Up in the Air? The Matter of Radio Studies

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Ten years ago

It is ten years since this journal published 'Ten Years of Radio Studies: The Very Idea!', a reflection on a decade of work since the launch of the Radio Studies Network (Lacey, 2008). The Network had come together in 1998 when a group of radio scholars from around the UK responded to a plea, published in *The Guardian* by Peter Lewis a year earlier, for the academy to take radio seriously (Lewis, 2007).[1] Scholarship on radio had long been under-represented in the field of media and cultural studies in comparison to that on television, film and print, and increasingly, of course, the "new media". The essay acknowledged and celebrated the Network's spur to new research, new collaborations and new spaces for discussion and dissemination, including this journal and the biannual transnational conference. Ten years on, there was a new confidence in our collective endeavours, no need any longer to preface every contribution with an apologetic justification. But the phrase, 'the very idea!' was intended to indicate a certain ambivalence, if not quite incredulity, towards the *conception* (in both senses of that word), of radio as a separate field of study. To caricature the main thesis, I argued against the idea of 'radio studies' on the grounds that there is no such thing as radio, and that setting up a new intellectual enclave would in any case just continue to isolate, distort and marginalise our work pragmatically, intellectually and philosophically. This essay is a response to the editors' invitation – and challenge - to revisit that argument another ten years on.[2]

No such thing as radio

Of course, I was not seriously claiming that there is no such thing as radio. Rather, I was trying to draw attention to the fact that there is no singular thing called radio. Instead, this singular word, radio, is called upon to describe any number of different things – material, virtual, institutional, aesthetic, experiential. And, in turn, each of these meanings unfolds over time and in different contexts to reveal anything and everything,

from a cat's whisker contraption of minerals and metal, rigged up by pioneering enthusiasts fishing eagerly for faraway voices in the white noise of the ether, to algorithmically produced streams of digitised commercial music providing ambient distraction at the absent-minded touch of a skeuomorphic button on a smart screen. But even these examples, taken from opposite ends of a standard technologically-centred history, might not fit a definition of radio that depended on a notion of 'institutionalised broadcasting' or 'liveness'. Then, as now, the attempts to define what is and isn't radio are ultimately futile - the very definition of a question that is academic; or at least it's futile to try to come up with a definitive or finite definition. But how those debates have played out over time and in different contexts *can* be illuminating, and can be indicative of a once consecrated field becoming exposed to some kind of threat as boundaries shift and expertise ossifies. The debates begin, and perhaps are at their most vigorous when a medium first emerges onto the scene. Certainly, it is fascinating to revisit the intense debates about what to make of newly available radio technology around the turn of the last century; but we see them re-emerge with the arrival of television, of audio streaming, and, with surprising persistence over the last decade or so, with podcasting.

But definitions don't just follow technological developments. Definitions clearly matter in shaping our research questions, but our research questions also shape the definitions we work with. In other words, 'radio' is not just a historical or material artefact, but is, at root, an intellectual artefact. This matters - and not just because of the ways in which the mutable materiality of the world (the changing matter and matters of radio),is made to fit the abstract idea. By sleight of hand, or ideological move, the artifice of that abstraction then seems synthetically to equate to and exhaust its object. This process of 'identity thinking' matters because the very idea of radio becomes 'one more familiar category that is no longer a unique or strange thing, but something familiar, with all that implies for institutionalisation, routinization and commodification' (Lacey, 2008, p.5). The same might go for the idea of 'radio studies', to which I'll return.

Meanwhile, to retreat from such levels of abstraction for a moment, on a more practical level I continue to find Carolyn Marvin's formulation helpful, namely that '[m]edia are not fixed objects: they have no natural edges' (Marvin, 1988: 8). I find it helpful not only descriptively, but also as a reminder continually to question where those edges are being drawn at any particular moment, by whom, and to what effect. And there usually *are*

edges, although one of the definitions offered in the most recent iteration of this perennial debate on a radio studies discussion list was simply, 'Radio is a shared experience with a human connection',[3] a definition in which the edges are not just blurred but almost entirely eradicated. Yet, despite the inevitable and necessary contestations around the edges, there is, by definition, something sedimented at the core of this little word that nevertheless brings otherwise disparate groups of scholars together.

