

Radio as a Screen Medium in BBC Arts Broadcasting

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Abstract

Today more than half of all radio listening in the UK is occurring through digital platforms. Within this context the BBC's current arts proposition provides a valuable insight into how public service broadcasters are adapting and responding to this burgeoning digital audience. In particular, attention is drawn to the ways in which digital platforms are used to supplement and enhance the auditory listening experience. In doing so, the present article argues that radio continues to occupy a significant position in furthering public engagement with the arts due to, rather than despite of, advances in digital technology.

Keywords

BBC radio; arts; public service broadcasting; digital media; multiplatform

Introduction

The arts have been a staple in BBC radio schedules since the corporation was first granted a licence to broadcast in 1923, and under the leadership of the BBC's first Director-General John Reith soon became synonymous with and symbolic of public service ideals. In the view of Reith and many of his contemporaries, it was the responsibility of broadcasting to make available to the many what had previously only been available to the select few. As such the arts dominated Britain's newly established public service broadcasting (PSB) system in the form of classical music, operas, theatre and talks during its formative years. Through the "magical agent" of

broadcasting, asserted the BBC's 1928 year book, "no longer is the Promenade Concert available only to Londoners, the Hallé Concert to Mancunians, the Belfast Philharmonic to the inhabitants of that city, and the Scottish Orchestra to those living in Glasgow" (p. 84).

Today the arts proposition on BBC radio is still relatively strong, with topical magazine programmes such as *Front Row* (BBC Radio 4, 1998-) and the *Radio 2 Arts Show* (2007 -), returning strands including *Poetry Please* (BBC Radio 4, 1979 -) and *The Sunday Feature* (BBC Radio 3, 2009 -), along with one-off series such as *The Art of the Nation* (BBC Radio 4, 2014) and *Will Gompertz Gets Creative* (BBC Radio 4, 2015). Although not as prominent as they once were, relays of classical music concerts and operas still feature in the schedules, with BBC Radio 3 broadcasting thirteen performances in partnership with the Royal Opera House in 2016 (Royal Opera House, 2017). The depth and breadth of arts content available across BBC radio is also particularly striking when compared to the arguably limited offering on television. For instance, within a three month period between September 7th and November 30th 2015 there were 244 programmes listed under radio in the weekly BBC arts newsletter compared to just 60 on television.

Nevertheless, when charting the history of PSB in Britain radio is often presented as part of a linear narrative in which the medium almost seems to be rendered immaterial or even obsolete by the arrival of television. Indeed, a disproportionate amount of contemporary studies focus solely on television and, increasingly, online provision as a means by which to evaluate the present PSB proposition. According to Kate Lacey, "part of the reason for the original neglect of radio is taken to be the (debatable)

notion that its golden age lies in the past” (2009, p.22). Yet figures from the radio audience measurement company, RAJAR, reveal that radio still reaches 89% of the UK population per week, averaging 21 hours of live radio per listener (2016a, p.1). Furthermore, with 57% of all radio listening in the UK now occurring through digital platforms (ibid), it could be argued that the medium is now becoming more interactive and versatile than ever. As radio has increasingly become what Michele Hilmes terms a “screen medium”, the BBC’s current arts proposition provides a valuable insight into how broadcasters are responding to this burgeoning digital audience.

At its launch in 2014, BBC Arts was framed at the vanguard of a broader shift toward a more holistic approach to public service provision that was responsive to the needs of changing consumption habits and technological affordances¹. In essence, this constituted the establishment of what Director-General Tony Hall termed a more “joined up” (2014) multiplatform arts strategy across the BBC, from organisation and commissioning to programme-making and branding. Although there had been a push during the mid-2000’s toward a so-called “360-degree” commissioning strategy involving “the full-scale adoption of a multi-platform and multimedia approach to commissioning, producing and distributing public service content” (Bennett and Strange, 2008, p.106), its implementation in arts broadcasting had remained obscure (Wyver, 2007). Just short of decade later, BBC Arts seemed firmly established with a remit to deliver these multiplatform ambitions in practice. When speaking with the BBC’s Director of Arts in 2015, he described BBC Arts as a “virtual department” and

¹ The BBC has undergone a number of restructures in recent years in a bid to consolidate commissioning processes and further streamline its services. The most dramatic of these saw the abolishment of individual television channel controllers and the appointment of former BBC One controller, Charlotte Moore, to the role of creative, editorial and strategic lead for BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Four and BBC iPlayer in 2016.

