

# **RADIO** **JOURNALISM**



Journalism Studies:  
Key Texts

**GUY STARKEY & ANDREW CRISELL**



# Radio Journalism

## Journalism Studies: Key Texts

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**Journalism Studies: Key Texts** is a new textbook series that systematically maps the crucial connections between theory and practice in journalism. It provides the solid grounding students need in the history, theory, 'real-life' practice and future directions of journalism, while further engaging them in key critical debates. Drawing directly from how journalism is studied and understood today, the series is a full-service resource for students and lecturers alike.

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# Radio Journalism

Guy Starkey and Andrew Crisell



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To our loved ones. They know who they are.

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## THE TRAVELLER WHO CAME CALLING: A SHORT HISTORY OF RADIO JOURNALISM

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### The importance of radio journalism

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Journalism is an activity that we primarily associate with newspapers, magazines and television. Indeed, among the many who turn to sound broadcasting as a source of background music, few may be aware that *radio* journalism exists. Hearing an occasional ‘capsule’ of news within the sequence of records, they perhaps assume that compiling it is about as challenging and glamorous as Cinderella’s day job.

In this book we are going to be making some rather large claims for the importance of radio journalism. But we should begin by pointing out that it requires skills which, even in the preparation of capsule news, are additional to the investigative and literary abilities that every journalist should possess. On radio, the drafting and delivery of news copy is not a simple matter. Like television’s, but unlike those of the newspapers, its words are constantly dissolving or *evanescent*: but unlike television’s, they are wholly invisible, as are the people who utter them. Consequently, its listeners seldom give radio their undivided attention. Its news copy needs to be written and presented with these factors constantly in mind – to adopt an easy and intelligible speech idiom even as it strives to do justice to the often complex and detailed character of events.

Yet the case for the importance of radio journalism rests on something other than the fact that it is more demanding and skilful than might be supposed. Most of us accept that journalism – the reporting and analysis not simply of ‘the news’ but of current affairs in their broadest sense – is at the heart of the BBC’s public service endeavour, and since television commands much larger audiences than radio, this is often taken to be ‘television’ journalism. However, we will suggest in this book that it is often on *radio*, with its ability to handle facts, issues and ideas without visual distraction, that this endeavour is most effectively performed.

## The origins of journalism

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A career in radio journalism is thus highly worthwhile, but to make the case for its current and future importance we need to know something of its past. Its origins lie in the natural human desire to know more about what is going on in the world that lies beyond the compass of our horizons and our own experience. Even that information which the early travellers brought to a community, recounting what they had seen or been told by someone else, could not wholly satisfy this desire. So the development of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg around 1450, with its ability to disseminate news, information and comment on a mass scale, first demonstrated the potential of humankind to produce and consume something that would become recognisable as journalism.

The print medium firmly established itself as a conduit through which a discourse could elaborate the results of journalistic activity. On the audience's behalf, someone could find, collate and digest a considerable amount of information and then synthesise from it an account which was presented in such a way as to satisfy the audience's natural curiosity, amuse, entertain it and even call it to action. Today, print still performs this important role, but because technological advance tends to be exponential, the last century produced increasingly rapid developments in distribution technology. This resulted in new mass media that would provide other popular platforms for the practice of journalism. The cinema newsreel, pioneered in 1910 by *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, offered audiences new experiences in the form of moving images to accompany text and eventually a *spoken* narrative. Yet, because newspapers and newsreels required both mechanical processing and distribution over land, even today print and film lack a compelling advantage possessed by the news-bearing travellers of old: immediacy (Starkey 2007: 115–16).

## The development of radio

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The invention of the first of the electronic media, the telegraph, provided that immediacy. It allowed point-to-point communication over long distances in real time, although a direct connection by wire was required, and rather than being a medium of mass communication it, like the telephone a little later, offered only person-to-person transmission. It was the development of radio (initially known as 'the wireless') that brought the benefits of mass distribution which were previously confined to the printing press. Radio broadcast over wide areas by sending electro-magnetic waves into the air. Its messages were available to anyone within range who had a suitable receiver, to large, real-time audiences who could hear of events quite literally within milliseconds of their occurrence.

