the politics of the 'Cold War'; in particular the threat of the Soviet Union to the West. There were thirty editions of the programme devoted to Cold War themes between 1975 and 1983. Some of these were presented by the noted 'cold warrior' Laurence Martin who used the programme to denounce Soviet expansion and warn listeners of the threat posed by communism. Similarly, the vociferously anti-trade union economist, Peter Oppenheimer presented editions of Analysis on the economy often using these to show how British trade unions were responsible for high inflation rates, industrial backwardness, lack of investment and slow growth. Mary Goldring, who became the main presenter of the programme from 1975 to 1983, was an outspoken critic of social security payments and their potential to undermine the work ethic. She denounced the 'abuse' of the welfare system and of the 'poverty professionals' who worked with claimants. In this outspoken and even provocative critique she used Analysis to express another central plank of Thatcherism.

It would be easy to dismiss this right-leaning orientation as simple bias and a failure of the BBC's flag-ship current affairs programme to achieve the BBC's contractual duty of impartiality. Perhaps a more persuasive argument is that radio current affairs should focus its attention on new ideas and ideologies as these appear even if that means some sacrifice of impartiality. This may seem a rather generous viewpoint but there is evidence that Analysis has 'thrown caution to the wind' and embraced new political ideas as these have emerged not only in the 1970s but more recently. So for example, in the early 1990s ideas began to circulate on the political left that came to be known as the Third Way. These were social democratic views and attempted to move beyond the traditional ideas of left and right. Eventually they were translated into what came to be known as 'Blairism' or the ideas

of 'New Labour' and influenced government policy from 1997 onwards. The details of Third Way politics need not concern us here but what was very significant was the way they were thoroughly aired on *Analysis*. In 1995 there were 29 editions of *Analysis* and a number of these had titles which at least resonated with the Third Way agenda; 'The End of Enlightenment', 'the Pursuit of Happiness', 'Thinking Ahead' 'Obsolete signposts', 'A New Kind of Democrat' and 'The End of Everything' all suggested content which would reflect Third Way concerns. Anthony Giddens, the prominent British sociologist and Third Way thinker was a contributor to two editions of the programme and, most significantly, Geoff Mulgan, another key Third Way advocate, was the presenter of four and contributed to two others.

More recently, following Labour's defeat in the 2010 General Election and the election of Ed Miliband as leader, a group emerged in the party calling itself 'Blue Labour'. The new movement distances itself from the liberalism and perceived elitism of New Labour and has attempted to reconnect with Labour's traditional working class base. This has included some controversial ideas about the value of traditional communities and the dangers of immigration. Although it is much too early to see if *Analysis* is providing an ideological space for these new ideas and their advocates there has been at least one edition of the programme which featured some of the Blue Labour thinkers and was devoted to the new movement. It was presented by David Goodhart, the former Editor of *Prospect* magazine and featured Maurice Glasman and Marc Stears, both prominent figures in the Blue Labour movement. It would appear that at the risk of losing its impartiality, there are times when *Analysis* has become the platform for new political ideas whether they are on the left or right.

File on Four

Although this chapter is mainly concerned with *Analysis*, that programme has a distinguished stable-mate in the Manchester-produced single subject current affairs programme, *File on Four*. This programme was the idea of the former *Analysis* producer, Michael Green, who was its first producer in 1977. If *Analysis* was founded on anti-journalistic values and traditional Reithian principles of challenging the audience with difficult and serious programming, then *File on Four* seemed

to embrace a form of journalism in which reporters would leave the studio behind to get ‘dust on their feet’ and provide stories ‘from the bottom up’.⁷ Not only was this current affairs radio made outside London and in the industrial north but was also an attempt to go beyond the cosy studio-bound world of experts and into the schools, hospitals and prisons to get the voices of ‘ordinary people’. File on Four was also made distinctive from Analysis by its focus on policy and its implementation, rather than ideas and ideologies.

Within a year of being launched, File on Four had settled into a format that remains largely unchanged to this day. In addition to the journalistic method, the modus operandi of production has also hardly changed in over thirty years. The programme itself, with its very distinctive theme music, is presenter-led by a reporter who has spent usually three or four weeks in the field accompanied by a producer. Voices of a wide variety of people are recorded including the usual policy-makers and experts but also people who had experience of policies; the harassed mums in hospital waiting rooms; the prisoners, police officers, school-teachers and nurses so conspicuously missing from Analysis. It is possible to detect here a commitment to the voices of the powerless that can give File on Four a left-wing feel compared to the more right-leaning Analysis.

After weeks researching and recording, the reporter/presenter and the producer return to the Manchester office to edit the material and produce the first draft of a script. Every Monday morning there is a run-through of the first version of the programme with the Editor present. In BBC radio a programme Editor is in effect the manager of that programme and responsible for weekly output. After this rehearsal, the Editor makes a number of suggestions described here by the current Editor, David Ross:

“The Monday morning run-through is a key moment in the life of any File on Four and I will always want changes to some degree whether it’s a minor tweak and polish or whether it’s a complete reworking of the structure.”⁸

The reporter and producer then spend the rest of the day and the evening if necessary to make the changes before a second run-through then takes place on Tuesday morning, the day of

the evening broadcast. The final version of the programme is then recorded and edited in the afternoon.

