It's All in the Booklet! Fanny Cradock's Power as a Pioneer TV Celebrity Chef and How She Used It to Transform Cooking Shows on the BBC

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Abstract: The development of cooking shows on television, and the rise in powerful, influential, bankable 'celebrity chefs' is often seen as a modern phenomenon involving cooks like Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson in Britain. Fanny Cradock (1909–1994) is credited as Britain's 'first celebrity chef'. However, details of her career are rarely documented. She is best known for her work on BBC Television, hosting regular series between 1955 and 1975, but her contribution is often ridiculed and reduced to her appearance and personality. BBC Written Archive materials show her ideas and suggestions for new formats, new audiences and new concepts in television cooking; including technical advancements, cost efficiencies, responding to market research and viewing figures and as a vehicle for product placement. Cradock's development as a true power changed the way television cooking, cookbooks and 'entertainment' shows were created and perceived for ever, paving the way for others who followed.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas 2017, the BBC made available, on iPlayer and via the Red Button, the 'Cradock Cooks for Christmas' series. Fanny Cradock recorded this series in 1975, and it is the most often shown, and therefore most often remembered of her appearances on the BBC. In recent years, it has been repeated on other channels, such as Food Network and the Good Food Channel, and has remained popular on YouTube. However, this showing marks a welcome return for the BBC in celebrating the Cradock archive. In 1975, when this series of five, fifteen-minute programmes covering different aspects of a successful Christmas meal was first broadcast, Cradock, who was 66 at the time (although she would never admit that), had a run of twenty years of BBC television broadcasts behind her.

The accompanying booklet for Cradock Cooks for Christmas (Cradock 1975) sold at the time for 50p and was promoted by Cradock herself throughout the series with what has now become a hashtag for the shows followers to share and communicate, 'It's all in the booklet!'. The booklet regularly attracts high bids on eBay such is the cult that has arisen around the series. The BBC's decision to reclaim the series and broadcast it, not as a comedy tribute (which), had a run of twenty years of BBC television, and the rise in powerful, influential, bankable 'celebrity chefs' is often seen as a modern phenomenon involving cooks like Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson in Britain. Fanny Cradock (1909–1994) is credited as Britain's 'first celebrity chef'. However, details of her career are rarely documented. She is best known for her work on BBC Television, hosting regular series between 1955 and 1975, but her contribution is often ridiculed and reduced to her appearance and personality. BBC Written Archive materials show her ideas and suggestions for new formats, new audiences and new concepts in television cooking; including technical advancements, cost efficiencies, responding to market research and viewing figures and as a vehicle for product placement. Cradock's development as a true power changed the way television cooking, cookbooks and 'entertainment' shows were created and perceived for ever, paving the way for others who followed.

The power of 'celebrity' as a promotional tool was recognised in the early days of television (Bonner 2011), certainly in the US and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom the BBC had a broadcasting monopoly and a public service commitment that programmes should inform, educate and entertain (Lyons and Ross 2016). Bonner argues that in the 1950s television was sufficiently established to allow personalities to emerge, with Marcel Boulestin, Philip Harben and Marguerite Patten as early examples. She notes, ignoring Cradock’s time with the BBC, that Cradock was a ‘flamboyant ITV cook’ who used instruction leaflets to ‘augment her cookbooks’ (Bonner 2011, p. 134). The notion of television cooks ‘entertaining’ their audiences ‘through the persona of their hosts’ (DeSolier 2005, p. 466) and being less concerned with whether or not they educate their viewers is recognised as beginning in the 1950s and 1960s with Cradock and Graham Kerr.

In the obituaries that followed her death in 1994, it was noted that Cradock was ‘easy to make fun of’ (Daily Telegraph 1994) as she was a ‘preposterous character, the foodie you love to loathe’ (Independent 1994), often ‘parodied by comedians’ as a result of her ‘rudeness and churlishness’ and her celebrated ‘bad temper’ (Herald 1994). In the obituaries, accounts of her life vary in detail, but all mention the clothes she wore, whether it was ‘a Hartnell ball gown’ (Daily Telegraph 1994) or simply an ‘evening gown’ (Independent 1994). Some details conflict, despite a threatening quotation from Cradock herself ‘mis-quote and we’ll sue’, for example ‘with a pinny over...
her evening gown’ and ‘Mrs Cradock eschewed aprons’, but cite her work with the BBC, ‘a pioneer of cookery programmes’ and ‘just what their audience wanted to hear’. Keith Floyd is quoted as saying ‘She changed a whole nation’s cooking habits’ (Ellis 2007), and Craddock even merits a mention in Floyd’s own obituary fifteen years later, where his presenting style is described as ‘an anarchic contrast to the well-ordered kitchen world of Fanny Cradock or a Delia Smith’ (The Times 2009).