“cultural institution” operating across the BBC’s television, radio and online services (interview with author). Through allowing greater collaboration across the BBC’s portfolio, this multiplatform strategy signalled new opportunities for integrating digital platforms and visual content within the radio listening experience.

Using BBC Radio 4’s coverage of the visual arts and BBC Radio 3’s *Opera on 3* as case studies, this paper examines the ways in which the multiplatform ambitions described above are realised in pursuit of public service goals. The data and analysis presented derives from a broader study based on twenty qualitative interviews conducted between February and November of 2015 with key figures involved in the production and commissioning of arts content across the BBC’s television, radio and online services². In this regard, the present discussion is also situated within a wider narrative concerning how those working within this area of provision are responding and adapting to shifting institutional, social and political contexts.

Extending the listening experience: radio as a screen medium

Within media and communication scholarship the “blindness” of radio is often theorised as the medium’s defining characteristic. As Andrew Crisell states in the opening chapter to his influential text, *Understanding Radio*, “it is from the sole fact of its blindness that all radio’s other distinctive qualities – the nature of its language, its jokes, the way in which its audiences use it – ultimately derive” (1986, p.3). Significantly, the first original radio play to be commissioned by the BBC took place

² These included the Director of BBC Arts, the Head of Arts Commissioning, BBC Arts’ Head of Digital Development, the Commissioning and Scheduling Manager for BBC Radio 3, the Commissioning Editor for BBC Radio 4 and the BBC World Service, and in-house and independent producers. To gain an insight into the role of partnerships in BBC arts strategy and programme making, interviews were also conducted with the Chief Executives of Voluntary Arts and the Arts Council of Wales, and the Managing Director of Royal Opera House Enterprises

in total darkness. Set during a power cut in a coalmine, Richard Hughes' *A Comedy of Danger* (1924) "consciously exploits the potential of the radio form" by situating the characters at the same visual disadvantage as the listener (Hand, 2014, p.26). Nevertheless, this absence of visual content does not render radio programming completely bereft of any kind of imagery. Predominantly, the type of visual experience facilitated by radio is that which is created in the "mind's eye" of the listener. "Because it offers sound-only instead of sound and vision", Crisell asserts, "the listener is compelled to "supply" the visual data for himself. The details are described, or they may suggest themselves through sound, but they are not "pictured" for him. He must picture them himself" (1986, p.7).

The ability to invoke the listener's imagination through sound alone is key to radio's continued prevalence as it can be listened to while engaging in everyday activities, such as driving, working or household chores (Tacchi, 2009; McLeish and Link, 2016). For a number of the participants interviewed in this study, this was a particular feature that distinguished radio from television. As one BBC producer explained:

If you're watching TV you're probably in your living room or your bedroom or whatever it is, but you're there because it's very efficient. Radio I think can take you by the atmosphere into a place in your head or mind that you can get into whether you're in the car or whether you're in the kitchen or whether you're in bed at night or in the morning. (Interview with author, 2015)

This has also made the medium conducive to the provision of supplementary content originally printed in periodicals such as the *Radio Times*, and now increasingly

situated online. As Richard Berry concludes in his analysis of visualisation in BBC national radio, the medium facilitates a mode of consumption in which the “listener/viewer can listen and look elsewhere but then easily switch modes from passive listener to engaged (visual) consumer of the content” (2013, p.180). This potential for listeners to also be engaged with visual content at the moment of listening has been evident within arts strategy before the advent of digital platforms. For instance, Sam Rose discusses in detail the presence of the visual arts in *The Listener*³ during the first decade of its publication from 1929 to 1939. In an attempt to solve “the problem of ostensivity”, states Rose, these supplements “were issued with the notion that listeners could follow radio talks while looking at the printed illustrations” (2013, p.607). However, perhaps the most significant development in recent years is the ability to integrate this type of visual content into the very platforms on which radio is now increasingly being consumed.