Among the early pioneers were Guglielmo Marconi, who first demonstrated transmission and reception but was slow to spot radio's potential as a mass medium, and Reginald Fessenden, who in 1906 broadcast the first programme of voice and music, but who failed to capitalise on his idea, so is merely a footnote in the history of broadcasting. These early delays in the exploitation of the medium tempt one to the conclusion that new media technologies are introduced into society only in so far as their potential for disrupting the *status quo* is limited (Winston 1998). Certainly, in various hands radio could be a powerful force in a number of different ways, a point we shall return to later. However, it was destined to become as important a medium as print – durable, as its hundred-year history attests, and, as the popularity of podcasts demonstrates, capable of exploitation through twenty-first-century distribution technologies. By today's standards it took a remarkably long time for Fessenden's pioneering broadcast to be imitated on any grand scale, but over the following two decades sporadic experimental broadcasting gradually gave way to regular services – in Britain under Marconi, in the United States under Fessenden's successors, and even in communist Russia, where in 1917 revolutionaries had used wireless telegraphy rather than speech transmissions to proclaim their victory and try to foment a worldwide uprising.

The power of radio as a means of entertainment and propaganda was swiftly demonstrated, yet it did not immediately produce *radio journalism*. In compiling his first programme, Fessenden omitted all news, even though the concept of news reporting was well established in the press. He played recordings of music and read a passage from the Bible, but had he thought of it he could have included the world's first news bulletin and quite legitimately led on the historic significance of his own actions. Alas, radio's great potential as a platform for journalistic activity was yet to be perceived: this great inventor of dozens of patented devices missed a golden opportunity and, as we shall see, it fell to others to perceive and exploit radio's potential to bring immediacy to the task of reporting the world to mass audiences.

### The distinctiveness of radio journalism

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What, though, is *radio journalism*, and how does it differ from other types of journalism? What do they have in common, and what are the reasons for the differences and similarities? How do these different traditions in presenting factual narratives coexist, and where radio journalism is distinct, why is it so? Just as print journalism is more than the front and back pages and includes reviews, in-depth analyses and comment which also solicit the attention of the reader, so radio journalism is much more than 'the news'. It is to be found in factual output of many kinds: in programming as much as

in bulletins. It is also expensive to produce, requiring more effort to source and to evidence, to illustrate and to communicate, than does the playing of pre-recorded music or the relaying of spontaneous conversation. The many forms in which radio journalism exists today could no more be invented overnight than Fessenden could conceive of a news bulletin in his first broadcast. They developed slowly, often beginning as the spark of an idea, always a product of the institutional context from which they emerged, and, once established, mimicked and extended by rival radio stations.

Some institutional contexts were more conducive to the development of radio journalism than others, and in different countries radio industries developed in different ways. The Marconi Company was a private business (Crisell 1994: 18), but in the United Kingdom the private ownership of radio stations was short-lived. This was because the governmental Crawford Committee of Inquiry – the second of many – recommended that broadcasting should be publicly owned (Crawford Committee 1926). In the United States, radio remained largely in the hands of commercial operators and these two sharply contrasting models of institutional ownership influenced the development of radio journalism in different ways in different countries. This distinction between the public and private sectors of the radio industry, one larger or smaller than the other depending on the country one cares to examine, is an important one. We consider it important enough to provide a framework for our analysis, and it is a theme that will run through this book.

### Journalism, news and the development of the BBC

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Today, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is the United Kingdom's oldest and, by common consent, pre-eminent broadcasting institution. Its role has always been to provide a comprehensive 'public service' that transcends the mere market, and we are used to the idea that news and current affairs are at the heart of this public service provision. As relatively recently as 1992, it published a policy document, *Extending Choice*, in which it posed the question: 'What, then, are the defining characteristics of the BBC's public purpose?' And it replied: 'Firstly, the BBC should aim to provide the comprehensive, in-depth and impartial news and information coverage across a range of broadcasting outlets that is needed to support a fair and informed national debate' (Franklin 2001: 103).

This aim is nowhere more apparent than in radio. Over its networks and stations as a whole, that which is not music is overwhelmingly journalism: news and what we might term 'contemporary information' – current affairs, sport, and other matters of perennial public interest, such as health, consumerist and lifestyle issues. There are exceptions, drama, light entertainment

and phone-in conversation among them, but with the exception of the latter they are also expensive to produce, which explains why they are almost entirely the preserve of a public service broadcaster. But all the other genres fall within the province of journalism. Music is the main concern of Radios 1, 2 and 3 (although Radio 2's flagship midday show, presented by Jeremy Vine, has a current affairs theme), but Five Live is wholly given over to news and sport, while news, sport, 'factual' and current affairs make up just over two-thirds of the output of Radio 4 (BBC 2004: 143). Finally, the extensive provision of news and information is the means by which BBC local radio seeks to distinguish itself from its commercial rivals (Crisell and Starkey 2006: 18). There have been periods during which these provincial outposts of the corporation have broadcast nothing but speech, but more recently they have favoured a diet of speech punctuated by music.