In her exploration of the evolution of British food and cookbooks, Humble (2005, p. 150) describes Cradock as ‘the most glamorous’ television cook and also ‘highly eccentric’, but likens Cradock to a pantomime dame ‘in full evening dress, dripping with jewels and mink stole, caked in heavy make-up’, continuing the analogy of Cradock as an ‘act’. Cradock’s food is described by Humble as ‘bizarrely grand’, her books as ‘astoundingly snobbish but also very funny’ and Humble compares Cradock’s food with Barthes’ descriptions of food in *Ornamental Cookery* (1957, p. 78), as ‘dreamlike food’ to be marvelled at. Humble notes that Barthes later retreated somewhat from his views, but that housewives of the 1950s did attempt to make Cradock’s dishes as part of a fantasy in their lives, divorced from the practicalities of everyday life, in a culture popular at the time of the gourmet, dedicated to French menus with matched wines (Panayi 2008).

Andrews in her look at broadcasting, domesticity and femininity *Domesticating the Airwaves* (Andrews 2012, p. 145) singles out Cradock as ‘the most famous television cook of the 1950s and 1960s’ (although she too refers to her mistakenly as Craddock) for her ‘over the top performance of domesticity’ (Andrews 2012, p. xiii). She then only devotes two pages of the two-hundred and forty-four of the entire book to Cradock, only referencing two original works, although incorrectly. In addition to mention of the appeal of the ‘excesses’ in decoration and presentation by Cradock, she discusses the ‘gendered power relationship’ which she claims Cradock plays and simultaneously undermines by having Johnnie beside her ‘acting as an assistant’ (p. 146). Ultimately Andrews concludes the appeal of Cradock is her camp, excessive performance, and echoes Lawson (2011, p. 350) who concluded that her ‘overly theatrical, pantomime appearance constructed an extreme and grotesque image of femininity’, referencing Cradock’s biography (Ellis 2007) as the only source in her work.

Arguably Fanny Cradock remains something of an enigma in the history of food and the media in Britain. In 2017 an evaluation of her contribution to home cooking (Geddes 2017) aimed to re-establish Cradock as an entrepreneur and pioneer in what is termed ‘multimedia’ (Bonner 2009), a term which describes connecting the ‘new world’ of broadcast media with more traditional, but associated printed articles and books, with other saleable commodities.

In this paper, I will focus on materials contained within the BBC Written Archives. These archives contain detailed records of discussions, suggestions connected with Cradock’s career in the BBC alongside her broadcast and highlight her powerful role in devising new formats in television cooking, reaching new audiences and suggesting, and implementing, new concepts for the communication of food and lifestyle.

**New Formats**

As can be seen from the archives, Cradock submitted endless streams of new ideas for programmes to the BBC for consideration. Thinking that housewives were becoming increasingly busy and required shortcuts at home, she proposed ideas for ‘no cooking cooking’ that were not accepted at the time. An idea that Cradock returned to frequently was for cooking shows to be filmed in real kitchens, primarily her own, but often ideas featured outlines of outside broadcasts from ordinary viewers’ kitchens. Previous ideas to do this on the radio were dismissed by the BBC until Cradock pointed out that she had purchased her own portable sound recording device, and it would be simple to do.

Cradock realised early on that there would be a commercial benefit in supplementing broadcasts with recipes and additional information in print. Writing to the BBC she suggested that she could pack more recipes into each segment on her radio broadcasts if she was not required to adhere to the standard dictation speed required, a speed which allowed listeners to jot down ingredients and recipes. Initially the BBC were resistant to providing copies of recipes for listeners, concerned that they might be swamped with requests, but Cradock suggested she would handle the requests directly, and so incorporated a ‘write to me’ request for listeners. This soon became a standard part of any Cradock broadcast, with several thousand people purchasing the associated pamphlet. Cradock used the resulting data as market research evidence of her popularity among BBC listeners and viewers.