Due to consumption increasingly occurring through computers, tablets and smart phones, Hilmes argues that radio is now “a screen medium, possessing extended capabilities that posed an enormous challenge to producers used to working with sound in its traditional forms” (2013 p.49). The emergence of screen-based listening has also become a significant consideration for broadcasters. In a 2012 interview for *The Guardian*, BBC Radio 1 Controller, Ben Cooper asserted: "Traditional radio for young people is dead in about a generation. We've got to work out what radio looks like on a smartphone, iPad and IPTV" (quoted in Plunkett, 2012). With BBC Radio 1's target audience falling between the ages of 15-29 years old, this is not only an issue of responding to emerging consumption habits, but also one of

³ *The Listener* was a weekly magazine published by the BBC between 1929 and 1991. The majority of its content was dedicated to the reproduction of broadcast talks and supplementary articles and images.

sustainability as the BBC attempts to address the broader issue of its “aging audience”⁴.

In line with the work of Hilmes (2013) and Berry (2013), the present analysis does not seek to dispute radio’s continued prominence as a primarily auditory medium. Rather, this article is concerned with the ways in which online platforms enhance the listening experience, rather than replace it. This is a position succinctly articulated by Berry, who argues that “technology and audiences have evolved to the point where radio can introduce visualization to complement the auditory offering, in a way that neither diminishes the impact of sound nor substantially alters the nature of the medium” (2013, p.171), going on to state that “the programme remains the ‘main event’ but visualization enhances and extends that experience” (p.172).

While the arts have always had a place on radio, the use of online platforms in this way provides new creative opportunities for broadcasters to add an extra layer to programming, and for listeners to enrich their listening experience should they choose to. But perhaps most significantly in a PSB context, this multiplatform approach adds a further educative dimension to programming in a way that engages new audiences and provides a greater depth of understanding for the already initiated. In this regard, it is argued that the adaptation of BBC radio to the new media environment strengthens public service provision, supporting David Hendy’s assertion that online media “sometimes serve old media rather than replace them, and that new symbiotic relationships are even now being forged” (2013, p.109).

⁴ In 2015 the BBC Trust reported that the median age of BBC Radio 1 listeners was 30 years old, up from 28 in 2005/06. The median age for BBC Radio 2 listeners was reported as 51, while 42% of BBC Radio 3 listeners were over the age of 65, an increase from 40% in 2009/10.

Multipatform strategies for public service provision

The integration of online platforms and digital services within linear broadcasting has been a growing priority for public service broadcasters since the turn of the millennium (Steemers, 1999; Meier, 2003; Bennett, 2008; Enli, 2008). The BBC's first significant application of this was for the 2001 natural history television series *Walking With Beasts*, produced by the BBC Natural History Unit. Viewers watching via digital television could access supplementary material and information alongside the broadcast programme through the "red button". As James Bennett and Niki Strange describe, these "were spaces the viewer could 'explore' and 'delve deeper' into for more information on each episode's beasts", and that like the arrangement of a museum they were designed to "present the visitor with an itinerary based on educative principles" (2008, p.109). Although these interactive strategies would soon be extended across practically all areas of provision, their initial implementation within natural history signalled new opportunities for engaging audiences with factual content on a previously unprecedented scale.

From a historical perspective, this expansion of content delivery is in many ways aligned with the traditionally educative function of PSB found in the often-quoted maxim "inform, educate and entertain". For Reith the order of these functions were particularly important, asserting in his 1924 text *Broadcast Over Britain* that "to have exploited so great a scientific invention for the purpose and pursuit of 'entertainment' alone would have been a prostitution of its powers and an insult to the character and intelligence of the people" (p.17). However, by the beginning of the 21st century the media landscape had changed dramatically since Reith first penned his broadcasting

manifesto. Whereas once the BBC held a virtual monopoly in Britain, the proliferation of commercial channels, and increasingly online media, had given audiences greater choice and introduced substantially more competition. In a speech to BBC staff in 2006 the then Director-General Mark Thompson highlighted a particular need for new and innovative approaches to delivering the “educate” part of the BBC’s remit within this context, going on to state that “even the words we use – learning, educative, specialist factual – can feel a little uninspiring” (The Guardian, 2006).