It may therefore come as a surprise to learn that news and current affairs were not always at the heart of the BBC's public service endeavour. In the early years of broadcasting they formed a marginal, derivative and rather meagre component of its programming. This was partly due to factors outside its control and partly a matter of perceptions and values. A body that saw more clearly than many into radio's potential as a rapid news medium was the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. Noting the threat that it would pose to the press, the Association lobbied the government to place a news embargo on the British Broadcasting Company. Launched in 1922, the company was prohibited from transmitting bulletins until the evening and obliged to take all its news from the press agencies. Moreover, the governments of the 1920s and 1930s feared that the new medium could be used to win public opinion to seditious views. While in the United States and elsewhere radio was left to commercial companies to develop (Starkey 2007: 23–4), the prevailing view in the United Kingdom was that it was too important to be left to the private sector. When, on 1 January 1927, the BBC was transformed from a private company into a public body, the British Broadcasting Corporation, its charter forbade it to editorialise and restricted the kinds of political content it could carry. Among governments, the fear that broadcasting can promote sedition, first articulated by Crawford (Crawford Committee 1926: 14–15), persists to this day.

Finally, John Reith, who was the Managing Director of the company and then the first Director General of the corporation, took little interest in news and politics (Boyle 1972: 173, 222) – and in this, he was not wholly untypical of his time. In the great scheme of things, news did not always rate highly. This was partly because people were less bombarded by news and information than they are today. News provision, almost entirely in the hands of the press, was intermittent – daily rather than continuous – and thus recognised as 'old' even as it was being consumed. In its infancy, the BBC sometimes broadcast no news on certain days because, in its view, no news had occurred (Scannell 1996: 160).

## The impact of radio on the character of the news

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Yet radio itself would soon transform the character of the news and thus help to change the perception of it. This began with the General Strike in 1926, a major confrontation between millions of workers and their employers. The government had armed troops at its disposal in case any physical outbreak of class war were to threaten the nation's security. Because much of the press was shut down by striking print workers, the news embargo on the BBC was lifted for the duration of the strike, and its five daily bulletins provided information of a topicality that could not be matched even by those newspapers that were still appearing. To the now rapidly growing body of listeners, it must have seemed as if a traveller had, indeed, come calling, with stories to tell of what was happening elsewhere. Families would gather round the wireless, enthralled by what they heard. This was the consumer electronics revolution of its time – and the first in history.

The sensation of immediacy prompted a new habit of tuning in to the radio to find out what was going on in the world, and the 1930s were marked by improvements in the production of radio news. Bulletins were drafted in language that was less 'literary' and rather more suited to the ear. Magnetic – hence instant – recording technology arrived, and the BBC gradually freed itself from some of the restrictions that the government and newspaper industry had imposed. Certain major stories broke that radio could cover more contemporaneously and more vividly than the press. Among these were the great fire at the iconic Crystal Palace in London, the last illness of George V in 1936 and the Munich crisis of 1938, which seemed to pull Europe back from the brink of all-out war. Eye-witness accounts were not just factual in content, like those of the press, but emotively coloured by the voices in which they were heard.

During the Second World War (1939–1945), radio journalism achieved a certain level of maturity. In times of war the public hunger for news is insatiable, and for the first time in history a technology existed to feed it. The BBC's war reporters were given the same battle training as the troops, equipped with portable disc recorders and despatched to the front line, whence they were able to send back detailed descriptions combined with a modest amount of actuality. The volume of material they produced was such that, for the first time, extended news programmes could be broadcast. *Radio Newsreel*, which began in 1940, and *War Report*, launched in 1944, contained not merely a bald recitation of events, but eye-witness accounts of them and recordings of the sounds they made. The very word 'newsreel', which was borrowed from the cinema, affirms the BBC's confidence that radio could now match some of the iconism of film (Crisell 2002: 61). Finally, in 1944, the BBC acknowledged the enhanced status that broadcasting had helped to confer on the news by ceasing to rely on second-hand and

often print-focused accounts of foreign affairs and appointing its own overseas correspondents.