Cradock used the same technique for broadcasts seemingly unrelated to food. Her pamphlet for a *Town and Country programme* (BBC 2018) proved so popular several print runs were required. Cradock additionally broadcast on rival *Commercial Television* between 1956 and 1962 where she regularly produced books to accompany a series, which were sold separately, and during stage demonstrations a printed programme gave details not only of recipes, but also of providers of each product used. Cradock submitted ideas to the BBC for a serialisation of her autobiography in 1960, focusing on stories about food primarily, but these were rejected by the BBC who felt her aim was to sell more copies of the book, a book which the Corporation had no connection with.

When Cradock began to provide copies of recipes in print for her listeners and viewers, she was acutely aware...
that they were basic in their presentation. She had made good use of illustration in her early cookbooks (Dale 1949), engaging the talents of Nigel Mould who had illustrated her children's books previously (e.g. Dale 1947). Cradock realised that these illustrations were not always sufficient to convey a technique or how to successfully execute a recipe, so made suggestions for a 'pic-strip' of real photographs to be included alongside the written instructions. Cradock offered that photographs could be taken by her husband to further reduce costs.6

Cradock was keen to move cookery programmes from late night or afternoon schedules, and from Adult Education to Entertainment, claiming that a more natural home for her programmes would be at times when housewives would be tuning in, and thinking about meal preparation. Coincidentally this was what would now be considered 'prime time' viewing.

Cradock finally persuaded BBC producers that her idea to cook in a real kitchen in a real home would be a winning formula. Her format for a programme focused on a series of dinner party and social occasions, ‘Fanny Cradock Invites’ being commissioned in 1966 (BBC 2018). The home kitchen that Cradock invited viewers into was her own. Cradock proudly walked viewers around the kitchen pointing out cabinet design and placement, where the many cookers were positioned, how much room was available for preparation and, crucially, where a range of gadgets and essential kitchen equipment was stored (YouTube 2018a). Cradock indicated the perfect spot to place a newly installed Spit-Roast, without mentioning the company who had sponsored her to highlight it.

Cradock devised a format for a series of short programmes in which she would cook three courses in fifteen minutes. This format derived from the volume of letters from viewers who complained that although her recipes were appealing, they were working housewives with busy homes to manage, and limited time to serve a tasty, wholesome meal for their families.8 In another instance her correspondence details how people living in the city could correspond with the BBC to secure more broadcast time after each programme she recorded. Memos show

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New Audiences

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that BBC staff felt that she was not only a ‘tough nut’21 with ‘irritating mannerisms’22 who liked to throw her weight around a little23, she was also appealing to viewers and listeners as a direct contrast to Philip Harben.24

During her time with the commercial television channel ATV25 Cradock made good use of audience feedback which not only showed her popularity but also which sections of any programme were most well received, by which age group and gender. She was able to quote sections of the feedback in her correspondence with the BBC, demonstrating her popularity, along with tales of the ‘astonishing reactions’26 and ‘record breaking’ audiences27 she attracted.

Following audience feedback and market research for ATV Cradock knew that her simple ideas which had most visual appeal were popular with children. Developing this further Cradock created a range of programmes ‘For Deaf Children’28 to encourage them to copy her visual instructions to recreate playful food creations for themselves and their families. Cradock published a series of books aimed to encourage children to cook for themselves (Cradock and Cradock 1959a, b, c and d) linked to her series on commercial television. She went on to develop more ideas for cooking with children for the BBC29 extending this to teenage audiences30 with the aim of interesting them in food and cooking.

