



edited by
CAROLINE MITCHELL

WOMEN & RADIO

airing differences

Women and Radio

'This book is a celebration of our contribution as women to radio and a clarion call for its powerful voice to be shared equally between women and men.'

Jenni Murray, Presenter, *Woman's Hour*, Radio 4

From the very first days of national broadcasting and the founding of the BBC, through the innovative work of producers such as Hilda Matheson and Olive Shapley, to the breakfast-time antics of Zöe Ball and Sara Cox women have been at the heart of radio, yet marginalised in the official histories.

Women and Radio: airing differences reveals and explains the inequalities experienced by women involved in the industry; yet provides a platform for the many contributions that women have made to radio broadcasting as producers, managers, editors, presenters and consumers. It allows an understanding of feminist approaches to the media and examines 'housewife radio', the relationship between women and music, DJ chatter, the 'female' news agenda and radio as a subversive and empowering medium.

Women and Radio explores the variety of programming from mainstream broadcasts such as *Woman's Hour*, through to radio at the margins as represented by accounts of lesbian radio, feminist pirate broadcasts, local Asian radio and women's community stations. Combining classic work on radio with innovative research, journalism and biography, this book features interviews with DJs, presenters, managers and journalists. Guidelines, advice and helpful information are also offered to women wanting to work in the industry.

Contributors: Margaretta D'Arcy, Stephen Barnard, Sally Feldman, Maria Gibbons, Rosalind Gill, Nicola Godwin, Janet Howarth, Belinda Hollows, Fred Hunter, Anne Karpf, Kate Lacey, Anne McKay, Kim Michaels, Caroline Millington, Caroline Mitchell, Shaun Moores, Sheridan Nye, Karen Qureshi, Olive Shapley, Jo Tacchi, Stephen Wells.

Editor: Caroline Mitchell is principal lecturer in radio at the University of Sunderland. She has been active in the community radio movement in the UK for the last 20 years and jointly set up the first women's radio station in the UK: Fem FM.

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Women and radio

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To Trish, Tony and Caitlin

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Olive Shapley (1910–1999) was an inspirational radio producer and presenter who played a major part in bringing working class voices into people's living rooms. In the 1930s she produced pioneering radio features and documentaries about social and cultural issues for the BBC. Her most famous work was *The Classic Soil* (1939). She became presenter of *Woman's Hour* in 1949 and continued to produce TV and radio programmes for the BBC. Later in life, a pioneer to the end, she set up accommodation for single mothers and Vietnamese 'boat people'. Her autobiography *Broadcasting a Life* (Scarlet Press, 1996) was written with the help of her daughter Christina Hart.

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Steven Wells has been pursuing an essentially unreconstructed punk agenda at the *New Musical Express* for the last eighteen years. He's written for several BBC comedy shows including *The Day Today* and *On the Hour*. He wrote and presented *Dance With the Devil* – a Channel 4 documentary on music censorship. In 1999 he launched his own avant-pulp fiction imprint – Attack! Books – and his first novel, *Tits Out Teenage Terror Totty*, was released to ecstatic reviews.

The Women's Airwaves Collective was set up in Lonon in 1980. It was a feminist radio programme-making group that ran radio training courses for women and also carried out research into the way women were represented both on the radio and as programme makers.

Anne Karpf

Foreword

As cultural shifts go, it is hard to imagine a greater one than that which has befallen women and radio. In under three decades we have moved from a time when executives could still be publicly nervous about the acceptability of women's voices for broadcasting, with a senior female Radio 1 producer insisting that she would not recommend a 'girl' to front a Radio 1 daytime show (Ross 1977), to one where that network's prestigious breakfast show now has its second successive female presenter, her predecessor having been arraigned for bad language. Radio women, if the tabloid press were to be believed, are all babes and ladettes.

Yet astonishingly, this cultural change has been all but ignored in the academic literature. To my knowledge this is the first substantial volume to deal specifically with the subject of women and radio. In precisely the period during which the field of media studies has exploded, and almost every aspect of mass communications been subjected to theoretical scrutiny, this major area has remained virtually unexamined.