Following the success of *Walking With Beasts*, it was not long until this multiplatform content model was also applied within arts broadcasting. John Wyver outlines a number of early examples including a live television transmission of *Shakespeare’s Richard II* in 2003, which, in a similar fashion to *Walking With Beasts*, provided “text information about the play and its plot plus commentary from Andrew Marr about contemporary political parallels, together with access to backstage cameras” via the red button (2007, p.194). Although arguably not as prolific as in other areas of provision, from the mid 00’s there was a further shift within arts broadcasting strategy toward integrating online content and the potential for audience participation. The most notable example of this is the 2005 BBC One series *A Picture of Britain*, described by Bennett and Strange as “markedly more sophisticated” than the multiplatform television events that had preceded it, with “user interaction moving beyond simple voting to generation and contribution of content” (2011, p.140). Alongside an array of programming across television and radio, viewers and listeners were invited to submit their own photographs, view other’s photographs, and engage in online photography “master classes” on the programme’s official website.

Here it is important to note that the provision of supplementary material is in no way a new concept within arts broadcasting. As already alluded to, the origins of such strategies date back to the early years of radio, long before the proliferation of digital media and interactive television. Detailed programme notes in magazines such as the *Radio Times* accompanied most classical music concerts, providing a guide for those unfamiliar with the pieces being performed. Jennifer Doctor describes the motivations behind this strategy, stating that “through articles, programme notes and announcements, the BBC strove to cultivate interest in its art music programmes and to provide basic information, so that the uninformed listener would have a foundation for comprehending them” (1999, p.103). Fundamental in such initiatives was an acknowledgement that merely broadcasting concerts and performances was not enough to eradicate the social and cultural barriers that made such art forms inaccessible to many. Rather, the ambition of democratising the “high culture” of the arts envisioned by Reith had to start from making their meanings and contexts available to all rather than a select few.

In many respects the multiplatform arts strategies that emerged through in the early 2000’s could be considered a continuation of this tradition. However, whilst the physical magazine format only allowed for text and images, digital platforms such as that offered by interactive television and online media introduced a more versatile and integrated approach to the provision of supplementary content. From a public service perspective this provided a new and novel way to introduce audiences to the arts and expand the parameters of cultural engagement. But perhaps most significantly for radio, it furnished the opportunity to introduce a more integrated visual component to

the once blind medium. Described by Hilmes as the revival of radio “both as a creative medium and as a shared cultural experience” (2013, p.44), the following demonstrates how the integration of online, screen-based media can also breathe new life into traditional public service genres such as the arts.

The visual arts on radio

Often when the visual arts are featured on radio it is in the form of discussion and debate, interviews with the artists themselves, or an examination of the socio-cultural contexts that surround the work and its creation. From historical perspective, Rose highlights early concerns within the BBC’s Talks Department around the capacity of radio to adequately cover the visual arts, stating that “although the corporation broadcast a number of talks on art, there was a recurrent worry about how to deal with an absent of visual subject” (2013, p.606). Although the printing of illustrations to accompany broadcasts in magazines such as *The Listener* went some way in addressing this issue, the arrival of television, and in particular colour television in the late 1960’s, in many ways rendered such strategies obsolete. Consequently, television has and predominantly continues to be the primary destination for programming in which a close analysis of the visual properties of particular artworks is central to the narrative.