Cradock proposed other ground-breaking programmes, aimed at what were then as yet unidentified audiences. She devised a series aimed at encouraging men to venture into the kitchen31 which again arose from letters imploring her to do so. Realising that many viewers lacked some of the basic knowledge and techniques that Cradock herself was fortunate to have at her disposal, she devised a basic cookery series (BBC 2018). For those more proficient, Cradock devised a series looking at various Kitchen Parties32 which the BBC predicted would be equally as well received.33

New Concepts

The notion of a challenge seemed to appeal to Cradock and BBC producers alike. Whether it was a challenge to liven up an otherwise ordinary ingredient, such as the humble potato34 or the spectacular Eurovision broadcast ‘Challenge in the Kitchen’, Cradock was keen to show her abilities. Cradock liked nothing more than to be challenged by the audience too, which often provided fruitful ideas that she could pitch to the BBC. One such prompt resulted in a series on economical cooking where the challenge was to make the most of seasonal, available and affordable produce, whilst of course still giving the Cradock spin for garnish and presentation.

Cradock submitted ideas which included cooking in front of a live audience in the studio, building on her image and reputation for sell-out shows in large halls across the country (Cradock 1960) while also allowing for interaction between audience and cook, answering questions or explaining difficult techniques and real-life problem issues through demonstration. Cradock also suggested that audiences at home would like to see her cook for, and then enjoy a meal with some celebrity guests posing as friends.35 It should be noted that these celebrities were sometimes actual friends as for example in the case of Barbara Cartland.36

Cradock saw food related shows as perhaps more than simply cooking, encouraging the BBC to consider her proposals for planning a kitchen successfully37 or talks about ‘exotic’ gardening38 which were connected to food, but not restricted to solely demonstrating recipes.

Cradock was quick to appreciate the benefits new technological advances might bring to broadcasts, often trying things out in stage performances initially before applying concepts to BBC productions. For the Challenge in the Kitchen broadcast in 1955 (BBC 2018) the files show a series of discussion between the Gas Board and BBC producers about the provision of cookers for the show. Cradock’s continental challenger, French chef Philip Oliver, had requested at least one ‘backless oven’ at his disposal where uncooked dishes could be placed in, and replaced backstage by the completed, perfect dish.39 It was felt perhaps that Cradock would be at a disadvantage if she too did not make use of this technique. The Gas Board confirm in a letter that such ovens had previously been used by Philip Harben and Margaret Lather Patten as standard.40

When Cradock was attempting to convince the BBC to film in real housewives’ kitchens, the issue of the cost of these outside broadcasts was always cited by the BBC as the reason for their refusal. Cradock suggested that the perception of an ordinary, real kitchen could be recreated in a studio setting easily by taking photographs of the kitchen and projecting them as a backdrop in the studio behind work stations.41 This idea may have been borrowed from her time working in the theatre, or from watching her parents at work, her father was a playwright and her mother an actress (Cradock 1960).

Cradock’s ideas were often deemed to be simply too expensive to produce, and therefore dismissed. Cradock herself would then return with suggestions of how costs could be cut, or met by herself, in order for a production to be made. This was appealing to thrifty BBC producers. Cradock pitched a travel series around Europe42 several times throughout her career, and after initial knockbacks offered exclusive use of her own footage, recorded by her husband Johnnie while they travelled across the continent. The BBC realised that while this footage could be useful and interesting, and that the Cradock’s had the technology to film it, they themselves did not have the editing facilities or know-how to make it useable and would require the use of the BBC facilities.43

Realising that costs were often a main concern for the BBC production teams, Cradock offered to bring and use all her own equipment for television programmes.44 This was written into her contracts as a flat charge and agreed as a standard way to proceed. This allowed Cradock to decide which products from gas cookers to pots and pans wouldfeature in her broadcasts, cutting promotional deals with companies away from BBC restrictions. There is some
written by Fanny Cradock. The image shows an excerpt from a page discussing her career and influence in the development of television cookery. The text highlights her persistence and ability to underline her power and reputation, which were key factors in her success. The author notes that written archives show she played a crucial role in developing new formats, audiences, and concepts during her time at the channel.

About the author

Kevin Geddes is an independent researcher with an interest in early television cookery, cookbooks, and other writing, and associated multi-platforming. Specialist in the life and career of Fanny Cradock. Owner and writer of a successful blog about Fanny Cradock. Recently completed a Master’s in Gastronomy at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, with distinction. Final dissertation project looked at the contribution of Fanny Cradock made to home cooking in Britain between 1955 and 1985 through archival research and content analysis, recently published in the International Journal of Consumer Studies, and presented at the Third International Conference on Food, Culture and History, Tours, 2017. A future collaborative presentation at the Communicating Food: An Interdisciplinary Symposium at the University of Chester, looking at ‘Nurturing Distinction through Children’s TV Cooking Shows: a comparison of case studies from Britain and Slovenia’ will be developed into a journal article. Currently preparing articles for Petits Propos Culinaires.

