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Producing The Arts Show: An Ethnographic Study of Radio Producers at Work

Brian O'Neill

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Introduction

This article presents some preliminary findings based on a study of the Radio 1 programme, *The Arts Show*. For a period of four weeks in November/December 1992, the author made an observational study of the production activities on the programme, the purpose of which was to look at the specific occupational activities and competences of the radio producer.¹ During this time I conducted an ethnographic study of the production routines and processes involved in the making of this programme. I observed the daily routines associated with the research, planning and recording of the programme. I also sat in on the weekly production meetings which all production personnel attend. At the end of the research period, I interviewed each of the three producers involved in the programme. The main findings of this article concern how producers individually and as a team negotiate the structure or format of the programme they work on; the pre-eminence assumed by the commodities of 'broadcast material' and 'broadcast time' in the production process, the orientation to institutionally agreed features of what constitutes 'good radio' and how the audience is conceived by producers in the course of their production work. From the point of view of producers, these findings are mundane ones: these are the everyday activities that a programme maker in radio has to deal with. An assumption of the approach in this study is that it is in the realm of the mundane that the distinct and unique features of broadcasting are to be found.

A sociology of broadcasting is not normally conceived in this way. The dominant tradition in the study of broadcast institutions is a macro approach with little to say about what institutional processes are.² An exception is Tom Burns' *The BBC - Public Institution and Private World* (1977), a wide ranging study which has at its core a valuable account, based on interviews, of various aspects of professional ideology within broadcasting. This study of the occupational milieu of broadcasting is, because it proceeds from participants' own accounts, the closest we have of what it means to work as a television or radio producer. However, the focus of the analysis in Burns is on the examination of the public service ethos as it existed at various levels within the BBC and is less concerned with the interpretive accounts produced by members of the organization.³

Underlying the conventional approaches to the sociology of broadcasting is the assumption that the rules by which news journalists, radio and tv producers operate are important topics of study in their own right. The criteria for selection in news production, for example, are seen to be of major consequence given the dependency on broadcast sources of information. The rules of broadcasting production should constitute an important topic of study but not in isolation from their use as a resource within broadcasting situations. A basic principle of the ethnomethodological perspective within sociology, for example, is to look at meaning in individual situations of interaction as an on-going accomplishment of the members involved.⁴ To look at just what makes broadcast work meaningful, means beginning with participants or actors' own knowledge and common-sense categories of what constitutes distinctness or meaning in the activity. It means looking at the background expectancies and assumptions which members use to interpret their situation and achieve intersubjective

1. I would like to acknowledge the support of *The Arts Show* production staff who granted me access to their programme and thank them for their assistance in the research for this paper.

2. By this I mean principally the study of the political economy of broadcast institutions as for example in Murdock (1988).

3. Later studies in this vein include Philip Schlesinger's *Putting Reality together: BBC News* (1978) - focussing primarily on institutional discourses and constraints on the production of news; Jeremy Tunstall's *Journalists at Work* (1971) - on the work of special correspondents; Peter Golding and Philip Elliot's *Making the News* (1979) - partly researched at RTE. More recent ethnographic studies of the television production world include: Roger Silverstone's *Framing Science* (1985) - a study of the making of a Horizon documentary and Andrew Hart's *Making the Real World* (1988), also a study of the making of a television science programme.

4. Garfinkel in his 'studies of work' programme claims that many social scientific studies have tended to be 'about' rather than 'of' occupations - cf. Heritage (1987). An ethnomethodological approach to the study of broadcasting would seek to reveal the 'just thisness', the distinctness of broadcasting to the situations from within. Apart from the work of Heritage and Greatbatch on news interviews (1991), ethnomethodology as a perspective has not been used to study broadcast situations. A model for such a study might be provided by Michael Lynch's *Art and Artifact in Laboratory Science* (1985), and ethnomethodological analysis laboratory work.

understandings. It means looking at the common wisdom and culture of the broadcast environment and how members of this exclusive club make sense of their private world. A secondary theme of this study, therefore, is the attempt to formulate the appropriate methodology to study the locally produced order of broadcast situations.

