Making the audible readable: radio's ephemerality and the digital humanities

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Introduction

Radio is one of the most important mass media of the twentieth century (Potter, 2020, 2).[1] Frequently defined as an auditory medium that lacks both a visual and textual dimension, it has been severely understudied (Hilmes & Lindgren, 2018, 302-303). This can partly be explained by the ephemeral quality of radio programmes: almost never repeated and rarely recorded, they seem to disappear as soon as they enter the ether. Despite recent calls for audio-visual DH (cf. Arnold & Tilton, 2019), the lack of digitized source material makes it challenging to study the medium using computational techniques. This abstract shows that next to audio-based technology, such as speech-to-text, recently developed NLP techniques can be used to study radio computationally. Contradicting the prevalent notion of radio as a solely audio-based medium, it argues that radio should be seen as a multimodal medium that contains audial as well as textual dimensions. These textual dimensions, which have so far been unexplored, could significantly boost the field of radio studies.

Data: BBC Programme Index

This research focusses on the Third Programme, a radio network broadcast by the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) between 1946 and 1967 and one of the broadcaster's early experiments in producing multiple networks, each with a different audience in mind. Introduced in 1946, the BBC set its sights on a part of Britain they had failed to reach so far: the cultural elite. After the network was shut down in 1967, the Third Programme's visibility quickly started to dwindle. Like many (if not all) radio networks, recording a broadcast was the exception rather than the rule, and as a result, research in radio studies has focussed on accessible shows, such as *All That Fall* and *Under Milk Wood*, leaving large parts of the network understudied. The fact that the biggest part of the Third Programme's archive can only be consulted in-person in the BBC Written Archives (Reading) and at the British Library (London) further complicates research.

In recent years, more remnants of radio networks, such as the Third Programme, have been made available to the public. This shift is largely driven by digitization. As far as the BBC is concerned, this shift is reflected in the introduction of the BBC Genome Project, which it considers to be the first step towards "full or near-full access to the archives [which] is both achievable and the right ultimate goal" (Papadopoulos, 2010, n.p.). The BBC Genome Project is a searchable database based on the *Radio Times*, a broadcast listings magazine (FIG. 1). Published since 1923, it contains information on all BBC programmes: (i) the title, (ii) the date of broadcasting, (iii) the time of broadcasting, (iv) a synopsis, and (v) a list of contributors. Hilary Bishop and Jake Berger call the BBC Genome "the closest thing we currently have to a

comprehensive broadcast history of the BBC" (2014, n.p.). The BBC Genome Project has been updated in June 2021 and renamed the *BBC Programme Index* (FIG. 2)*,* but the database's original structure and content has largely remained unchanged.
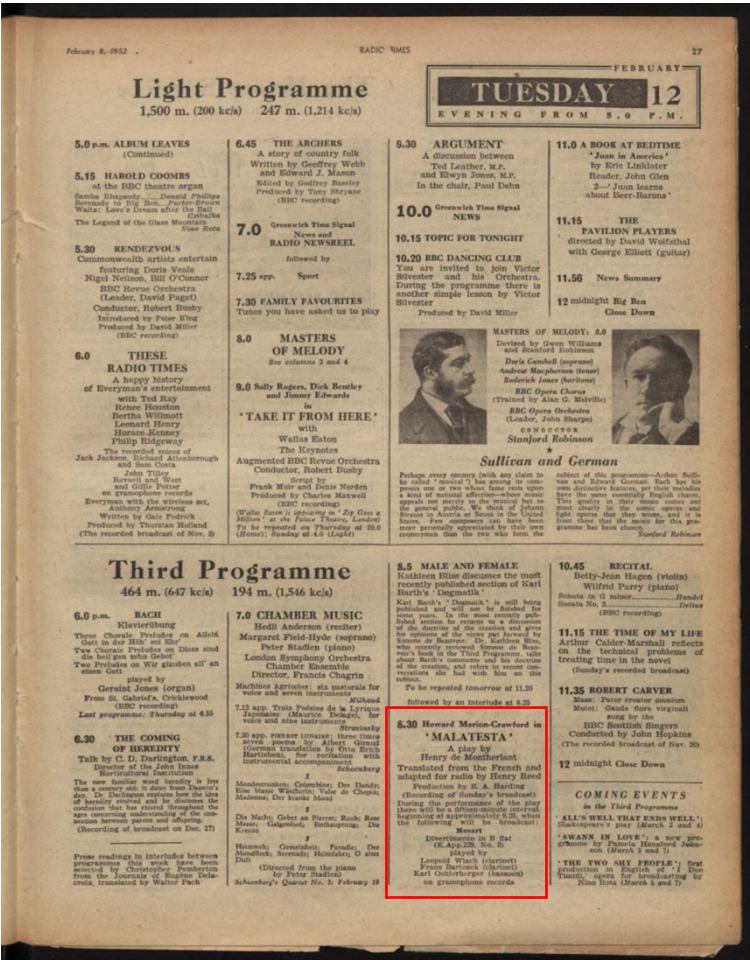

Fig 1. Example of the radio play *Malatesta* (broadcast Feb 12, 1952) listed in the *Radio Times*

Fig 2. Example of the same radio play, *Malatesta*, but this time shown in the digitised *Programme Index*

Case study: the BBC producer

This abstract examines the producers that were active during the Third Programme. BBC producers were members of the supply department and enjoyed considerable technical and creative freedom. As a result, they played a central part in decisions about the network's final output. Previous studies of the Third Programme have focused on programmes produced by select group of producers, such as Douglas Cleverdon, Louis MacNeice, and Donald McWhinnie, that made a name for themselves beyond the Third Programme (cf. Chignell, 2019; Wrigley & Harrison, 2013; Feldman, 2014). The BBC Programme Index, which contains traces of *all* producers that were involved in Third Programme, shows that we need to take a critical look at who was responsible for the content of the network.