The reasons for its neglect lie partly in the marginal status which radio, accurately dubbed an 'invisible medium', itself occupies in the media studies firmament (Lewis and Booth 1989). Just as television is treated by the press and public as radio's more glamorous, monied sibling, so this hierarchy has been reproduced in academic research, and only recently seriously contested (Lewis 2000).

It is also true that radio, by its very ubiquity, sometimes seems to defy analysis. At times it appears more like a utility – say water or gas – than an art-form or means of communication. At others, attempting to theorise such an inescapable, quotidian medium feels like trying to pin down the air. (Moore's in this volume fascinatingly documents just that moment when radio moved from novelty to invisibility.) In addition its simultaneously public and intimate nature, noted in Lacey's chapter, can make it difficult to find the right language and discourse with which to think about it. Yet the very reasons which make the subject so elusive also make it a rich and fertile topic for study.

Hitherto, those interested in it had to trawl through the biographies of female

Foreword

radio pioneers, or extrapolate from television texts. And just as radio seemed an afterthought in media studies, so women have often seemed an afterthought in the emerging field of radio studies.

Caroline Mitchell is to be congratulated for having done so much of the trawling for us, and gathered together a selection of papers, some previously inaccessible, which can serve as markers of the territory.

Whereas radio is often characterised as a female medium, Mitchell found that overall women listen slightly less than men to commercial radio, as well as to Radios 1 and 2; on Radio 5 the disparity is more marked. That network, before its launch and despite its female controller, was disparaged as Radio Bloke, but there are now several other contenders for the title.

I have long thought that the obsession with car radio – the number of programmes called 'drive time' is beyond count – is a scarcely-concealed obsession with men and radio, toys and boys, since only around 20 per cent of radio listening takes place in cars.

Yet this is a particularly interesting moment to be exploring the subject of women and broadcasting. Radio, in its early days seen largely as a means of confirming women in their domestic roles, has come to play a much more complex role in women's lives. With music increasingly a marker of personal identity, and radio the chief source of music, the medium is used by women, and men, as part of the nexus of goods and services through which we construct our social identities. Listeners employ radio to differentiate themselves from their spouse (see Tacchi's chapter), or from parents. Musical taste has become a bridge between the individual and their subculture, a badge of affiliation. Music radio not only, in the argot of marketing, is niched, but also helps us niche ourselves.

The field of women and radio is in its infancy: We have yet to think deeply, for example, about how age affects radio use – how older women, teenage girls and pre-teens use the medium – or ethnic minority women's relationship with national radio. We have barely begun to develop sensitive tools to identify and analyse how different radio stations and programmes address women.

But much has already changed in the field. Feminist discourse has metamorphosed over the past two decades from a preoccupation with stereotyping to an obsession with pleasure (by my reckoning, it was some time in the late 1980s that young female Archers addicts first came out) to a more nuanced understanding of the different dimensions involved in women and radio.

This volume illustrates the sheer breadth of the subject. There are not just many different types of radio – national, local, and community, public service and commercial, permanent and RSLs (Restricted Service Licences) – but also a plethora of different issues. In addition to the employment of women in radio, there is women as audience, and the representation of women by radio – matters which are all linked, albeit not as causally as some early feminist work suggested.

One of this book's chief innovations is to integrate mainstream and community radio as subjects for study, thereby highlighting their similarities and differences (see, for instance, the chapters by Gibbons, and Michaels and Mitchell). These suggest that radio is still a highly gendered culture, where stereotypes about how women can and should sound on air are not being eroded so much as enlarged and defended (see Gill).

Mitchell puts women and community radio – at best usually a footnote in academic analysis – at the core of the book. In two chapters she provides a valuable history of women's radio stations and discusses women's struggle to secure space within community stations, while D'Arcy's chapter provides an evocative account of the Galway women's pirate radio station.