Against radio studies

And so it is that we find ourselves operating in a field called radio studies, though I think the same thing applies here as it does for our putative object of study - namely that it's a description that has a pragmatic value, but that its value as an intellectual project is at its greatest when its edges are the least well defined. Too often in the neo-liberal academy we find ourselves having to play institutional games that are based on competition, using the language of promotional culture, productivity and distinction. If radio studies becomes consecrated as a field, as Bourdieu (1993),might have it, then the funding, the posts, the publications and promotions will follow. This is a powerful logic.

But intellectually, philosophically, politically, pedagogically I would argue that there is also a danger in too much specialisation, in too much fragmentation. There is a danger that we speak to each other as if an echo chamber, that we separate ourselves off from broader currents of debate, and that we might simply come to know more and more about less and less. In my article ten years ago, I made the case for radically decentring radio as an object of study, even as we pursue it. In other words, I was arguing for a properly holistic and radically contextualised approach to radio, an approach that would take seriously the *longue durée* of history, the complex tapestry of communicative forms and the intricate discursive webs within which the thing we call radio comes to be. I was also trying to suggest that remaining somehow on the margins of mainstream media studies, and not least in focusing on an auditory medium in an age of spectacle, provides a very good platform from which to embark on such undisciplined interdisciplinary adventures, and that in venturing out with our antennae tuned differently, we might bring something fresh to those other fields.

Another ten years

So that brings me back to the brief, to review the last ten years of work on a subject that I've argued is problematic to define, in a field that I've argued needs to be defined as expansively as possible.

Even a basic keyword search of academic publications on radio (in English),reveals there's a huge amount of interesting work being done. Radio studies is, after all, one of the fields that describes itself in the plural. The account that follows cannot claim to offer a complete or exhaustive overview and will, inevitably, be partial, in both senses of the word - limited and delimited by pragmatics and predilections.[4] I've made some arbitrary decisions about where to draw my own edges – to put to one side the very many non-academic, or 'popular' books on radio, the memoirs and biographies, the production manuals and career guides, and even the scholarly blogs, documentaries and other forms. And it assumes that 'radio studies' is a field located across the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, despite potential connections with the technical and scientific research going on elsewhere in the academy.

Across the repertoire of scholarly books and articles that have been published over the last ten years, there continues to be, needless to say, studies that connect with every point of the circuit of culture: studies about technology, policy, ownership, institutions, politics, production, scheduling, programming, formats, genres, representation, transmission, audiences, communities, identities, reception, perception and effects - and all of these drawing examples from past, present and future, from the margins and the mainstream, in contexts from the local to the global, deploying methods from across the arts and social sciences and drawing on theories and traditions from across the disciplines.

Some of this richness is reflected in the various edited collections (e.g. Mollgaard, 2009; Gazi et al, 2011; Hand and Traynor, 2012; Bessire and Fisher, 2012; Gunner et al, 2012; Loviglio and Hilmes, 2013; Gillespie and Webb, 2013; Oliveira et al, 2014; Bonini and Monclús, 2014; Baade and Deaville, 2016; Brown et al, 2017; Biewen and Dilworth, 2017; Michelsen et al, 2018), overviews (e.g. Chignell, 2009; Starkey and Crisell, 2009; Street, 2015),and special issues of journals (e.g. Bottomley, 2015; Berry, 2016; MacLennan, 2018),that have been published in the last ten years, much of it inspired by

and produced within the context of networks, special sections of major conferences and large-scale funded projects. It's certainly one of the markers of a confident and creative field of endeavour that it can sustain so many contributions of this order, and that scholars are returning to radio to examine what it can tell us in terms of medium and communication theory more broadly (e.g.Mowitt, 2011; Sewell, 2014).

Not surprisingly, the number of specialist journals is also on the rise. Established titles like the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television,* publishing since 1981,*The Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, currently celebrating its 25th anniversary, and *The Radio Journal*, now in its 15th year, have recently been joined by the *RadioDoc Review*, on online journal specialising in the documentary form, with embedded audio files bringing together the work of practitioners and academics; and the *Radio, Sound and Society Journal,* which launched in 2016, as did *RadioMorphoses*, the journal of the Francophone radio studies network, GRER.

