

GEOFF MCQUEEN

g.mcqueen@salford.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD (UNITED KINGDOM)

UNPACKING THE BOX OF DELIGHTS: HOW BBC RADIO 4 EMBRACES THE SHORT-FORM FEATURE

ABSTRACT

The proliferation of podcasting and on-demand services like NPR One challenges linear broadcast radio. Not only does “on demand” radio allow consumers a choice of content style but also of content length and audio feature makers now have greater flexibility to create pieces of any length that they choose. The recent podcast “Serial”, produced by the makers of “This American Life”, highlights how producers are utilising this flexibility in their practice with great success. How does a major linear broadcast station like BBC Radio 4 react to this challenge and adapt to these changing consumer tastes and desires? How can a broadcaster of this nature embrace six and seven minute features in any meaningful sense? This paper examines a recent BBC commission that repurposes existing and specially commissioned short radio features and curates these into cohesive programmes that work within the BBC’s rigid schedule. “Short Cuts” (featuring the comedian Josie Long) has now established itself into the BBC Radio 4 schedule. This paper will examine this programme as a case study. This study will look to examine and draw conclusions as to how the BBC can harness the energy, enthusiasm and content of amateur and independent radio producers and make that work within a schedule of structured hour and half-hour programming.

KEYWORDS

Radio; features; documentary; curation; short form

INTRODUCTION

With the proliferation of creative audio podcasts, consumers sharing content through social networks and the internationalisation of radio tastes and fashions there are an increasing number of challenges for BBC Radio 4 as traditional, linear radio broadcaster. This paper will examine the how

BBC Radio 4 programme *Short Cuts* addresses, to some extent, all of these issues.

Globally, this is an exciting time for creative audio output. Three key factors have been suggested for this (Lindgren, 2014):

1. There is more listening happening
2. More people want to produce creative content
3. The body of academic work on the subject is growing.

Short Cuts is a half-hour show compiled from short radio features. An examination of this show highlights a number of complex factors which determines the way that this show is put together and scrutinises its relationship with both consumers and independent producers. This paper looks at how by commissioning *Short Cuts* BBC Radio 4 has created a space for short-form radio features within its linear schedule and what this means for the listening audience and also for the feature makers themselves.

RADIO FEATURES

There is no universally accepted precise definition of a “radio feature”. There continues to be an overlap in the definition of radio features and radio documentaries. Chignell (2009) describes features and documentaries as “both factual radio genres” and similar “in most respects”.

The definition of the radio feature has “oscillated between the two poles of drama and journalism” (Scannell, 1986). It has been defined in terms of dramatic production (Gielgud, 1947) or simply as another definition of documentary (Felton, 1949).

Laurence Gilliam pointed towards the uniqueness of the feature, saying: “It is pure radio, a new instrument for the creative writer and producer” (Gilliam, 1950).

One definition of feature that is useful here is that of the late feature maker Tony Barrell who suggested that “a good feature is a piece of radio that can stand alone, create its own world, be worth hearing more than once” (Aroney, 2005).

Barrell’s definition hints at where we are now with regards to the consumption of audio features, thanks to the recent, smartphone-driven appearance of the “golden age” of podcasts (Blattberg, 2014). Crafted and creative audio feature makers no longer suffer from “the ghastly impermanence of the medium” (Sieveking, 1934) as listeners are increasingly

being given the chance to “listen again” or to download podcasts to keep within their own digital archives forever.

Another way that features are being repeated is at live listening events. In The Dark are a group of radio and audio enthusiasts who began putting on listening events in London. At these events a menu of audio features (usually around an hour or so) would be played out to attendees in complete darkness.

Creative audio features have, albeit unexpectedly, proved to be resilient and appear to be flourishing in the current technological climate. Despite this resurgence in popularity however, the radio feature remains relatively under-explored in critical theory.

SHORT CUTS

Short Cuts is a thirty-minute radio feature series commissioned and broadcast by BBC Radio 4. It is produced for the BBC by the London based independent production company Falling Tree Productions, whose website claims they are “One of the world’s leading radio production companies crafting award winning radio features, documentaries, audio tours and podcasts”. Falling Tree Productions have been critically described as being “a hallmark of excellence when it comes to radio documentaries” (Sawyer, 2014).

Short Cuts was first broadcast in January 2012. The BBC website describes the show as “a selection of brief encounters, true stories and found sound”.

Radio producer Alan Hall is the owner and MD of Falling Tree:

Short Cuts was the third manifestation of an idea that I had years ago. It was called initially *Soundings* and then it was called *Living Sound*. We offered that with Tom Robinson, using short form, found sound, various things, different ways of approaching audio.