One of the most important duties of the programme's Editor has been to decide on the topics to be covered in the 35 or so programmes each year. At times in its distinguished history, File on Four has had the funds to address international stories, including very early reporting of the development of AIDS in Africa. In the 1980s other international subjects included food aid in Bangladesh, child labour in the US and assassination in Guatemala. It is notable that even in the international stories the focus of attention remained on the victims of events and policies. But File on Four's particular subject area was and continues to be British social policy and its consequences. As a result, law and order (including prisons), the National Health Service, education and other parts of the welfare get particular attention. At the time of writing a recent edition of File on Four illustrates some of the programme's enduring features including subject selection. The description of this recent programme on the BBC website is revealing:

“Jenny Cuffe talks to foster parents who find themselves battling with local authorities over the children in their care. They describe a Kafkaesque nightmare where doors are shut, telephone calls and emails unanswered, even court orders are ignored. Meanwhile, vulnerable children are treated as pawns as social workers move them from one place to another.”⁹

The emphasis on people, both adults and children, as the ‘vulnerable’ victims of state institutions is typical and striking. The presenter is the celebrated radio journalist, Jenny Cuffe who was a producer of Woman's Hour in the 1970s. She went on to specialize in child abuse stories and began working for File on Four in the early 1980s under the editorship of Helen Boaden (currently Director, BBC News). Like Boaden herself, Cuffe was part of the feminization of radio news and current affairs in the 1980s that entailed more women working in factual radio and more feminist themes appearing in the output. Women like Jenny Abramsky and later Liz Forgan were highly influential radio managers while presenters like Mary Goldring and Sue MacGregor moved into the traditional male territory of news and current affairs presentation. So, thirty years after her

arrival at the programme, Jenny Cuffe is still making much-needed programmes on the treatment of children, in this case in an edition of *File on Four* produced by the long-serving producer, Sally Chesworth.

File on Four's methodical and unchanging approach to research and production has resulted in a programme that continues to impress. It could be argued that this is the most successful current affairs programme on either radio or television in the history of British broadcasting. That accolade is partly the result of the very special role of programme Editor and to the remarkable stability of programme staff. David Ross has been the Editor since 1995, ensuring the highest possible standards of what he calls 'evidential journalism'. Gerry Northam and Jenny Cuffe are two of the long-serving reporters on *File on Four* and the result of this stability and commitment is a current affairs programme which maintains the highest standards of radio journalism.

New Challenges for Radio Current Affairs

A striking feature of recent British broadcasting has been the decline, almost the extinction, of television current affairs. As a number of authors have described, distinguished programmes like *World in Action* and *This Week* have disappeared (Holland, 2006; Goddard, Corner and Richardson, 2007) while those that have survived, such as BBC One's *Panorama* have struggled to find a secure place in the schedule or a stable format. While television current affairs has declined in the face of increased competition, the radio equivalent has endured. As television news seemed to succumb to the visual gimmickry of CGI enhanced studios and carefully coiffured presenters, radio news and current affairs have maintained the same rigour and the same *modus operandi* that was laid down by the programme pioneers. As *Panorama* has wilted *Today*, *Analysis* and *File on Four* have if anything become more confident and respected as the BBC's main purveyors of news comment and analysis. *The World at One*, that controversial early experiment with a combined news and comment format has recently been rewarded with a fifty per cent increase in its allotted time to forty-five minutes.

However, great challenges remain for radio current affairs. We no longer live in the world of the 1970s when *Analysis* and

File on Four were launched to such acclaim and Today began to occupy its pre-eminent position as the most listened to radio current affairs programme.¹⁰ It is a commonplace of media discourse that the attention span of the audience has reduced and the proliferation of media, including the internet and internet-based provision, has made it harder to hold audiences for a period of time. This is a fundamental challenge for radio current affairs producers who must find new ways of engaging with listeners. In addition, the rise of social network sites like Facebook and Twitter have posed new challenges as radio producers try to find ways of incorporating these new communication opportunities into their programming.

Perhaps nowhere is this challenge greater than for BBC radio's most demanding and cerebral current affairs programme, Analysis. How can this most serious of programmes survive in the age of reduced attention-spans and social networks? The current Editor of Analysis, Innes Bowen, has adopted three different strategies with varying success.¹¹ There is an Analysis Facebook page but the most recent edition of the programme at the time of writing had only produced six comments and fewer 'likes'. A search back through the Facebook pages of the programme reveals a few regular commenters who comment repeatedly. After the edition of Analysis on leadership (7 November 2011) there was only one listener who commented and she did so five times. The ever-patient Analysis producer eventually replied with this brave attempt to turn a fan's over-enthusiasm to some advantage:

*"Although we don't agree with you, we hate to disappoint one of our most loyal fans. We want to offer you a sop. If you care to nominate your favourite ever Analysis programme we will podcast it during the forthcoming break, saying that you recommended it and why. Just let us know."*¹²

The Analysis Twitter account shows that in February 2012 there were 1751 followers, which is more than either the programme specific Today or File on Four Twitter accounts. However, looking at the radio network Twitter accounts it is clear that these are far more popular with 51,000 followers of @BBCRadio4 and over 85,000 followers of @bbc5Live.