The question of whether women should have cordoned-off spaces on the airwaves, or whether these end up ghettoising women out of the mainstream, refuses to go away. But this volume suggests that historical analysis can illuminate the changing meanings of radio, and the ways in which it has sometimes been deliberately gendered (as described in Lacey's chapter).

The anthology also points to the variety of ways in which the subject can be considered – ethnographically, statistically, historically, and practically. In an area so shamefully underdeveloped theoretically, it marks a significant beginning.

Radio is sharing in the multi-media revolution, part of the vaunted convergence. There's a nostalgic fondness for the old deco sets just at the point where radios (apart from jokey, novelty sets) are looking increasingly like mobile phones, answering-machines, remote controls, and other digital paraphernalia. At a time when women's lives are also undergoing major change – with more women deferring maternity or eschewing it altogether, and a greater than ever number of women living alone – the relationship between women and radio will be a rich and fluid one. May this book excite further debate, critique, and interest in it.

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Caroline Mitchell

INTRODUCTION: ON A WOMAN'S WAVELENGTH?

Radio is a personal, intimate medium. Allow me to start by indulging in some highly selective moments from my personal 'radio life narrative':

1960s: The large wireless in our drawing room warms up, the lights glow and the sound of the programme fades in. I listen to 'The Clitheroe Kid' – a situation comedy on the Light programme. I love Jimmy Clitheroe's laugh and his 'funny' northern accent; the way he is so naughty, getting into trouble, 'cheeking' his elders. Listening to this programme is an escape into another family, a different class and another gender.

1970s: My school mates and I gather round the small transistor radio on a Sunday evening in the school common room. With mounting anticipation we listen to the 'Top 20 Countdown' on Radio 1. Later, after lights out, I ward off homesickness by listening to my tiny transistor radio. The sound is turned down low so that the matron won't hear and confiscate my radio companion for good.

1980s: As part of my undergraduate studies I carry out a survey about women's employment in local radio. One manager informs me that he won't employ women in technical areas of radio: 'They might get their long hair and fingernails caught in whirling tape spools.' He isn't being ironic. I have short hair and I bite my fingernails. Around that time a Hospital Radio apparatchik tells me not to touch a mixing desk until I have had extensive training: 'It might blow up,' he says.

1990s: Fem FM has been on the air for a week now. History was made when we switched on the transmitter of Britain's first women's station. It's the last

programme and we are dancing in the studio. Suddenly the music stops – in our joyous cavorting someone has kicked out the plug powering the transmitter. I push the plug back in – woman power!

2000: I've been in labour for 36 hours. Today for some reason all I can bear to listen to is Radio 2. The music keeps me going. Terry Wogan, Ken Bruce – I can even stand listening to Jimmy Young! But then Steve Wright turns on the smarm. 'Turn it off,' I scream as the next contraction reaches its peak. Our daughter is born early that evening – just in time for 'The Archers'.

Radio is thus entwined into the rhythm of our everyday lives¹ through its texts, genres, discourses, institutions and industry. This volume is the first book to bring together writing and research about women and radio. It combines previously published material with specially commissioned articles and represents some of the key debates in the areas of policy, theory, practice and praxis² relating to women and radio. Through a range of personal, historical and theoretical perspectives it consolidates the position of women on the radio research agenda where once they were absent, invisible or marginal. This introduction maps out the core themes in the emerging field of women and radio studies and delineates some boundaries. It briefly outlines the framework of radio in Britain for people who are unfamiliar with its structure.

Women and Radio is divided into three main sections, each with an introduction. The first part, 'Gendered radio – hidden histories and the development of programming by and for women', takes us through personal and historical narratives to explore how radio for, about and by women has developed. Part 2, 'Radio texts and audiences and the rise of feminist radio', is primarily an exploration of the different theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of radio's relationship to female audiences (both 'active' and 'passive') as well as accounts of feminist radio praxis. Part 3, 'Women working in radio', contains contemporary research and case studies about the current position of women working in different roles in the BBC, commercial and community radio sectors. A final section has contacts and resources for those who wish to use academic, vocational, or campaign networks relating to women and radio.