Notes:
4. Correspondence (24 September 1965) Memo to C. BBC1 from Donald Grattan. [confirming booklet sales of 150,000 copies] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.


13. Correspondence (28 June 1953) Memo from Cecil Madden to BBC Producer, [confirming costs effectiveness of the Cradock show and innovative use of stage set-up/technology] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1949–1954.

14. Correspondence (8 January 1960) Letter to John Cradock from Kenneth Adams. [recognising that the Cradock’s would like to return to the BBC] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.


16. Correspondence (3 October 1958) Memo to Assistant Head of O.B. from Michael Peacock. [acknowledging that the Cradock's are open about their business propositions] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.


32. Correspondence (18 June 1964) Memo to Ch. P BBC1 from Doreen Stephens. [confirms pilot made and others to be available] BBC Written Archive Centre T32/1169/1 – Kitchen Party Pilot and General
33. Correspondence (18 June 1964) Memo to Ch. P BBC1 from Doreen Stephens. [confirms pilot made and others to be available] BBC Written Archive Centre T32/1169/1 – Kitchen Party Pilot and General
35. Correspondence (15 May 1963) Memo to Natasha Kroll from Freda Baratt. [discussing using some of Fanny Cradock’s ‘friends’ in the kitchen] BBC Written Archive Centre T32/1169/1 – Kitchen Party Pilot and General
39. Correspondence (2 January 1956) Letter to Reg Gregg from BBC Production. [asking for cooker minus a back to be provided] BBC Written Archive Centre T32/486/1 Challenge in the Kitchen
40. Correspondence (3 January 1956) Letter to Alan Sleath from The Gas Council. [confirming previous use of backless cooker by Harben, Patten etc.] BBC Written Archive Centre T32/486/1 Challenge in the Kitchen
41. Correspondence (9 November 1962) Letter to Miss Doreen Stephens from Plunkett Greene Limited. [with various suggestions of new ideas, including O.B.’s in real kitchens and back projections] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.
42. Correspondence (19 September 1955) Memo to Assistant C.P. Tel from Alan Sleath. [discussing European film footage, costs of editing film and lack of editing equipment by Cradocks] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.
43. Correspondence (19 September 1955) Memo to Assistant C.P. Tel from Alan Sleath. [discussing European film footage, costs of editing film and lack of editing equipment by Cradocks] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.
44. Correspondence (29 October 1962) Letter to Fanny Cradock from Charles Lister. [asking for clarification Cradock will provide all food and properties] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.
46. Correspondence (16 October 1963) Memo to C.P. Tel from Cecily Madden. [mentioning Cradock is good value really] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART3 File 2 1963–1970.
47. Correspondence (14 November 1955) Memo to C. Madden from Cecil McGovern. [discussing difficulty in Cradock appreciating a BBC point of view] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.
48. Correspondence (8 January 1960) Letter to John Cradock from Kenneth Adams. [recognising that the Cradocks would like to return to the BBC] BBC Written Archive Centre TVART1 File 1 1953–1962.
49. Correspondence (9 July 1964) Letter to Joyce Bullen from Fanny Cradock. [mentions upcoming trips to Italy, Tunisia and then shows] BBC Written Archive Centre T32/1169/1 – Kitchen Party Pilot and General
50. Correspondence (24 June 1964) Memo to H.F.P. Tel from Joyce Bullen. [filing instruction marked in pencil at top – Fanny File] BBC Written Archive Centre T57/103/1 – Home Cooking General
51. Correspondence (26 June 1964) Memo to Miss Joyce Bullen from Doreen Stephens. [responding to notes on alternative presenters, none as suitable as Fanny Cradock] BBC Written Archive Centre T47/003/1 – Home Cooking General
52. Correspondence (26 June 1964) Memo to Miss Joyce Bullen from Doreen Stephens. [responding to notes on alternative presenters, none as suitable as Fanny Cradock] BBC Written Archive Centre T47/003/1 – Home Cooking General
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