For ten years or so after the war, radio news enjoyed relatively plain sailing; although the march of communication technology was quickening, the fledgling television service posed no threat since it, too, was a BBC monopoly, and all broadcast news was in the hands of a single controller (Briggs 1995c: 63). Moreover, such is human conservatism, that just as radio news had initially been thought of in terms of the press, so now television news was being thought of in terms of radio. Apart from a 10-minute newsreel which was shown on five evenings a week and aped that of the cinema, television news between 1946 and 1954 consisted only of re-broadcast radio bulletins accompanied by a still photograph of Big Ben. Even after 1954, when a slightly more pictorial bulletin was introduced, the newsreaders remained invisible, declaring themselves only as 'voice-overs' behind photographs, film clips and caption cards.

Hence, in the United Kingdom radio journalism developed at a pace that today would be considered rather leisurely. Since the absence of real competition encouraged complacency rather than innovation and influences from overseas were slight, the institutional context provided little impetus for change until the mid-1950s. Reith's BBC had been short on fun and long on moralising, serious in its musical programming rather than popular in its outlook (Crisell 1994: 22), so the attempts made during the 1930s to break the BBC's monopoly had focused on entertainment rather than factual content. They had been mounted by privately-owned broadcasters such as Radio Luxembourg, Radio Normandy and Radio Eiffel Tower, which used transmitters on the continent to beam signals across the English Channel.

### The impact of television on radio news

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Hence, if the Corporation was being challenged by rivals in those pre-war years, it was not in respect of its news coverage. What changed everything was the launch of Independent Television (ITV) in 1955, and particularly of ITV's networked news provider, Independent Television News (ITN). Both BBC television and BBC radio were hit hard – radio irreversibly so – but competition had the unforeseen, longer-term effect of moving the provision of news and current affairs nearer to the heart of the BBC's public service philosophy. Indeed, it is arguable that the Corporation comes closest to performing a public service in the *radio* provision of these things. To demonstrate this, we need to look at broadcasting developments over the last half-century.

Unblinkered by a radiogenic past, ITN brought a new and televisual perspective to news reportage and in so doing, took large numbers of viewers



away from the BBC. But by the end of the 1950s, the latter had emulated its rival and lured many of them back. What television did in general was to devastate the audience for radio and it has been suggested that the fast-moving Cuban missile crisis of 1962, with its images of weapons on the decks of freighters, was the story that would establish television's lasting dominance as a news medium not only over radio but the press (Hood and O'Leary 1990: 35–6).

Suddenly it seemed as if radio – with journalism now at its core – had been sidelined. Unrelenting technological advance had created a monster that would bring about radio's destruction. Just as the discovery of electromagnetic radio waves had created a platform for a new and immediate journalism of sound that was able to trump both print and film, an even newer technology, offering immediate images as well as sounds, now threatened to kill off radio. From the middle of the 1950s there was therefore an urgent need to rediscover radio's core strengths. With the fortuitous arrival of transistor technology, which enhanced the mobility and portability of receivers, music above all, but also news and information, emerged as forms of content that audiences were eager to consume as a background to their other activities. The first radio sets had been bulky objects that took up a considerable amount of space in the living room and required power from large rechargeable batteries. These were replaced by mains-powered receivers which of course remained in a fixed location where they could be plugged into a socket in the wall. Then, in the 1950s an attractive range of transistor radios appeared: compact by comparison to the old valve wireless set, they could run off batteries similar in size to those used today and, most important, they were *portable*. Now listeners could experience radio in different rooms, they could buy multiple sets, take the radio with them on holiday, even enjoy listening on the beach. The 'tranny' quickly became a 1960s icon and even, in London's fashionable Carnaby Street, a style accessory.

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### The revival of radio – and of radio news

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Radio's technological renaissance was fuelled by social change. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a whole generation of 'teenagers' (the word dates from about this time) began to assert themselves culturally, economically and politically. What they craved from their radios was American 'rock 'n' roll' music, to be played round the clock and not just in the miserly doses supplied by the BBC's Light Programme. A burgeoning music scene, a desire to access American hit records and a real sense that the BBC was ignoring youthful tastes led to an invasion of the airwaves by 'pirate' broadcasters, such as Radio Caroline, Radio London and Swinging Radio England. This new challenge to the monopoly of radio that the BBC still enjoyed also

came from across the sea. But this time the commercial operators, as keen as their predecessors to make money from paid-for advertising, were broadcasting from converted ships and disused military forts situated just outside British territorial waters.