And then *Short Cuts* (which was originally called *Story Box*) with Nina Garthwaite, we offered that to Mo (Bakaya), but previously I’d offered it to his predecessor, but it didn’t get anywhere at all. It was only when Nina and El (McDowall) got involved that it began to sort of take on a kind of shape. (Hall, 2015)

Eleanor McDowall joined Falling Tree in 2008 and is now a senior producer there. She is the series producer for *Short Cuts*. “There was an

opportunity to pitch into the afternoon strand and I wanted to do something that would create a space for the kind of radio that I was excited by, on Radio 4” (McDowall, 2015).

The format of the show involves the selection of a theme every week. These themes are chosen in a way to allow different interpretations and stories to be told. Themes have included “misadventures”, “divided we stand”, “the comfort of strangers” and “rabbit holes”. This format echoes that used by the Third Coast Festival in their show *Re:Sound*, as broadcast on WBEZ Chicago and then podcast.

The show is a mixture of pre-existing and newly commissioned short features. These are selected and sequenced by Eleanor McDowall and introduced to the listener by a presenter. For the first two series of *Short Cuts* the presenter was Nina Garthwaite, the creator of the *In The Dark* listening group.

I think we originally conceptualised it more as something that would have *some* new material originated for it, but a lot of it would be about licensing and showcasing stuff from around the World so Nina seemed like a natural fit because of what *In The Dark* were doing. (McDowall, 2015)

The role of the presenter in the series is to introduce the stories and, through scripting, move the listener emotionally from feature to feature. McDowall selects music of varying genre and lengths to mix in these interstitial segments to facilitate this.

For the vast majority of listeners this series would be the first time that they would have heard of Nina Garthwaite. After the second series finished Nina Garthwaite was replaced as presenter by the comedian Josie Long.

Josie Long is a successful comedian who had previously had her own four part comedy series *All Of The Planet's Wonder* on Radio 4, making her a known voice and quantity for the network. Josie was slotted into the presenter role on the programme and is now, as Alan Hall describes her, the “documentary DJ” on the programme.

The installation of a presenter with a degree of celebrity is something which is prevalent within all UK radio and certainly within the BBC. It is now very rare for presenters to emerge from “new talent” (as Garthwaite could be described) and the model now appears to be to recruit presenters from the world of “celebrity”.

Comparison of the two presenters Twitter profiles (Figure 1) shows the difference that a degree of celebrity and social media engagement can make to the size of an audience.

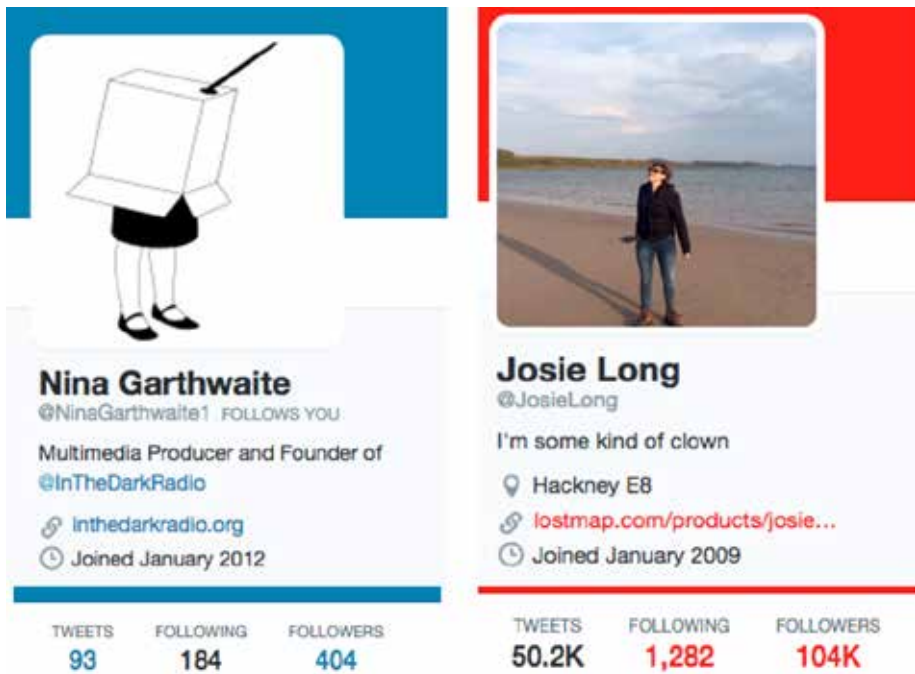


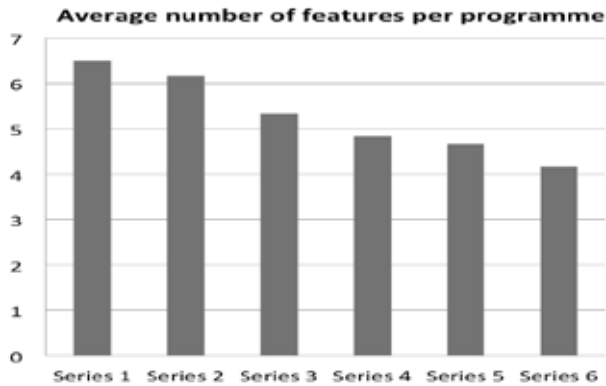
Figure 1: Twitter profile comparison (April 2015)