In terms of research monographs on radio, there were already clear signs of a renaissance ten years ago, and the last decade has seen that gather pace and breadth. In the field of cultural history, there have been plentiful publications on a growing range of periods, places and perspectives, for example in a North American context (e.g. Slotten, 2009; Russo, 2010; Simpson, 2011; Razlogova, 2011; McCracken, 2015; Woolley, 2016; Kuffert, 2015; Vancour, 2018), in Latin American contexts (e.g. Karush, 2012; Ehrick, 2015; Rea, 2016; Bronfman, 2016; Mohammed, 2017; and in European contexts (e.g. Neulander, 2009; Lovell, 2015; Wrigley, 2015; Murphy, 2016; Scales, 2016; Vaillant, 2017; Whittington, 2018). It is harder to find book-length cultural histories of radio broadcasting in national contexts beyond the Americas and Europe, but there are notable exceptions (e.g. Griffin-Foley, 2009; Stanton, 2013; Hoar, 2018), There has, however, been a substantial interest in cultural histories of transnational radio broadcasting (e.g. Hilmes, 2013; Lommers, 2013), and the role that radio has played in cultural diplomacy and propaganda in different contexts (e.g. Anduaga and Egaña, 2009; Krysko, 2011; Ribeiro, 2011; Potter, 2012; Webb, 2014; Schlosser, 2015), and radio for development and social change in global contexts (e.g. Englund, 2011; Gomia, 2012). Radio's role in public and political life more generally has also been examined in interesting ways (e.g. Goodman, 2011; Somerville, 2012; Fairchild, 2012; Lacey 2013), as has radio's part in the 'digital revolution' (e.g. Anderson, 2013; Dubber, 2014;

Bottomley, 2016; Crider, 2016), and the role played by particular celebrated individuals (e.g. Sterling, 2013; Williams, 2015; Raboy, 2016; Fuller-Seeley, 2017). Cutting across all of these frameworks are examples of detailed examinations of various radio genres, including journalism and documentary, music, drama and storytelling (e.g. Verma, 2012; Hand, 2014; Smith and Verma, 2016; Porter, 2016; Thurmann-Jajes, 2017). There is a particularly vibrant sub-field of research into radio's modernist heritage that deserves mention here, too (Cohen et al, 2009; Keane, 2014; Feldman et al, 2014; Rosenthal, 2014; Dinsman, 2015; Bloom, 2016; Avery, 2016), not least as an example of work from literary, philosophical and other disciplines that engage in different ways with the idea of radio.

It has been a humbling, exciting, and frustrating experience even just skating over the surface of this library of material. Humbling, because I feel even less well qualified to offer this review than I did when I started; exciting because of the sheer volume, variety and vitality of this work; and frustrating because I haven't had time to delve very deep or to undertake a more exhaustive review. What does strike me, though, is that 20 years ago we could probably have counted the number of contemporary scholarly books about radio on the fingers of a hand or two. Ten years ago, the situation was already much improved, but it was still just about possible to pretend that it was a small and focused enough body of work to have some kind of legitimate overview. This exercise has confirmed for me that we're well past that point now.

And, of course, that's good and right. For all that media studies has relegated the study of radio over the years, radio remains one of the most ubiquitous, influential, resilient and pioneering of all the modern communication forms. It's propagated by some of the largest global corporations as well as the most precarious community outfits. It influences politics, identities, community formation and musical styles. It continues on all its varied platforms, and in all its myriad communicative contexts, to engage its listeners with all manner of information, education and entertainment.
It would indeed be foolhardy to think that all of that could be contained within a single overview or even contained within a single field, but let me highlight a few things that struck me in the process of writing this piece.

Radio Studies is International

One of the exciting things that's happened to radio studies in recent years, as I think the books show, but that is even more striking looking at the literature as a whole, is the strengthening of international links. It's partly a function of the international radio studies network of course, partly a function of ease of online access to international publications, and partly a product of the broader context of globalisation. There are several parts to this. First, there is the growing number of detailed cultural histories and analytical treatments of a growing range of national and local broadcasters. Second, there are increasing numbers of studies that aim to look at the connections between and across radio broadcasting in different national contexts. This includes important new studies about international broadcasters, but also work that is doing comparative work or looking behind the scenes at the cooperation and competition between broadcasters across national boundaries. Third, there are studies which examine the role of radio in transnational cultural diplomacy and identity construction