These were primarily music stations, whose commitment to journalism extended no further than relaying the news they had lifted from the BBC networks, but they demonstrated the demand for a kind of programming within which news would play a vital role. The impression that the pirate presenters were marooned on the high seas and divorced from the lives of their onshore listeners could be mitigated by the inclusion of almost up-to-date news. The listeners, who were mostly unaware of its source, felt that these stations had their finger on the pulse of the nation: that they were musically more advanced than the BBC, but also just as capable of satisfying that universal human need for news and information.

With radio rescued from extinction by a new generation of listeners whose tastes and interests would grow and change with age, new uses were found for the medium. While television steadily colonised people's evening leisure time, radio was able to find large audiences during the day, when people were less free to abandon other activities in order to indulge their sense of sight. Breakfast time soon became radio's peak period and it still commands a larger share of the audience until early afternoon (Radio Advertising Bureau 2007).

Among the first to see that there was still a place on radio for a substantial treatment of news and current affairs was Robin Day, one of the original ITN newsreaders and later a formidable political interviewer. In 1955 and while still employed by the BBC, Day proposed a daily 'Morning Review' that would eventually take shape as the *Today* programme. His rationale was a shrewd one:

... there is a steadily increasing audience to car radios. This element must be particularly large first thing in the morning when people are motoring to work. These people cannot read while driving. Why should we not offer them comment and description that the rail or 'bus traveller can read in his newspaper?

(quoted in Donovan 1997: 3)

The *Today* programme launched in 1957, at first carrying mainly apolitical features but soon becoming 'harder' and newsier (Donovan 1997). Indeed, as part of its plans to reorganise sound broadcasting in 1970, the BBC thought of turning Radio 4 into an all-news network, while news and current affairs were also seen as the key strength of its local radio stations, which had begun to open in 1967. Moreover, with programmes like *Analysis* from 1970 and *File on Four* from 1977 (both Radio 4), the notion

of radio journalism broadened to cover all forms of current affairs that could be effectively presented through speech and sounds – not just breaking stories but ongoing and background issues, and not merely through straight reportage but in interviews, actuality, debate and commentary.

The importance of *Analysis* and *File on Four* cannot be overstated, and we will return to them later. In essence, they are extended speech programmes which focus on single issues and explore them in sufficient depth to allow a range of views to be considered and analysed, reinforced by expert comment and even summed up by the drawing of appropriate conclusions. This approach contrasts with the magazine format typified by such programmes as *Today* and *Radio Newsreel*, which cover a range of topical items within a single edition. Indeed, topicality is not a prerequisite for *Analysis* and *File on Four*, since their in-depth reporting requires an extended period of investigation and post-production before they can be broadcast.

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### See it happen: the ascendancy of television news

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Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that by 1970 television was the major medium for ‘news’ in its primary, minimal sense of important events that have only just occurred, permit some visual treatment and have not been greatly moderated by backgrounding, analysis or commentary. Radio and newspapers could only *tell* what had happened, between them offering a limited actuality of sounds and fixed images: television could *show* it, and the number of things it could show was growing all the time. From 1963, satellite feeds brought to its bulletins images of what was occurring half a world away, and during the 1980s the replacement of film by magnetic tape and a general miniaturisation of components enabled cameras to become portable and thus capture things that had once been beyond them. Now, instead of merely telling about other lands, unusual events and remarkable experiences, the visiting traveller could *display* them.

Over the last 25 years the number of television outlets has also multiplied: two more terrestrials have launched – Channel 4 in 1982 and Channel 5 in 1997; the first cable and satellite stations appeared in 1983; and since 1996, digital television has triggered a further huge expansion on all three platforms. Television is now so abundant that a miscellany of content on any one channel is beginning to seem old-fashioned; enough channels exist to permit ‘themed’ or specialised content, and the prime candidate for theming is news. The sheer quantity of, and demand for, news; the reduction – often to zero – of the gap between the point at which it occurs and the point at which it can be shown; the improvements in picture quality and the growing sophistication of on-screen graphics all prompted