Producing *The Arts Show*

The Arts Show was first introduced in 1987 as a thrice weekly arts magazine programme broadcast in the early evening at 7.00-7.45pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. With the introduction of *The Arts Show* there was for the first time on radio a serious commitment to covering the arts in a comprehensive way. This was demonstrated in the number of programmes, three a week; the time slot of 7.00-7.45pm; and importantly, the assignment of a team of producers, a researcher and a permanent presenter. The decision to have a popular personality presenter in Mike Murphy was also significant as an attempt to make arts programming more accessible. Now in its fifth year *The Arts Show* is generally acknowledged to be a success and a vindication of the decision to go for a populist and broad approach to arts coverage on radio.

The team responsible for producing *The Arts Show* now comprises three producers permanently assigned to the show as well as a broadcast assistant who looks after administration. The team of three producers bear sole responsibility for what appears on the programme. A rotation system is operated by the team so that each producer takes a week in turn for producing the show. The programme will typically comprise a mix of studio interviews or reviews plus a number of taped reports. Some will have been in preparation for some time, others will be recorded on the day of transmission.

After five years, the programme has developed a certain pattern in its coverage of arts events. The standard format consists of four to five items featuring reviews and reports on arts happenings with an average duration of eight minutes each. A programme might contain a review of the opening night of a theatre production, a review of a film, a report on some arts event, perhaps a preview of a festival, and an interview with an artist. Within this format, the producers opt occasionally to vary the programme with a number of 'specials'. Programmes can be devoted to a single topic – such as an artistic profile. There are also occasionally live outside broadcasts sometimes featuring performance. Major festivals such as the Wexford Opera Festival or the Galway Arts Festival are often featured as special editions of the programme. The magazine format has allowed *The Arts Show* to have a policy of fairly broad coverage of the arts across the country and to be as inclusive as possible when it comes to representing different art forms. It also allows the programme to react quickly to events and to function as a topical magazine of current arts events.

The Production Routine

Like many other media products, radio programmes are produced according to a definite and standardized routine. Planning and development constitutes one major phase of activity in the producing of the programme. This concerns short, medium and long term planning of material for production.

The most visible aspect of production is recording and on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays work on the programme revolves around the afternoon studio recording session. The 'producer of the week' usually spends the morning gathering the material which will be used in the afternoon's recording such as tapes of reports, music if it is to be used and commercials for insertion into the programme. Guest reviewers and interviewees will be scheduled to come to studio at the appropriate time for recording. Once all items are finalized, the producer proceeds to compile the running order for the programme and write the 'briefs' for the presenter. Practice on writing briefs varies from one programme to another with some presenters requiring long, detailed briefs which will need no further input from the producer. On this programme, the practice is that

the producer will write fairly short briefs on individual items but will informally discuss each segment of the programme with the presenter beforehand.

Recording itself takes place during a two hour block in one of the studios in the RTE Radio Centre subsequent to a short discussion with the presenter. The programme is recorded sequentially, item by item, stopping only between segments allowing guests to be brought in or tapes to be cued up. Some rehearsal does take place: a producer will discuss the angle or the direction of the interview with the guest and the presenter beforehand. During recording, the producer sitting at the console next to the sound engineer will be able to communicate with the presenter via a talkback channel, normally only to remind the presenter on time and occasionally to prompt a question. With taped items, the presenter normally simply 'intros' the item as it is recorded onto the master tape. Unlike the frenetic pace of live broadcasting, recording a programme is a relatively relaxed affair. Any time left over in studio is often used for editing a package or prerecording a feature for use in a later programme. Both studio and editing time are at a premium and care is always made to make the optimum use of this scarce commodity.