To use the data of the BBC Programme Index, I collected information on all programmes broadcasted by the Third Programme between 1946 and 1964. After filtering out all interludes and close downs a total of 49.311 programmes remain. Next, I selected all programmes that have a producer listed by applying a regular expression (regex) filter to each programme's list of contributors. If a producer is detected, the programme is added to a subset. This results in a subset of 5.976 programmes.

After all the relevant data is collected, a popularity index of the BBC producers is generated by counting the absolute number of times each producer is listed in the Programme Index (FIG. 3). The popularity index contains both familiar faces, such as Douglas Cleverdon, Rayner Heppenstall, and Terence Tiller, but lesser-known producers, such as Peter Watts, David Thomson, and Mary Hope Allen (the only woman to appear in the top ten most frequent producers), also appear. While this quantitative perspective points us to blind spots in previous work on the network, a next phase in research would be to fill the gaps with qualitative information.

Producer	Frequency
Douglas Cleverdon	664
Rayner Heppenstall	331
Terence Tiller	290
Raymond Raikes	269
Christopher Sykes	241
R. D. Smith	160
Donald McWhinnie	159
Mary Hope Allen	147
Peter Watts	145
David Thomson	137

Fig 3. Top 10 producers that are listed the most in the Programme Index

Next, an annual popularity index is created by looking at each producer's yearly presence in the BBC Programme Index. To gain more insight into how this annual popularity index

changed over time, I calculated the turnover series (following a workflow described by Karsdorp et al., 2021). I start by calculating the annual popularity index and putting the obtained rankings in chronological order. Each set of consecutive annual popularity indexes is compared, and the number of shifts that have taken place between two rankings are summed. This results in an annual turnover for each year and a turnover series, which consists of a combination of all annual turnovers (FIG. 4). The turnover series of the Third Programme producers shows that the network was quite conservative when it comes to producers that were given the opportunity to produce content: the number of annual shifts is never higher than five. The years that show the highest degree of variability are the periods 1949-1953 and 1960-1961.
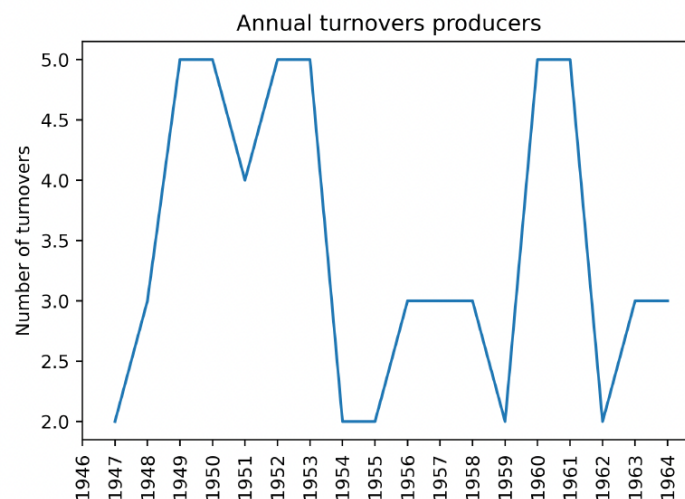
Fig 4. Annual turnover series of the Third Programme producers

The history of the Third Programme can be used to contextualize and explain this trend: the two periods of change coincide with the appointment of a new BBC controller. The BBC controller is significant in relation to the BBC producer, as they played a decisive role in deciding which producers could make which programmes. In 1949, Harman Grisewood was appointed as BBC Controller, Howard Newby was appointed in 1959. Grisewood and Newby both hoped to change the content of the Third Programme. Grisewood was motivated by his political convictions, which were described as a "staunch conservative" (Bridson qtd. by Whitehead, 1989, 27). Newby, on the other hands, hoped to revive the Third Programme after the network experienced multiple setbacks, such as decreasing listening numbers and the resulting decrease in airtime (Carpenter 1997, 69). Further research could explore how the Controllers' vision (albeit driven by religion or innovation) and the most prevalent producers' output interact with one another.

Conclusion

Radio Studies have long been limited by radio's ephemeral nature. This abstract argues that new digitized archival material, such as the BBC Programme Index, open up new lines of study in this under-researched field. While the original radio programme often failed to outlive its first broadcast, the textual metadata left behind by radio networks such as the Third Programme can be as rich a mine of information as the original programme. Next to digitization,

quantitative methodologies provide us with the necessary tools to explore and chart the trends in these rich mines of metadata. Guided by a long-standing question in radio studies, this abstract has shown how digitized archives and quantitative methods allow us to examine the BBC producer from a new angle. Rather than a narrow focus on a handful of privileged producers, a quantitative analysis of all producers listed in the Third Programme Index provides us with new insights into which producers were most active during the Third Programme and how this key group of content suppliers evolved over time.

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