Garthwaite does not tweet often and has a small number of followers. Contrast this with the large volume of tweets from Long and the fact that she has more than a hundred thousand followers and these statistics have a commodifiable value to the broadcaster.

The BBC already has a track record of recruiting presenters who have large numbers of followers on social media: notably in its use of YouTube “stars” on Radio 1 (Smith, 2015). This offers the broadcaster an ability to easily, and without cost, alert a target demographic to its media output and aids the sharing of viral content.

ANALYSIS

Looking at the programme content there are some identifiable trends occurring. The average number of features (Graph 1) being placed within the container of the *Short Cuts* programme is decreasing series on series.



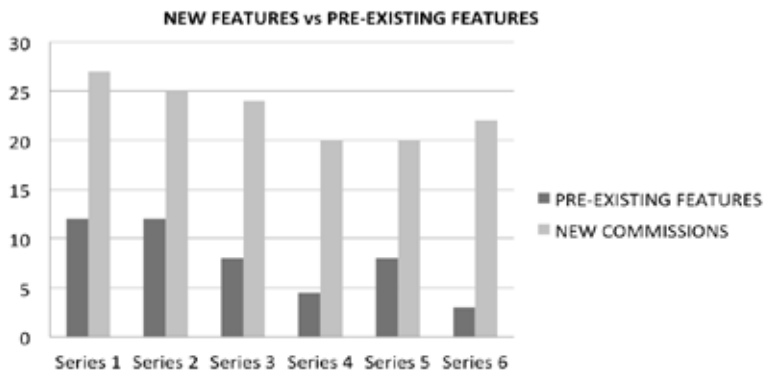
Graph 1: Average number of features per programme

Hall suggests that this is partly due to the difficulty of producing suitable content:

...even people that we work with a lot and are really good don't necessarily quite get what's required to do a *Short Cut*. So, actually the pool of people that Ellie can rely on has got smaller and smaller.

Because it can't sound like it would sit on *Woman's Hour* or *Saturday Live* ... it can't sound like it's just sort of an offcut from a longer doc.... It does have to have a narrative tension, it can't just be a soundscape.

The data, however, suggests that there may also be a purposeful moving away from using pre-existing features (Graph 2).



* Series 3 consisted of four programmes (rather than six) episodes so these figures have been adjusted.

Graph 2: New features vs pre-existing features

There have always been more new commissions than licensed pieces in *Short Cuts* but this gap has widened considerably over the first six series.

McDowall's appetite for different storytelling styles appears to be at the heart of this move towards a commissioning model and she says that *Short Cuts*:

...was conceived much more as a showcase with a small opportunity for commissioning, and I think more and more it's just become its own space. I think ideally I want it to be wholly commissioned, I want it to encourage that kind of material to be made in the UK and in Europe and showcasing different production styles. I feel people have ready access to American radio now and I think it's exciting to support different styles. There are people I've worked a few times with recently like Martin Johnson or Rikke Houd who are coming from Sweden and Denmark respectively and I think it's quite exciting to bring that European style to the BBC, cause you know everyone can access *This American Life* and *Serial* now, no one needs us to highlight that! (McDowall, 2015)

Mohit Bakaya, the BBC Commissioning Editor that commissioned *Short Cuts* identifies the link between new producers and new audiences:

I'm hoping it'll engage a younger audience. I think the key thing is celebrating short form documentary and short form storytelling. It's also a way of bringing new production talent on to air cause a lot of the pieces that are featured are from more junior producers who are coming to it with stuff. It's absolutely an attempt to try and bring an audience in to documentary making with the kind of stuff we do but through a different doorway. (Bakaya, 2015)

As Lindgren (2014) states there is an increase in the number of people making creative content. Bakaya's statement here appears to indicate that the BBC recognises this and views *Short Cuts* as an entry-point and mechanic to allow new production voices to get on air via the production of short-form pieces.