Some of the previously published material in this volume (for instance Local Radio Workshop's survey of sexism on the airwaves and Barnard's review of the relationship between DJs and female audiences) is somewhat dated in the light of subsequent developments in radio employment and practices, but has been included because of its historical and contextual importance for women and radio studies. The book mainly focuses on women and British radio although some interesting examples of European research (i.e. Lacey's historical study of early women's radio in Germany and perspectives on Irish mainstream and pirate radio activity by Gibbons and D'Arcy) are included. The first chapter comes from the United States but its thesis about attitudes towards women's voices in the early days of radio can be applied to British radio.

Catering for 52 per cent? The structure of radio in Britain

The structure of British radio is well-documented elsewhere (Crisell 1997, Barnard 2000).³ In 1995 radio listening was the third or fourth most popular 'home-based' leisure activity for women (after watching television and visiting /entertaining, alongside listening to recorded music and ahead of reading, gardening and DIY) (Central Statistical Office 1995). Although quantitative research (like that carried out by Radio Joint Audience Research (RAJAR) into when, what and how women listen to the radio is mainly used by industry controllers and managers, a picture of UK radio and its female audience can be revealing.⁴ Overall, women listen slightly less than men to commercial radio – the difference mainly coming from national channels.⁵ The Radio Advertising Bureau (RAB) has carried out research into how young women use radio and found that 'there are 7.4 million women aged 18–35 in the UK of whom over 78 per cent will listen to commercial radio at some point, for an average of 15 hours a week.' (McLuhan 2000). Two BBC channels, Radio 3 and 4, have roughly the same numbers of men and women listening (men listen to Radio 3 slightly more). Radio 2 is listened to by 24 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women (for roughly the same amount of time). The Controller of Radio 1 recently stated that he wanted to increase the number of women listening to the channel (see Chapter 19). Currently it is listened to by 27 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women, men listening to an average of 10.4 hours a week and women 7.6 hours. The widest 'gender gap' is for Radio 5 Live, which has 19 per cent of the male population listening and 7 per cent of women. It has attempted to woo some women to its sports coverage with specialist programmes but it is not known as 'Radio Bloke' for nothing! Twenty-four per cent of men and 20 per cent of women listen to BBC local radio.

These figures may help schedulers and programmers to provide a better public serve or target consumers more effectively but as important is *how* do women listen? RAB research (2000) has found that men and women require different things from their listening – men consume radio to get specific information, traffic news, football scores etc. and as radio executive Katy Turner claims: 'Women are concerned more with feeling good, being mellow.' (Sullivan 1994: 31).

The female medium?

Anne Karpf has written that radio has a 'special relationship with women's lives, in that it is an explicit accompaniment to them – a commentary, or a counterpoint' (1980: 43). The Radio Advertising Bureau (RAB) has identified that nearly two thirds of 'housewives' (note the quotation marks, the RAB admit that these 'housewives' now include male and pensioner 'main shoppers') listen to commercial radio each week:

Radio plays an important role in the lives of housewives, relieving their feelings of isolation and helping to lighten the spirits while doing chores. It also accounts

for a disproportionately large section of the media day, making radio a dominant medium, in their lives.

(RAB 2000: 8)

Karpf (1987: 169) also talks about the 'gender apartheid' in radio listening where daytime radio women are placed in the private, domestic realm by male presenters who operate in the public realm and assume that men are there too. Defining the 'space' for women on the airwaves is a key concern of this book.⁶ The DJs and programme controllers of the 1970s and 1980s consciously or unwittingly colluded in the aforementioned public/private binary. This book documents and celebrates research and practice which places women in a range of spaces in relation to radio, as listeners and practitioners: 'Each of us remains private, we are public at the same time' (D'Arcy 1996: 3).