But we also have to acknowledge that there are persistent imbalances and gaps in the picture. Despite notable exceptions, the volume and scope of the national broadcasting histories are freighted heavily towards the Global North – or at least they are in terms of the Anglophonic frame within which I'm even making this claim. Most of the reasons for this imbalance aren't unique to radio studies, of course. It has to do with entrenched postcolonial and Eurocentric legacies and all that means for unequal funding, access to resources, availability of archives, the overwhelming dominance of Western frames of reference and theory, the differing levels of engagement with and recognition of media studies in different parts of the world, the common requirement to publish and present in English on the international academic circuit. Some of it, though, *is* specific to our field: the overwhelming dominance of the BBC public service model and the commercial model of the American networks, together with the pioneering scholarly work into their histories that have been so influential in setting the stage for other studies. One area, though, in which the picture is painted rather differently, not surprisingly, is in the area of development studies. There is a great deal of interesting and important work being published in, or at least about the Global South about the work of radio in education, especially health education around things like reproductive rights, and radio work in developing empowerment, participation and democratisation. And in these ways,

together with a focus on community practices and activism, there are connections with work being done on community radio in the West.

Radio Studies is Interdisciplinary

The study of media in general is, of course, characterised by the range of research questions, theoretical perspectives and methodologies that is required in order to get a handle on the phenomenon. To examine whatever it is that we agree to call radio in the round we would, at a minimum, need to engage in aspects of media and communication studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies, journalism studies, literary studies, development studies, sound studies, area studies, business and management studies, policy studies, history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, cultural geography, politics, economics, linguistics, civics, acoustics, poetics, ethics, electronics, music, rhetoric, international relations, performing arts, gender & sexuality studies, critical race studies, disability studies. We find ourselves engaging in content analysis, textual analysis, data analysis, discourse analysis, archival analysis, reception analysis, rhythmanalysis, political economy, medium theory, social theory, critical theory, musicology, narratology, ethnography, phenomenology, biography, autobiography, pedagogy...

We don't all do all of this, or course, but nor do we just draw on these other fields. A keyword search for radio-related work just over the last five years beyond the dedicated radio journals produced a list of 345 articles in 192 journals from right across the globe, across the breadth of the arts and social sciences.[5]

Particularly striking is the number of articles in public health journals, as well as business and marketing, although it is no surprise to find that communications journals make up the largest single constituency, albeit at the more quantitative, effect-measuring end of the spectrum, rather than more cultural, sociological and humanities-inflected approaches. But the point is that radio is part of every aspect of everyday life, reflecting all aspects of life back to all its various publics, and that the field of radio studies probably extends much further afield than those of us associated with that term normally contemplate.

Radio is Intermedial

One of the main issues I have with the idea of 'radio studies' is that it seems to rest on the assumption that the various media can be studied separately. While there may be a virtue in thinking about the specificities of any particular instance of mediation, I would argue that this has to be complemented by studies that understand the medium in the broader communicative context, and that this inevitably involves a sensitivity to inter-medial relations. Interestingly, there does seem to have been something of a shift during the last period, depending on our starting point.

When we think of radio as broadcasting institution, our comparisons and connections are made with television.[6] This was probably the default position in the post-60s rise of media studies when television seemed inexorably on the rise, and radio tended to be treated as a mere pre-cursor to television, or worse, a medium that was defined by its assumed deficiencies, as a blind medium, an invisible medium, a secondary medium. When we think of radio as a sound medium, our comparisons and connections take us to media forms like podcasting, sound art, audio books. When we think of radio as a source of information and connection in the world, we might be more likely to make connections with the press and social media. When we think of radio as an artform or a form of entertainment, at least until it comes to music radio, it seems that connections come most readily to literature, theatre and film. As for music radio, the main connection is likely to be with the recording industry.

And when we think of it as a cultural phenomenon, we might think not only of how it remediates other media and cultural forms like music, drama, comedy, literature, sport and religion, but also how it is represented in other media and becomes part of the cultural imaginary as well as cultural experience. And finally, when we think of radio as

technology, the big intermedial stories in the last couple of decades have been about networking, convergence and remediation. This gives rise to essays about medium theory, of course, and also invites detailed examinations of the emergence, adoption and adaptation of new radio forms in the new digital media ecology, and what to call them: internet radio, online radio, interactive radio, streaming audio, smart radio, satellite radio, cloud hosted radio, Radio 2.0, Digital audio broadcasting, Webcasting, Podcasting, Microcasting, Audioblogging, Audio microblogging, radio gardens....

The truth is, the study of radio has always been international, interdisciplinary and intermedial, but this last term at least is new, and reminds us that our research frameworks are historically contingent and repeatedly recalibrated and refreshed by developments not only within the technological, institutional and textual lifecycle of radio itself, but by broader cultural and theoretical trends.