With the rotation system, the pressures of broadcasting – writing scripts, recording, timing, making quick decisions about content, putting programmes together to tight production deadlines – fall on one producer. The other two members of the team spend the time planning and setting up items, recording reports whether in Dublin or around the country, editing packages or finishing reports for use in a later programme. Working hours vary on the programme: a lot of time is spent going to exhibitions, attending opening nights or viewing cinema previews. Work such as this by its nature happens at all hours. Equally, editing time for putting together the packages is usually outside the daytime schedule when studios are less busy with recording and live broadcasts.

The Production Process

The world of the radio producer is one dominated by the activity of filling the empty space on programme schedules. Producers are responsible for originating programme ideas, executing and organizing the production of these ideas and making all necessary arrangements for the final delivery of a programme for transmission. The two commodities that producers are primarily working on in the production process are programme content and broadcast time.

Programme content consists of the individual, relatively self-contained segments that make up a complete programme. Each item is given separate attention by a producer as to its content, scope and duration; items have their own production schedule and often require individual technical and editorial consideration. In some cases, individual programme items may be commissioned out to freelance reporters who take total responsibility for the production of that item. Normally, a producer will have a number of individual items in production at any one time and at various stages of completion. Some may exist only as vague ideas or leads to follow up in the future. Others, if they are to be recorded in studio, may be 'set up' – arrangements already having been made and contact established with the participants on the item and ideas formed as to what shape the item is to take. With prerecorded reports there are various stages of production involved: from the initial programme idea, through the stages of planning and arranging, recording and editing of a completed 'package'.

As they work on and complete programme content, the other commodity that producers are concerned with is broadcast time. Just as individual programme segments can be said to be one dimension of the production process in radio, the other dimension that stands out clearly, particularly in studio environments, are units of broadcast time. In the case of prerecorded packages, the production of broadcast time is complete and it is imported into the programme running order with little extra comment other than noting its duration. For the reporter recording the package, the actual

duration required is an important consideration as it gives an idea of how much to record in an interview. Theoretically, a package can be edited to any length but the editing process is made much more difficult and tedious where the recording ratio to required package duration is too high. In live broadcast situations and in recording studio items for *The Arts Show*, producers are constantly negotiating and working around the spaces of allocated time for each item. An interview might be allocated eight minutes in a typical programme but if something sparks during the recording that the producer finds particularly interesting, they may allow it to run a little longer. Such over-runs have to be compensated for by deducting time from subsequent items. This is rarely a problem in live broadcasting where producers are very much attuned to the flexible negotiation of time between one item and the next. In *The Arts Show* there is less flexibility given the high number of prerecorded items which establish fixed blocks of time around which producers have to manoeuvre.

Each producer's practice of managing time is different. Some use stop watches – backtimed from the end of the programme so that they are constantly working with remaining time rather than elapsed time. Others use a clock or stop watch on each individual item and count only to the allocated time they have arranged on the running order. Time management is a crucial skill of the radio producer and one which requires quick responses and some experience in this type of decision making. One of the senior producers of the show is noted for having an almost intuitive sense of time with a seemingly effortless capacity to fit material into available spaces. Another producer who had just come to the show having worked on a live, daytime programme, found the change in pace and the whole conception of time quite different, which took a lot of getting used to.

Planning and Decision-Making

The formal occasion and venue for making decisions on *The Arts Show* is at the weekly production meeting. Production meetings in broadcasting generally serve the important function of putting future programme content 'up for grabs', allowing for discussion and a free exchange of views between all those associated with research and production. In contrast to studio work which requires a definite running order with a list of items and accurate timings, there are few certainties in the production meeting: there are possible items and possible guests; stories have to be researched and speakers have to be checked out. Tapes have to be edited and all timings are approximate. The aim of the production meeting is to develop planning talk and planning ideas in to realizable 'ideas for items', particularly with regard to the forthcoming weeks' programmes.