This focus on short-form storytelling is present elsewhere in the BBC Radio 4 schedule, notably in the series *Jarvis Cocker's Wireless Nights*, which was commissioned by the BBC's Tony Phillips:

I just sensed that the way that the consumption of radio was going, largely via the internet, social media outlets and

from what I was picking up in the United States, that there was a place for the crafted short-form feature. Just as when I joined the BBC as a trainee in the early 90s there was definitely space for really beautifully crafted short-form features. So I knew that there was an art and there was a quest there, that I just wasn't hearing but it chimed with the times that we were living in. There is a space for long-form as much as there's a space for short-form. So, one of the things that I was doing was looking for short versions of long-form documentaries to put those out into social media spaces to act as almost teasers or trailers for the longer form documentary. We have to work hard now, we have to work harder than ever to entice listeners back to listening to radio... to listening to long-form radio... to listening to *any* sort of radio. And if you can create spaces where there are short features: that's often something that is shareable, something that can easily be passed along and, by word of mouth, go viral there's great value in pursuing this. (Phillips, 2015)

This tactical move on the part of BBC Radio 4 to create space within the broadcast schedule for shows like *Short Cuts* and *Wireless Nights* highlights an increasing focus on a commissioning strategy that embraces both a digital and a linear broadcast element. Many of the individual features from *Short Cuts* are now available as shareable clips in the form of YouTube animations or short audio clips streaming on the BBC website.

Short Cuts is also made available to download as a podcast. At the time of writing¹ the podcast was, according to the iTunes store, the second-most downloaded podcast in the UK.

When asked about the podcast Mohit Bakaya said: "We are very keen to use programmes like *Short Cuts* to really kind of pioneer a new audience digitally. The podcast is terribly important".

CONCLUSION

This article has only taken a look at one particular series currently being produced for BBC Radio 4. As such, it is difficult to draw out wide-ranging conclusions. However, it is clear that both of the commissioners spoken to are now commissioning for more than the linear radio schedule and see short-form radio features as something that can lend itself to sharing through the social networks of listeners. This commissioning focus now

¹ 23rd April 2015

appears to be an attempt to provide content in a form that works for audiences who are increasingly likely to find Radio 4 content via a tweet or Facebook post, as well as continuing to provide cohesive and more traditional programme forms for linear broadcast.

In this early examination of this one series, there are many areas that would appear to be of interest for potential future research. These include the nature of the radio feature itself; the commissioning strategy of BBC Radio 4 for linear and digital delivery; the links between creative audio podcast production and broadcasters; the issues surrounding the use of celebrity presenters on radio; the exploration of short-documentary form as a developmental opportunity for new producers and the changing influence of Europe, Australia and North America on UK radio output to name just a few.

REFERENCES

- Aroney, E. (2005). Radio documentaries and features: invisible achievements. In S. Healy, B. Berryman & D. Goodman (Eds.), *Radio in the world: papers from the 2005 Melbourne Radio Conference* (pp. 397-405). Melbourne: RMIT Publishing.
- Bakaya, M. (2015). Interview with the author [21st April 2015].
- Blattberg, E. (2014). *The podcast enters a new golden age. Digiday*. Retrieved from <http://digiday.com/publishers/nielsenenes-rise-podcast/>.
- Chignell, H. (2009). *Key concepts in radio studies*. London: SAGE.
- Falling Tree Productions*. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.fallingtree.co.uk/>
- Felton, F. (1949). *The Radio-Play: Its Technique and Possibilities*. London: Sylvan Press.
- Gielgud, V. (1947). *Years of the locust*. London: Nicholson & Watson.
- Gilliam, L. (1950). *BBC Features*. London: Evans.
- Hall, A. (2015). Interview with the author [21st April 2015].
- Lindgren, M. (2014). *RN's Creative Audio Unit – what's that all about?. The Conversation*. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/rns-creative-audio-unit-whats-that-all-about-26454>.
- McDowall, E. (2015). Interview with the author [17th April 2015].

- Phillips, T. (2015). Interview with the author [21st April 2015].
- Sawyer, M. (2014). *The Missing Hancocks; Short Cuts: After Dark – radio review*. *the Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/nov/01/radio-review-miranda-sawyer-hancocks-half-hour-short-cuts>.
- Scannell, P. (1986). 'The Stuff of Radio': Developments in Radio Features and Documentaries before the War. In J. Corner, *Documentary and the Mass Media* (1st Ed.). London: Arnold.
- Sieveking, L. (1934). *The Stuff of Radio*. London: Cassell.
- Smith, P. (2015). *BBC Radio 1 Hires Leading UK YouTube Stars In A Battle To Stay Young And Relevant*. *BuzzFeed*. Retrieved from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/patricksmith/bbc-radio-1-hires-leading-uk-youtube-stars-in-a-battle-to-st#.mgKrl3mXr>.