The core programme of the Radio Conference 2018 was made up of 90 papers across 30 panels from 27 countries across 6 continents. In preparation for the keynote lecture, I generated a word cloud from the abstracts.
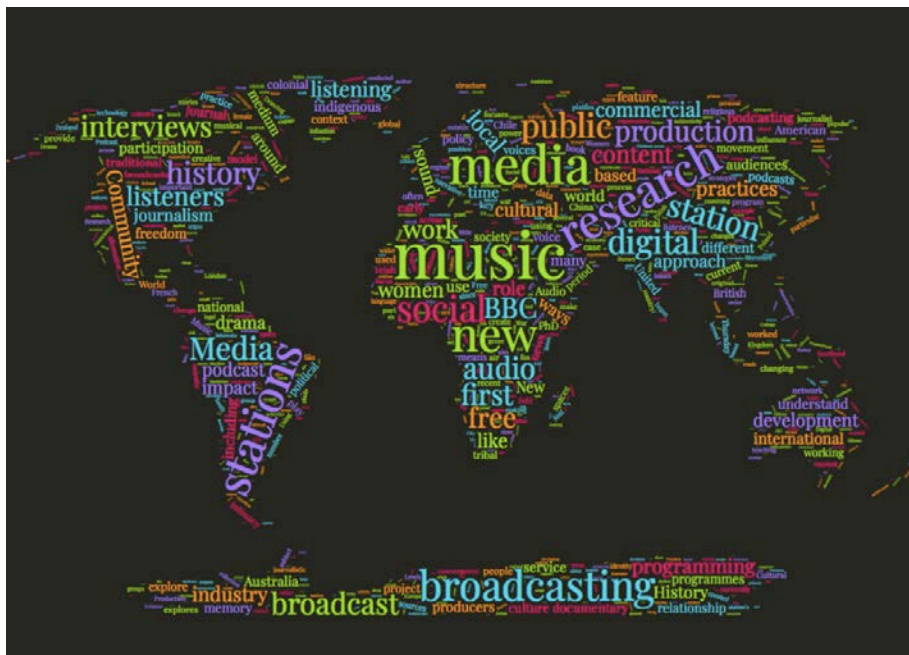
In research terms, it is a crude, artificial and very likely inaccurate snapshot, but given those caveats, it was nevertheless striking that the words that came to the surface, for all their variety, are almost exactly the words that one might have expected to find doing the same exercise at any point over the last ten or twenty years. In fact, if we took the

words relating to digitalisation out of there, and possibly globalisation, then we might have expected to see the same clutch of words from an even earlier period. Perhaps this is what in the end defines a field of interest – a persistent frame of reference, an ongoing conversation about the nuances in multiple iterations of stations, broadcasts and audiences, policies, programmes, personalities, practices and publics. But perhaps it's also this stability of framing which produces the apparently stable core of our object of study. I may be wrong, but I suspect if we were to do a similar exercise in other areas of media and cultural studies that we might find more volatility, and perhaps a more prominent engagement with theory, with some of the prevailing "buzzwords", which I'm sure are there in the detail, coming more to the fore. This isn't necessarily a criticism. Having said that, I want in this final section to think through not only the ways that the study of radio can be illuminated by some broad contemporary debates, but suggest ways in which radio studies is very well placed to offer context and perspective in debates that aren't first and foremost about radio. In other words, the question, as I put it in my essay ten years ago, is,

> ...whether 'radio' could be deployed as a structuring term through which to examine historical changes in communication practices (an enduring structure over time – or "in history"), or whether 'radio' is better understood as a relational term, one that is defined differently in relation to different contexts or periods?

Then as now, I argued that, in the end, it has to be both:

> 'Radio' is always both an abstracted idea (albeit a product of social action), and a material reality. The real challenge, then, is to recognise that in our work and to tease out the dialectical tensions between them. The problem with 'radio' as an abstracted concept, to adapt E.P. Thompson's critique of 'culture' as an analytical category, is that it is 'clumpish' - that it gathers so many attributes and activities to itself, it may confuse or disguise discriminations (Thompson, 1991). Used well, however, 'radio' can become a tool with which to open up new avenues of enquiry.