With *The Arts Show* a large number of fixed items or regular events and occurrences can be entered in a diary such as the Dublin Theatre Festival, the DGOS (Dublin Grand Open Society) Winter Season, Galway Arts Week, the Cork Film Festival. Such fixtures help to lessen the uncertainty of how to fill programme space. There are also the not quite so predictable but still regular run of theatre opening nights, new cinema releases, and new book publications, all of which help to structure the planning process for the programme. The programme staff like to think of *The Arts Show* as a newspaper of the arts in which an event of any significance in the arts world will appear. This throws the onus on producers to keep up to date with what is going on not only in local art circles but also with art thinking generally. They must be well informed on coverage of the arts elsewhere and must be able to react swiftly and knowledgeably to events as they happen much as would happen in a current affairs environment. This professional concern with topicality is indeed another dimension of the sense of broadcast time with which producers deal.

On a regular programme like this planning is a process that goes on all the time, not only at production meetings. Between producers themselves there is a constant exchange of ideas and views on programme content, not only on the regular, relatively fixed items that come up for review, but also the types of features and reports that

appear on the programme. Many such features begin as press releases or notices sent into the programme which will be followed up if there is a vacancy or if the idea catches the imagination of one of the producers. Equally, there is word of mouth and the network of contacts that producers build up throughout their careers. The latter method is often preferred by producers who regard press releases and professional publicity seeking with a certain disdain. Many producers prefer to follow up their own leads and develop their stories in their own way. However, as a general rule in broadcasting, despite the best efforts of well-intentioned producers, there is a randomness in the way much material is chosen for programmes. There appears to be a hierarchy of certainty of which material will be included in the running order of a programme according to the prominence and importance an event is deemed to have within the arts world. As one descends the ladder of certainty into contingency, all sorts of issues come into play such as who knows whom, whether there is room in a programme, the individual tastes of a producer and so on.

Working to a Format

The notion of a format in radio concerns the sense of structure or identity of both programmes and stations and is something that transcends individual programme makers. An important aim of establishing a format is to encourage audience identification and establish an expectation within the audience about the nature of the programme as a whole and its subject matter. *The Arts Show* has a recognizable structure or format in the manner in which certain types of content are presented. This is not necessarily worked out consciously beforehand and is often represented as a pattern which emerges, that which seems to best suit particular subject matter or audience involved and functions almost as an intuitive sense on the part of producers. Coming to the programme from having worked on a daytime radio programme for a number of years, one producer described the change in terms of the very different response that seemed to be demanded:

First of all I found that the thing I had to do was kind of really slow down the way I was listening... It wasn't that I wasn't familiar with *The Arts Show* because it's a programme I've always listened to but it was just that in studio terms, whatever it was for the last four years I've been going in there kind of hyped up and doing all those things so that in studio terms I was really slowing it down to listen to it.

It is an important principle with producers that a programme does not become predictable and that a structure does not become a rule. One of the core values of broadcasting is that it remains fresh and continues to challenge listeners rather than simply respond to expectations. The danger that *The Arts Show* producers try to guard against is falling into the habit of producing the five item programme of eight minutes duration each. A format can become an oppressive and restricting structure inhibiting creativity and preventing producers using their initiative. Programmes become formulaic when they no longer respond to real audience needs and are merely generating programme material out of a preexisting pattern. The continual need to reassess how programmes are made and looking out for new angles and ways of approaching material constitute for producers one of the most difficult challenges in broadcasting.

Making good radio

There is a saying within RTE that when it comes to developing programme material 'it doesn't matter what the hell it is or what it's about as long as it makes good radio'. One of the basic competences informing the work of radio producers is what might be termed an orientation to this feature of what makes 'good radio'. This is a set of general assumptions which include but go beyond the customs and conventions by which radio is produced. It can be an intuition about what worked well in an interview, for example,

values that are invoked when making decisions about who should appear on a radio programme, for how long they should talk and how an item should be structured. As an expression of the craft involved in making radio programmes, it is an orientation shared by all radio producers. Sometimes openly discussed, it more often than not remains at the level of a background assumption of radio professionals.