With respect to the BBC’s current radio provision, a notable diversion from this can be found in BBC Radio 4’s *Decoding the Masterworks* (2015). Presented by art historian Dr Janina Ramirez, the three-part series seeks to examine “famous and familiar works of art in minute detail” and “decode these masterworks for today’s audience”. In the first episode Ramirez prefaces an in-depth examination of Manet’s

A Bar at the Folies-Bèrgere with the following description of the painting as she stands before it in the Courtauld Gallery in London:

It's late on a Parisian evening in 1882. The newly opened Folies-Bergère is busy. Here up on the first floor gallery, the mirrored bars are dazzling with lights for the trapeze performers flying about the main auditorium. Make your way through the jostling crowd, some watching the show, many others chatting, drinking and being seen, and you find one of the newly permitted female bartenders is free. You think you've caught her eye amidst the frivolity going on around her. Or have you? She's certainly caught your attention even though she's not really looking *at* you. It's those eyes. And those eyes belong to the girl at the bar of the Folies-Bergère here on one of the walls of the Courtauld gallery in the heart of London. And you can find it by typing the title of the painting into your internet search engine; type in "Bar at the Folies-Bergère".

What is most striking about this introduction is the clear instruction, or "call to action" (Bennett and Strange, 2008), for listeners to simultaneously engage with online visual content. Implied in such statements is the expectation that the majority of those listening are also in proximity to a computer or smartphone on which they can view the painting as a reference point to the discussion that follows. For those listening to *Decoding the Masterworks* online, the text description box below the programme on BBC iPlayer also states that: "Listeners are invited to look the painting up, if they can, on their computer or tablet".

When interviewing an independent producer who had recently been involved in the production of online content for BBC radio, he cited a wider shift in radio consumption habits as the catalyst for such formats:

They're acknowledging that more and more people are listening online or that they're listening in the traditional way but with a tablet there or something like that. (Interview with author, 2015)

In line with this assertion, a number of other series such as BBC Radio 4's *The Art of the Nation* (2014) and *A Mortal Work of Art* (2014) have also made use of "online galleries" hosted on the programmes' homepages to illustrate the works featured. Again, at the beginning of each programme the presenter will often prompt listeners to visit the BBC website and view particular images online to provide visual context for the discussion. In the case of *Moving Pictures* (BBC Radio 4, 2017) the image used for each episode on iPlayer is also that of the work being discussed. Alongside this the description underneath the media player invites the listener to follow a link to "explore a high-resolution image of the painting and you'll be able to zoom in to see the tiniest details as you listen".

Of particular interest here is the way in which visual content is concurrently integrated into both the digital listening platform and the narrative of the programme itself. No longer is the visual subject absent within this context, providing a reference point from which to explore areas of the art world that were previously relatively limited compared to the types of programming available on television. Programmes such as *Decoding the Masterworks* and *Moving Pictures* demonstrate how the

illustrative capacity of this approach has expanded radio's coverage of the visual arts to include more detailed aesthetic analysis and criticism. At the same time, the general familiarity of the works discussed and level of description featured ensures that traditional "blind" listening is still effective. As Dr Janina Ramirez goes on to state in her introduction to *Decoding the Masterworks*:

Even if you can't get to your computer or tablet at the moment you probably know this image. It's ubiquitous; you find it on biscuit tins, t-shirts, posters...

This ability to facilitate different modes of consumption and levels of attentiveness, while not weakening others, is a defining feature of such multiplatform radio strategies. Both the listener driving and the listener viewing content through a digital device are able to engage meaningfully with the narrative of the programme, further evidencing the argument that "Modern media are being supplemented, not supplanted, by their successors" (Hartley, 2009, p. 20). Building on from this analysis, attention will now be turned to the educative and informative roles of digital content in supplementing the broadcast of more esoteric art forms.

Opera on 3: streaming Handel's Orlando

In 2015 the BBC's foremost classical music, arts and culture service, BBC Radio 3, broadcast a live performance of Handel's *Orlando* as part of its regular *Opera on 3* strand. But particularly significant about this performance was that it was the first BBC opera broadcast accompanied by a live online commentary. Lead by academics and those directly involved in the opera's production, this commentary provided contextual information and analysis in real-time as the performance unfolded.

Alongside this, visitors to the BBC Radio 3 website were able to access photographs of the Welsh National Opera's production that "not only capture the magical costumes and design of the show, but also take us through the action scene-by-scene" (Smith, 2015). There were also interviews with the cast and shots from backstage, including "selfies by the artists" (ibid).