This is not to argue that radio is 'essentially' any more or less rich as an analytical tool than any other object, but simply to say that there are some peculiarities about radio's history, characteristics and position on the margins of scholarly attention that I think can make it a useful foil with which to reveal some prevailing blindspots.

Radio and media historiography

The first thing that comes to my mind, as a historian, is the accidental amnesia of so much work in media studies. Driven by a relentless presentism, whether simply chasing novelty or motivated by a noble intent to engage in the world, there is all too often a lack of historical awareness. Increasingly, radio, television, print and film get referred to as 'traditional', as some sort of marker to distinguish them from contemporary social media. This is problematic in all sorts of ways, and not least because of the implicit hierarchy of value that such a questionable periodisation conjures up - where traditional implies being old-fashioned, out-dated, conventional as opposed to innovative or progressive. It also seems wilfully to ignore not only the healthy persistence of these 'traditional' media forms, but also the ways in which they continue to innovate and to integrate with the whole range of new media forms and platforms. The distinction only works because of how it carelessly flattens out important historical distinctions, ruptures and continuities. This will be true of all the so-called traditional media across the board, but a better knowledge of radio history might offer particular insights, as the return of such classic radio terms as 'network' and 'wireless' might suggest.

But I would go further, and suggest that the history of radio is, or should be, foundational for understanding the emergence and evolution of modern mediation. The status of the print revolution and its extensive and lasting influences is widely accepted. Somehow the scale and import of the radio revolution is less routinely recognised, though I would suggest it continues to frame our media communications to the current day.

The history of radio is where we find the first negotiations of the relations between telecommunications and publishing that underpin the current culture of convergence. It's where we can find a history of an interpersonal form of wireless communication appropriated and contained by the interests of governments and capital. It's where we find the emergence of a modern mediated public sphere that is grounded in ubiquitous, immediate and simultaneous communication, and all that brings with it in terms of inventing the media event, and the reflection of the audience back to itself in moments like, say, the broadcasting of a football match. It's where we find for the first time a radical reordering of the relations between public and private discourse, and all that brings with it in terms of a decline in deference, a feminisation and democratisation of

public speech and so on. It's where we find the techniques of audience research first developing, and where we can chart most clearly the debates playing out between the ideas of public service, promotional culture and propaganda. It's where we find the creation of some of the world's most successful genres and formats, like soap operas and the top 40. It's where we can find test cases for a whole range of pioneering arrangements that continue to resonate, whether that's the rise of powerful corporate networks or the carving out of alternative communicative spaces for experimentation, resistance or community building. With call-in shows it's where we find for the first time real-time interactivity. Come to that, it's where we first find the very idea of 'live' emerging in its current sense. It's where the very presence of the human voice begins to bring back into the public sphere the expectation of immediacy, involvement, individuality and intimacy. It's where we first come to experience and come to expect to exist in a state of permanent receptivity, where the flow of mediated information is constant, accessible, and free at the point of reception. It's where we find, for the first time, people adapting their everyday routines to the rhythms, demands and attractions of that media flow. It's also where we can find the history of a medium that has not only pioneered all these things but has continued to thrive through all the waves of media innovation despite all melancholy predictions to the contrary, whether that's the arrival of sound to the cinema, of television to the living room, or the arrival on the scene of the endless competing distractions of mobile and social media.

No doubt there is more, but already we confront a rather obvious question, which is why - if radio really has been as influential or at least as pioneering in all these ways – why is its history so relatively neglected or at least disconnected from contemporary debates? Well, there are some obvious answers to do with short-termism or pragmatism and there is also something to do with the unfortunate dominance of a kind of evolutionary historiography that puts radio at the far, and by implication primitive, end of a relentlessly telelological narrative of progress. But I want to posit another reason as a segue into the next point I want to make – and it has to do with radio's key characteristic as a medium that trades in sound.

The first thing to say about that is, perversely, that we are still living in a world that is dominated by the logics of the print revolution, where knowledge is understood as being put on record, stored in ways that are stable, accessible, repeatable and searchable.

Though radio as we know it post-dated the technological ability to record sound, most radio sound for most of radio's history has been, and continues to be, transient, ephemeral, ethereal. Add to that the conditions of its reception, in most circumstances, as something that is listened to while doing other things, and the fact that it works without visual imagery in an age of spectacle, and it might suggest why radio per se has not registered in cultural and media memory with the same force as television, film, photography or music. I could be wrong, or it could be changing as recorded radio on demand in the form of podcasts and archived streaming continue to grow in popularity, but certainly historians of early radio are continually confronted with radio's immateriality, looking for its traces in paratexts and other surviving paraphernalia.