A summary of early research into women and radio which was mainly influenced by socialist feminist perspectives⁷ is necessary before moving onto discussing wider theoretical debates. Women and radio was first put on the academic and political agenda in Britain in 1977 when, in a publication conceived by the campaign group 'Women in Media', Mileva Ross critiqued the British radio industry's attitude to both female listeners and programme makers. Ross concluded that more training was needed to redress the lack of female employees in different sectors of the radio industry. Shortly after this, Anne Karpf (1980) discussed how we should be counteracting the hidden 'anti women' framework behind obnoxious DJ constructed 'strip programming'⁸ (which positions women as passive and undemanding listeners). She suggested that there was a need for a wider range of programmes that represented the 'truths' of women's lives – including unashamedly giving feminist-influenced work a fair hearing and creating an industry where women could create their own stations as well as contributing to wider mainstream programming agendas. Baehr and Ryan tried to push policy and practice further through outlining guidelines for change in local commercial radio. They too criticised the limiting 'domestic and sexual boundaries set by the media' (1984: 42) and argued that cheaply made programming that always had an eye on the ratings was anathema to high standards. They recommended that in order to redress the culture of the radio medium of male producers and female consumers, programmers should train more female contributors and generally take more risks with programming. Baehr and Ryan did not recommend the setting up of women's stations in the commercial sector, although they acknowledged that separatist training and programmes for women might increase equal opportunities in the short term.

Women and radio studies

Radio has been called the 'Cinderella' medium (Scannel 1988), and Radio Studies has only recently found a space within Media and Cultural Studies.⁹ If radio is Cinderella then women and radio studies still has 'pumpkin' status.

This volume starts to carve out the area of women and radio studies, but is there a coherent, united perspective in the field? Some themes emerge, in particular the dominance of feminist/media and cultural studies approaches to theory, practice and policy; the notion of active audiences and using ethnographic work and critical discourse analysis as methodological tools. Van Zoonen (1994) notes the paucity of studies in feminist media production in cultural and communication studies. One of the strengths of the emerging field of Radio Studies, and also in this volume, is the attention to this area.

Clearly gender, women, feminism and patriarchy are important definers in the debates raised in this book.¹⁰ Inevitably in its nature as a collection of historical and contemporary pieces it is going to be affected by different phases of feminist thought and theory, moving through debates about the 'effect' of sexist radio output on 'passive' audiences, through political economy research about patriarchal employment practices in the radio industries to feminist influenced research in the area of cultural studies, linguistics and anthropology.

Women and radio – old myths and new areas for research

Much of the influence of traditional myths about women's relationship to radio is now disappearing. The well-rehearsed and loudly voiced arguments about women's voices being unsuitable for radio and disliked by listeners have now been more or less smashed.

Women's programming and women's stations have now been tried in practice by mainstream BBC and commercial programmers and by alternative community stations. Many women shy away from having special programmes or stations allocated to them – they say gender is not an important factor in programming. I would argue that this is a rejection of stereotyping, a distrust of the way the radio industry has already packaged femininity in ways that are off-putting to many women. Viva's commercial format failed to address the complexities of working women's identities. Karpf identified the dilemma of a single programme (in this case BBC *Woman's Hour*) representing the range of women's interests: 'It negotiates the conflicts in broadcasting to and for women, at times unsure how far to examine and interrogate the "outside" world' without losing its focus on and validation of the 'domestic world' (Karpf 1987: 175). Stations employing female DJs have begun to address the problems of gender imbalance and limited role models for women in UK music radio. At Radio 1 different audiences are addressed by a wider range of female presenters including music journalists, women with club experience and entertainment DJs.