Much like the printed programme notes that once accompanied classical music programmes such as *Music and the Ordinary Listener* (BBC Radio, 1926) in the *Radio Times*, this online provision has a clear educative function in line with broader public service objectives. But perhaps the key benefit of digital platforms is their potential to provide a greater wealth and diversity of niche content that would typically be available in print (limited to text and images), or indeed on television (often characterised by mainstream appeal). As the Managing Director of Royal Opera House Enterprises stated in relation to ballet performances:

For people who are really keen on ballet or want to learn more about ballet then there's a whole set of material there that otherwise in the pre-internet days would never have found its way onto a TV channel. I think it's just adding to what we have in place already. (Interview with author, 2015)

Consideration must also be given to the ways in which digital platforms, and the types of content facilitated by them, appeal to varying audience demographics. With the average age of opera goers in the UK reportedly between 60 and 69 (O'Neill et al., 2014), the use of popular cultural trends such as "selfies" would seem an overt attempt to broaden this demographic. In recent years there has been a wider push

within opera institutions and organisations themselves to lower the median age of their audience through initiatives such as reduced price tickets for under 30's, targeted advertising campaigns, and experimental new performances. As stated by La Scala spokesman, Carlo Maria Cella: "Every theatre has to cultivate a renewal of its audience. As someone wrote: new blood for the old ceremony" (quoted in Stranger, 2009).

This sentiment also aligns with a broader push within the BBC to target "replenishers", defined in official BBC strategy documents as those aged 35-54, who will replace the aging audience over time. While the average age of audiences has been steadily increasing across BBC services in recent years (BBC Trust, 2014), there is a particularly striking generational divide between consumption of public and commercial radio. In 2016 the BBC's radio services reached weekly audiences of 57% within the 15-44 age group, compared with 71% for the commercial sector. For listeners over 45 years of age this trend is almost reversed, with a weekly reach of 72% across the BBC's radio services and 57% for commercial radio (RAJAR, 2016b, p.1). Such statistics raise pertinent questions around how to broaden this audience demographic and ensure the future sustainability of the BBC's reach on radio, while at the same time preserving the essential character of more niche services such as BBC Radio 3.

The issue of sustainability was a particular concern highlighted in an interview with BBC Radio 3's Commissioning and Scheduling Manager, who stated: "I don't think we ever create output specifically for replenishers, but we make a lot of effort in terms of marketing and scheduling to try to draw in thirty to forty year olds". When

asked what form this effort takes, the interviewee responded that “it’s probably more in the area of station sound” going on to describe a transition during his tenure from a tone that was “a little old fashioned and stuffy” toward the inclusion of “younger voices and a younger style”. He was also keen to assert that this should not be interpreted as “dumbing down”, but rather as “welcoming a wide range of listeners” (Interview with author, 2015). Such comments encapsulate the perennial issue of distancing arts broadcasting, and indeed the BBC more broadly, from its elitist image. This is perhaps most succinctly articulated by the corporation’s director of radio and education, James Purnell, who asserts in a blog entitled *Reinventing the BBC*: “The BBC that turns a hundred will have come a long way from its beginnings. It won’t be the Auntie that dispensed culture from on high. It will be much more of a thoughtful friend. Prodding us to keep our resolutions, helping us ask and find answers” (2017). Within this context the BBC now balances precariously between self-consciously promoting an anti-elitist stance and attempting to refute accusations of “dumbing down”.

When speaking to a BBC executive producer who had coordinated the online provision for *Orlando* he also contended that, although age was a factor, the primary purpose was to engage new audiences with what has traditionally been a rather esoteric and subsequently niche art form:

If you know your opera and you know your stuff then you probably don’t want [to listen with online commentary], you know what it is. But if you don’t, somebody screaming at you in a foreign language is quite a difficult thing to climb on to. It’s not necessarily age related, I have no objection at all

if an eighty year old wanted to follow it on there. But I'm hoping that somebody [younger] might come and say, "you know what I'm not that familiar with how the opera works but this is how I can get more into what that is, and the BBC is offering us something in parallel with the Welsh National that is quite special". (Interview with author, 2015)

With its reach and universality, broadcasting has historically been regarded as playing an important role in efforts to broaden the demographic of opera and classical music. However, overt attempts to "popularise" these art forms on television have often been met with resistance. In 2010 ITV's reality TV format *Popstar to Operastar* was widely admonished in the press, with Telegraph journalist Rupert Christiansen accusing the series of being just "a very superficial commercial exercise" (2010). The 2015 BBC Proms were also criticised for including an Ibiza concert and grime symphony, with one commentator heralding it as the first step toward commercialisation and corporate sponsorship: "stand by for next year's Audi BBC Proms – or maybe a bigger betrayal, the Apple iTunes BBC Proms" (Lebrecht, 2015).