What makes 'good radio' depends, firstly, upon a knowledge of the medium, of what is distinct or unique about radio, and an ability to harness those characteristics. *The Arts Show* in the words of one producer is a programme that attempts in its coverage of the arts to exploit the 'resources of radio' and in reviewing theatre or film will regularly illustrate that review with a clip from the play or extract from the film soundtrack. Equally, taped reports must exploit the basic resources of speech and sound and convey in the recording a sense of the place and occasion. Another producer describes a characteristic of radio that she particularly likes to exploit was the ability of radio broadcasting to link up remote locations via telephone lines from various regional studios and to create a sense of a programme 'coming from everywhere'. The ability to recognize these resources and to use them to good effect is a core element of what radio producers learn through experience.

Secondly, 'making good radio' depends on a producer's ability to make professional judgements on the programme material at hand. A producer will, for example, open a programme with the 'sexiest item' in order to grab an audience's attention and will balance reports, interviews and music in a way that maximizes the programme's appeal and coherence. Recognizing 'sexy' items as well as negotiating the type of balance demanded by the programme involves a range of skills of discrimination that in part has to do with a knowledge of the arts but also bears an important relation to questions of programming and knowledge of the audience.

A programme like *The Arts Show* receives a lot of press releases and publicity material. Choosing from this pool of material requires an understanding of the institutional rules of what is going to work well on radio. On a superficial level, such rules will necessarily vary from one programme to another where criteria will be informed by different audience considerations or a different programme profile. Yet at a more fundamental level, there is a remarkable consensus within the radio industry of what kinds of voices are appropriate, what types of music are suited to particular occasions, what duration items should last, how programmes can be balanced and so on. It is perhaps not too crude to describe this as a common orientation to or agreement on entertainment values in radio. On many occasions, at meetings where particular names or items were being discussed, an overriding consideration in most instances was 'How good was somebody on radio?' Often what qualifies an individual or a particular type of story as being 'good' is a quite intangible thing such as the quality of somebody's voice, their ability to speak fluently and in an entertaining way, their ability in an interview situation to interact with the presenter of the programme, and a familiarity with the processes of media communication. Certain individuals often reappear on programmes as panelists and guests because they understand the rules of interaction in a broadcast interview and they know the limitations of time which the broadcast situation imposes.

A negative stereotype is the description of being a 'worthy' programme. A 'worthy item' implies an event or a story that has some importance and is something that ought to be covered but unfortunately makes for boring or bad radio. For the producer who wants to break new ground or take a different approach, the challenge is to overcome the tag of 'worthiness' and combine originality with the exigencies of radio; in other words, combining the need to be interesting and informative with the need to be entertaining.

The Audience

The audience for any particular programme is something which in one sense producers decide in advance. Commercial radio, for example, targets a programme to a

specific audience segment. In Radio 1, such decisions take place against the background of RTE's public service commitments to cater for a wide variety of interests and in some instances to produce programmes of very specific and limited appeal. *The Arts Show* falls somewhere in the middle between attempting to appeal to a broad cross section of people and producing a minority interest programme. Its method of achieving this is by balancing its coverage between the popular and more exclusive arts and its populist manner of presentation.

For radio producers, feedback from the audience is a very important part of the production process. It allows a producer to take stock of how production is being done and assess how well it is meeting the requirements of the consumer. Many daytime radio programmes have a fairly direct process of feedback where the audience is allowed an opportunity to participate in the show whether by phone or letter. *The Gay Byrne Show* has an enormous post bag which in itself functions as a barometer of audience reaction. With *The Arts Show* there is a conspicuous absence of direct feedback from the audience for a number of reasons. For one, there is no opportunity in the programme for participation whether by phone or by letter. A small amount of post comes into the programme for the presenter Mike Murphy, but nothing about the programme as such or in reaction to individual items. Secondly, there is very little audience research being done by RTE at the moment. The polling research commissioned by the radio advertising industry generally, the JNLR reports, gives minimal information about the constitution of the audience but does not have any facility for listeners' reactions to programmes. Producers of *The Arts Show* do, of course, get feedback on their programmes of a more informal nature. This can come from one's peers, friends and colleagues. Much of this also comes from the arts world, itself an important part of the audience, and with which *The Arts Show* maintains close contact through the very process of producing programmes.