It is hard not to see the Analysis experiment with social

media as unsuccessful but this surely reflects the nature of a programme which was founded on the belief that listeners want intellectually challenging and authoritative opinion rather than the causal comments of other listeners. More successful in the programme's responses to contemporary challenges have been new ways of presenting and producing the programmes themselves. At one level quite minor changes of style can make the programme more digestible. So, for example, reducing the number of contributors from the usual seven or more down to just five can help the listener to follow the argument. The slightly austere tone of Analysis has recently been lightened at times; in an edition of the programme on cultural diplomacy, the artist Grayson Perry (described in the introduction as a 'transvestite potter') explained his difficulty in representing Britain in a country like Iran, 'I might think ooh what do I pack, you know?' (Analysis, 30 October 2011).

By far the most successful innovation in Analysis has been the introduction of debates. Although not branded as Analysis the 'Radio 4 Debate' on 3 August 2011 was titled, 'Keynes vs Hayek' and produced by Innes Bowen. She wrote this very revealing blog about the event which usefully summarises the way modern radio current affairs is meeting its challenges:

*"Who would have thought that one way for Radio 4 to catch the attention of a younger audience was to organise a debate about two dead economists, with a septuagenarian member of the House of Lords (Lord Skidelsky) as the star attraction? Last Tuesday night, around 1000 people queued around the block at the London School of Economics to attend a Radio 4 debate about the ideas of John Maynard Keynes and Friedrich August von Hayek. In the 1930s, these two giants of economic thought advocated sharply contrasting responses to the Great Depression: Keynes argued for more state intervention and Hayek for a more free market approach."*¹³

She went on to claim that the average age of the audience was 23. There are plans to run more debates this time under the Analysis banner and so connect with a new Radio Four audience of young people who want to benefit from radio current affairs and in so doing demonstrate that there is still a future for the genre.

Conclusion

Throughout the long history of the BBC there has been an attempt to explain the world to listeners through the medium of speech alone. From the early educational talks in the 1920s to current affairs in the twenty-first century, the genre has evolved to become a central part of what we think of as public service broadcasting. The challenges to the serious and sometimes demanding single subject programmes are considerable but there is evidence, in audience size and the quality of programming, that there is still a demand for radio which addresses the biggest questions, perhaps especially at a time when social and economic problems seem so intractable.

The challenge for radio current affairs producers today is to produce serious and in depth programming, the sort which can help the listener make sense of an increasingly complex global world, while engaging the listeners who may not be used to such demanding content. The obvious route of social media seems not to be the only way forward and may just pay lip service to 'connecting' and 'engaging' listeners. There does, however, seem to be potential in live or 'as live' programming which is both cost effective and appeals to a younger audience as the case of the 'Kenyes vs Hayek' debate showed. It will be interesting for students of journalism to see how this challenging but important dimension of radio output adapts and innovates in the future.

Notes

1. All information available from: www.bbc.co.uk/radio4 [3 February 2012].
2. The most complete discussion of the radio talk is to be found in Scannell and Cardiff, 1991.
3. Broadcasting: Copy of the Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation, 2006 (Cm 6925), Available: www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust [12 March 2012].
4. The producer was George Fischer and the presenter, Ian McIntyre.
5. George Fischer, interview, 22 September 2000.
6. Interview, Analysis producer, 30 October 1998.
7. Interview, Michael Green, 29 July 2008.

8. Interview, David Ross, 23 June 2010.
9. Carers in Conflict', Available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b019rqcl#synopsis>. [3 February 2012].
10. The average weekly audience for Today according to RAJAR figures released in January 2012 was a record 7.15 million, attributed to increased interest in the economic crisis (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/feb/02/>).
11. The following section is based partly on an interview with Innes Bowen, 20 January 2012.
12. BBC Radio 4 Analysis Facebook page, Available: www.facebook.com/BBCRadio4Analysis, [3 February 2012].
13. Innes Bowen, 'Is Economics the New Rock and Roll?', Available: www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/radio4/2011/08, [3 February 2012].

Challenging Questions

- What do you think is the most appropriate form for modern radio current affairs? As part of a news programme like Today or single subject like File on Four? In your answer provide examples from both programmes.
- What do you think is the best way for a programme like Analysis to use social network sites? Do you agree that there is insufficient synergy between the programme and sites like Facebook?
- Listen to one example of File on Four and one of Analysis. Explain how the two programmes differ and state what you think are the particular strengths and weaknesses of the two different approaches.

Recommended reading

- Chignell, H. (2011) *Public Issue Radio: Talks, News and Current Affairs in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
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