In many ways such criticism is symbolic of a wider rhetoric that both equates popular appeal with commercialism and frames commercial imperatives as counterintuitive to artistic expression. As the critic George Steiner once stated in relation to literature: "Dumped on the mass market, the products of classic literacy will be thinned and adulterated" (1971, p.82). Imbued in such statements is the sense that presenting these typically niche art forms in popular formats inherently alters the very characteristics that define them. In comparison, the provision of supplementary online content offers opportunities to cultivate a new audience for highbrow art forms in a way that, in the

words of Berry (2013), “enhances and extends” rather than “diminishes” the original work. But rather than merely preserving the arts, the educative function of such multiplatform strategies also widens the parameters of cultural participation, introducing audiences to areas of cultural life they may not have previously been exposed to. In this regard, as opposed to “dumbing down” public service content, the integration of online supplementary material demonstrates how the BBC’s founding mission to “open up to all those who had been denied them by a limited education, low social status and small income the great treasures of our culture” (Crisell, 1997, p. 35) is realised within the contemporary media landscape.

Conclusions

Over the last three decades much has been written about the supposed decline of public service *broadcasting* in the digital era. However, as Hendy states, “even if we accept the inherent multi-media character of contemporary society, [...] we’re confronted with the stubborn survival of radio and television well beyond the moment of their predicted demise” (2013, p.109). Still, with hours of internet usage in Britain more than doubling since 2005 (Ofcom, 2015, p.28), there are now increased pressures on public service broadcasters to meet the evolving needs of those they serve across a variety of different mediums and in a variety of different forms. Particularly with the rise of trends such as “second screen viewing” (see Lochrie and Coulton, 2011), this has led to a more holistic approach to the commissioning and production of content that considers the ways in which audiences of television and radio may also be interacting with online media at the point of watching/listening.

In examining these developments, the present paper argues that radio continues to occupy a significant role in increasing engagement in the arts due to, rather than despite of, advances in digital technology. The increased prevalence of audiences listening to radio online via digital platforms or while also engaged in online activities has contributed to reducing the limitations that have been present in the narrative surrounding the arts on BBC radio since its inception. While the visual arts had posed a particular challenge to radio broadcasters in the past, the “new materiality of radio”, as Hilmes (2013) terms it, has extended the range and depth of aesthetic analysis possible within the auditory medium. There are also signs that these digital strategies are becoming more expansive with the inclusion of live commentary, videos and other informative content to accompany live broadcasts of opera and classical music. The illustrative and educative opportunities borne of this multiplatform approach strengthens the public service arts proposition in a way that neither “dumbs down” the original broadcast or makes it inaccessible to new audiences.

The examples outlined within this paper can also be situated within a broader narrative concerning the evolution of public service genres more broadly in meeting the demands of the new media landscape. In an age of substantially greater competition and choice, broadcasters such as the BBC are increasingly looking to more innovative ways of delivering public service provision and engaging audiences. As the BBC state in their proposed plans for the next charter period, “we, like every other broadcaster, are facing a world in transition” (2015, p.6). With specialist factual genres often scrutinised by policymakers and regulators as evidence for how well the BBC is performing in terms of distinctiveness, the ability to demonstrate their continued relevance and impact is now more pertinent than ever.

Although just one facet of this evolving narrative, the case of arts on BBC radio provides a valuable insight into how these new digital strategies are realised in practice. Rather than threaten radio's prevalence and sustainability as a predominantly auditory medium, the articulation of multiplatform provision examined here demonstrates how online visual content can coexist and indeed thrive alongside a continued commitment to linear broadcasting.

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