In the absence of such knowledge, it is interesting to view the kinds of conceptions producers have of their audience and both the level of knowledge and the kinds of interests they envisage their listeners to possess. The programme aims to address a broad audience comprised of ordinary people, non-specialists with a general interest in the arts. There is some disagreement about how successful the programme has been in that regard. Some feel that the programme has been too narrow and elitist in the past and are worried that a programme defined by 'arts' automatically precludes a lot of people. Producers can be very sensitive to the charge of becoming elitist and for some it is important to adopt the perspective of the 'ordinary punter':

I'm very interested in the arts but I would regard myself as somebody who is just an ordinary punter and I thought that that would be a bit of an advantage because I would say that my criticism would be that perhaps the programme has on occasion got a little high blown.

...for the ordinary listener I think that there should be a kind of accessibility to things, that we're not all experts ... because I think people have very lively and intelligent minds and want to hear about things. And... I'd be less inclined to pander to an audience of ... say the established Arts Show audience of people who are listening for their reviews and things like that and who would have fairly ...developed ideas on what's happening in the arts. I mean I would be much more interested in broadening the scope and including other people as well ... making sure there's a populist kind of appeal to it. But it's difficult to do that with something that's established itself as an 'Arts' programme with a capital A.

Rival conceptions of the audience often come to the fore in choosing who actually appears on a programme. The topic of who should review for the programme is, for example, frequently an occasion for discussing not only who would be qualified to do a review but also who a review is being aimed at. The choice of reviewer can make all the difference to the tone of a piece and how it is addressed to the audience. In general, there is a commitment to treating the arts seriously on the programme and this involves

inviting reviewers whom are relatively specialized in their field, either professionally or from an academic point of view. This is less the case with popular arts such as films and popular music where a less specialized response is called for. Occasionally, very different kinds of people will be invited to review for the programme: politicians, celebrities, ordinary people who present an alternative or off-beat view.

The personality who has had the most prominent influence on how the programme is perceived is, of course, the presenter, Mike Murphy. His ability to reach a wide audience is seen as crucial to the success of the programme. He maintains a populist appeal for *The Arts Show* while also facilitating a forum for serious discussion and consideration of the arts. All producers on the programme are agreed that such populism is important as a guard against the more extreme and elitist versions of arts broadcasting:

You can be as elitist as you like but at the end of the day, the man manages to get around an awful lot of different areas and to sort of carry it off. I mean to make it amenable at all, accessible at all to people you have to have somebody presenting it who is with well known and who will just get the non-artistic audience.

What's great about Mike and it's one of the things that makes the programme very good is Mike absolutely cuts through the shit. He won't take pretentious nonsense from anybody. He'll ask straight questions and he'll find out what it's about ... there's a touch of the Mister Everyman about him.

Conclusion

In this study I have made some observations about the working activities of radio producers making programmes. I have commented on what I see as the features of locally produced order in the making of *The Arts Show*. The world of the radio producer revolves around the activity of filling programme space during which producers are preoccupied with segments of programme material and units of broadcast time. Various organizational features of the broadcast environment have been shown to have an important bearing on how this is accomplished: the format of the programme as it is reproduced by producers of the show; the orientation towards established conventions of what makes for 'good radio'; and the twin public service commitments to serving minority interests and broadcasting to a wide audience. The version of public service in this case exhibits a high degree of populism and orientation to what is perceived to be relevant and of interest to ordinary, non-specialist members of the audience. Significantly, the production of populist radio with high entertainment values is seen as a necessary defence against the elitism that an arts programme might normally imply.

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