What we are beginning to see is the development of women's radio expressed in a range of ways. The most conservative, and commercially successful forms are 'soft' programming formats, like that of Heart FM, which attract as many male listeners as female. The audience figures show that men are happy to listen to 'female' formats and programmes (like *Woman's Hour*) but women are not so tolerant of 'male' formats (like Radio Five Live). In the past decade in Britain,

women's radio stations including those in the model of 'Fem FM' and occasional feminist pirate radio activity have provided the space for women to express, experiment and raise their voices. Ideas and formats promoted in such relatively 'fringe' media activities are often taken up later in mainstream formats. Sadly what is less likely to change is the patriarchal political economy of the radio industry. We have to look to countries with more imaginative regulatory systems for alternative media cultures to truly thrive. Paradoxically women want it all – difference and equality. They want specialist programmes that without preaching or proselytising validate their gender and/or race, class, sexuality and subculture and they want to be well-represented in different genres in terms of production, management and ownership of all kinds of radio stations.

So what can feminist cultural and media studies scholars contribute to the future of research into women and radio? An interesting line of study is the theoretical notion of voice and space: how at the same time women can be heard and not seen, disembodied when they 'appear' on radio. What also seems to be missing from much of the current research and writing in this area is the nature of the *pleasures*¹¹ women get from radio. Whether they empathise with, object to, learn from, fantasise over or subvert what they hear and what they make, women can be active consumers and producers of meaning. Women can use radio, as both listeners and programme makers, to subvert, manipulate and play with that space and their identities.

Notes

- 1 Scannell (1996) describes the way broadcasting relates to everyday routines and events as 'dailiness': 'In modern societies radio and television are part of both the background and foreground of our everyday dealings with each other in a common world' (1996: 5).
- 2 By 'praxis' I mean practice informed by theory.
- 3 At the start of 2000 the BBC, which is funded by an annual licence fee, had 5 national networks all based on providing a public service to listeners. Radio 1 is the channel for pop music and youth interest. Radio 2 is for music and light entertainment, mainly aimed at the over 40s. Radio 3 is the channel for arts, culture and classical music. Radio 4 for current affairs, a variety of speech-based programmes, comedy and drama and Radio 5 Live, for news and sport. Each of the British 'regions' (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) has its own radio service and there are 39 local stations and an Asian Radio Network. The Radio Authority grants licences to the commercial sector, which at the start of 2000 has three national stations and 245 local stations as well as 15 cable and 19 satellite services. The Radio Authority also grants short-term licences (Restricted Service Licences) to hundreds of stations each year to cover sporting and cultural events and to test out new formats (often for community-based stations).
- 4 RAJAR research is for both BBC and commercial sectors. Figures come from weekdays, March 2000 survey, 10 Jan to 26 March 2000. Figures are based on the percentage of all men and women who listen to each station (called the station 'reach') and the average hours they spend listening (in brackets).
- 5 All Commercial Radio 68% men (15.7) and 65% women (15.3). Source: Radio Joint Audience Research Ltd (RAJAR), conducted by Ipsos – RSL Ltd.
- 6 A definition and discussion of women's space in the context of feminist revisions of Habermas' (e.g. 1989) public sphere can be found in Chapter 15.

- 7 See van Zoonen (1994: 12–13) for a useful discussion of typologies of feminism.
- 8 Music linked by continuous DJ chat and trivia – frequent references being made to landmarks in the listeners' daily domestic routine. Seemingly no end to each 'programme' – one presenter hands over to another and the routine continues.
- 9 The establishment of the UK Radio Studies Network has been instrumental in highlighting radio as an area for research and study. See Contacts section for details.
- 10 Natalie Fenton acknowledges the fragmented and contested nature of feminist theory and argues that 'Not only is the concept of "woman" crucial to grasp the gendered nature of the social world, but so is that of patriarchy in order that we do not lose sight of the power relations involved.' (Fenton 1998: 14).
- 11 Joke Hermes, in the context of her study of women 'reading' women's magazines, talks about how 'it needs to be accepted that readers of all kinds (including we critics) enjoy texts in some contexts that we are critical of in other contexts' (Hermes 1995: 2). She goes on to state that 'post structuralism, psychoanalysis and postmodernism led to the acknowledgement that pleasure was an important study of popular culture in its own right' (op cit.).

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