Radio and new materialisms

Here we see how the study of radio might connect with current debates about the new materialism. Of course, there is a materiality to sound itself in as much as it is the stuff of vibration that registers in the body. But we think of it as immaterial because in our current moment we tend to think in a visual register. Since sound doesn't register on the eye, it is easy to mistake invisibility for immateriality. To talk of the immateriality of radio is to be so focused on the invisibility of sound as to turn a blind eye to the many important materialities at play. Radio scholars are not alone in this – the new materialism is emerging precisely in reaction to the vocabulary of virtual reality, immaterial labour, not to mention clouds and wirelessness, that construct a fantasy of frictionless communication, a fantasy world where we can be transported to realms of sublime connection without the bothersome interference of bodies, technologies and infrastructures. And it's there at the very beginning of the story of radio when, in English at least, the technology is named for its mystical freedom from the material, industrial, parochial matter of wires.

But even if we acknowledge the materiality of the technologies immediately involved in the production, transmission and reception of radio, we tend not to think of the wider ecological imprint of our communication culture, including radio: the vast swathes of arctic forest cleared to make space for the definitely not immaterial banks of energy-consuming computers that really make up the cloud, the carbon footprint of all the energy required to keep those databanks but also the stations, transmitters, computers and other parts of the infrastructure of radio turning over; the scars on the landscape

from mining the minerals required, not to mention the dreadful material conditions of the people who work there. And perhaps we should think about the ecological implications of the colonisation of the atmosphere itself, our appropriation of the airwaves.

If the discussion about radio history above was a call for contemporary media studies to take a longer view of history, to acknowledge the connections of communication forms over the last century, then the new materialism demands an even longer, posthuman, view of history, to situate our communicative ecology within the deeper temporalities of the Anthropocene. And it demands that we think about the connections between different orders of materiality, between human and non-human, and it demands that we pay attention to forms of ethics beyond what is normally encompassed by the term media ethics. Radio's part in the changing dynamics and experience of time and space, together with its part in fuelling consumer demands and the multiple circuits of affective desire might also have to be part of this picture.

Politics, ethics and affect

There is an ethics here, but also a politics. Scholars in the field of radio studies are clearly as exercised about current political events as anyone else, and rightly so. It is incumbent upon us to think about the spaces and forms that radio offers for mobilisation and resistance across the political spectrum, the gendering of working practices, the different kinds of struggles to get different kinds of voices on the air, the ways in which the fragmentation, commodification and enclosure of once open radio spaces produce new echo chambers, more voices and fewer listeners. There are questions of policy here, of infrastructure and working practices; there are also questions of media literacy, or as I would prefer, an obligation to listen out. To this extent these are questions which are not unique to radio, but I would like to suggest, as I've done at length in my work on listening publics (Lacey, 2013), that coming at these questions from a radio-trained perspective that recognises the power of the voice, and the power of listening might provide a sensibility and a vocabulary with which to question some of the conventional tenets of political theory and practice.

Part of the virtue of doing that is to recognise the affective, emotional and embodied aspects of mediated political communication. This seems a particularly urgent question in the face of rising populisms fuelled by emotive speech and a short-circuiting of

reasoned deliberation. Once again, there are examples from radio's past that might be productive to revisit in this regard – the way a new medium was appropriated by demagogues, certainly, but also the way a new and untested communications medium served as a battleground between left and right, and between those who saw in it great democratic potential, and those who feared its authoritarian tendencies.

Again, the growing interest in emotions, affect and the senses brings much to our field, but there are ways in which the particular configuration of communication that was first developed by radio is worth considering for the insights it might bring to the construction and contradictions of modern mediated communication. The radio breathed life back into the mediated word, gave voice and character to the abstracted and anonymised worlds of the Gutenberg Galaxy. The very intimate experience of listening to the radio in private space was at the same time to share imaginatively in a very public form of communication alongside countless distant others. This is just one of the ways in which we come to experience the personal as social and the political as personal. It is a very particular modern and affective mode of the intimate public sphere.

The ethics of intimacy are imbricated in the technological. Thinking about contemporary digital media in *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle writes that 'technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies' (2011,1), although perhaps it would be better to revise that to say that technology *proposes* itself as the architecture of our intimacies, inasmuch as any agency it possesses exists in its status as environment within which intimacies are enabled and performed. If current debates about the rather anti-social effects of social media often circle around the construction and sustenance of technologically afforded 'intimate proximities', that is to say, the longing for, and the simulation of, presence, then to what extent can we trace the archaeology of both these effects and the debates around them to the early years of sound broadcasting, where liveness, immediacy, voice, perpetual connection and universal access already characterised the form?

But there's another angle to this, inasmuch as this technologised fantasy of communication, in its most profound sense of communion and human connection, is possible only if we have trust in our technologies to be faithful mediators. Many of the promotional and ideological gambits around heightened forms of realism in contemporary media are about shoring up that faith that the world is being brought into our intimate domain with as little distortion or noise as possible. Our politics, too, is

framed in terms of trust, and we trust our politicians more if we feel we have some sort of intimate access to their character, if they can communicate and commune, empathise with and embrace their public. And this form of access to political personalities, the ways in which public speech adopted the modalities of private talk, also has its roots in the early years of radio broadcasting. There may even be an argument for a greater intimacy afforded by the disembodied voice alone, as visual images heighten the sense of distance through techniques like cropping, close-ups, rendering in two dimensions and so on. The screen literally screens one from another, emphasising the distance, where radio's soundscape is overlain on, and becomes part of, the sonic environment of the listener.

Perhaps it might be said that the unidirectional mode of address of classic radio could only produce an impoverished form of intimacy, if intimacy is understood necessarily to involve reciprocity. But I would argue that conventional celebrations of interactivity and mimetic reciprocity tend to be either predicated on naïve dialogic models that don't work at scale, or end up privileging the act of speaking up, and so slide into fantasies of control and narcissistic performances of the self. What I've learned from my involvement in the study of radio is not only that listening is an intimate, immersive and embodied mode of reception – more so, perhaps, than say, reading or looking – but also, if it is understood as 'listening out' for otherness, that it is foundational to an ethical and intimate politics of communication across distances, both physical and metaphorical.

Up in the air: the matter of radio studies

By way of conclusion, I want to return to the title of this paper. At one level, it simply plays on radio being 'on air', but it also nods to the need to think about radio in the kind of material and environmental terms discussed above. And it also suggests that, as so often, the field is in a state of flux as it responds to a wide variety of political, environmental, technological and theoretical change. The phrase also indicates my own rather ambivalent relationship to the 'very idea' of radio studies and why it matters.

The first of the transnational radio studies conferences was held at Sussex, my own institution in the UK. It went by the rather idiosyncratic title of '2001: a Radiodyssey'. I remember us coming up with it as a bit of joke at a steering committee of the Radio Studies Network, and agreeing to go with it just until we came up with something better…

In the end, Peter Lewis put a respectable spin on it for the call for papers, writing that, "an odyssey suggests a ten-year horizon, past and future, a variety of testing experiences, and a home-coming." Thinking about the journey we've been on over the last ten and twenty years, reviewing the work that's been produced and the ways in which it promises to continue, I find a field that is open, expansive, multi-disciplinary and engaged; a field that matters. After all my ambivalence to radio studies as an idea, as long as we keep on venturing abroad and keep the borders open to neighbouring fields, it's not a bad place to find an intellectual home.

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[1] The piece carried the subheading, 'Seventy-five years after the BBC was created, radio is the forgotten medium. We lack the words to discuss it, let alone the tools to improve it. Peter M. Lewis thinks it's time we took it seriously.'

[2] This is a version of the keynote lecture, 'Up in the Air: Where is Radio Studies Now', presented to the 9th biannual *Radio Studies Conference: A Transnational Forum*, held at the University of Melbourne at Prato, Italy, in July 2018.

[3] In a thread entitled, 'What is Radio, 2018?' on the Jiscmail Radio Studies list, April 2018, https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/.

[4] For a review of work in (American) radio studies up to 2009, see Sterling (2009). For a recent review of work in Spanish, see Piñeiro-Otero and Pena, 2018.

[5] Result of a keyword search for 'Radio' in the titles of Arts and Humanities and Social Science journals in the WorldCat database conducted on July 7, 2018.

[6] The use of 'we' in scholarly contexts is always problematic in the way it flattens out differences and spuriously declares a common knowledge, but it remains here as a rhetorical residue of the original spoken version of this paper that was addressed to a particular community of scholars.

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