

Radio Studies

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Radio studies emerged as a sub-field of media studies in the 1990s. Encouraged by the comparative neglect of radio in the larger subject, it was initiated by a decisive turn away from the study of visual media (mainly television and film) towards the non-visual and older medium of radio. Because of these origins, radio studies, a diffuse and hybrid amalgam, is united simply by the attention paid to radio at the expense of television and film, rather than any coherent underpinning theory. Most published work which shares this focus can be classified as part of radio studies, and by this sleight of hand works of cultural history or on the wider auditory culture can be seen as part of the new subject, irrespective of the intentions of the author.

The search for the first books on radio would take us straight back to the beginning of the last century and the largely technical literature on the new sound medium. There are, however, examples of theorising about the distinctive properties and potential of radio written before the Second World War. Rudolf Arnheim (1936) discussed the phenomenology of radio listening in an influential early work which pre-dates but has contributed to radio studies. In the US, Hadley Cantril at the Office of Radio Research at Princeton University studied the outbreak of panic following the broadcast of *War of the Worlds* in 1938 (Cantril et al. 1940) and at the same time Paul Lazarsfeld's *Radio and the Printed Page* was a ground-breaking study of 'serious' speech radio and its audience. In Britain the memoirs of former BBC staff provide important reflections on radio, most notably, Lance Sieveking (1934).

The emergence of media studies within the broader field of cultural studies occurred in Britain in the 1970s. The intellectual ground-work was carried out under Stuart Hall at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. However, although radio, the press and television were all studied in the centre, it was television which received the most attention because of its pre-eminent role in the British media. This understandable focus effectively marginalized radio within media studies for at least a decade.

Crisell's attempt (1986) to identify the characteristics of radio and the significance of these for its users is arguably the first published work of radio studies. The fact that this was a British contribution is not without significance as the translation of the auditory turn in media studies into a network of academics and other writers was largely a British development. Crisell's brief but controversial statement about the nature of radio (including, famously, his suggestion that radio is a 'blind medium') perhaps unintentionally helped to found both an academic sub-discipline and a network of radio scholars more than a decade later. The founding of the *Journal of Radio Studies* in the US in 1992 was a decisive development in the US as was the launch of *The Radio Journal* in the UK in 2003. Hilmes, sees the growing influence of cultural studies in academe as important. The range of cultural artefacts and previously disparaged media forms which could be studied was greatly increased

and even radio ‘a vital, though ancillary, component of our informational and entertainment universe’ was included (Hilmes, 2002: 1). She also notes the way the demographic fragmentation of radio (especially in the US) makes it possible to observe the various “subaltern counter-publics” as minority and community groups take over; another reason for renewed interest in radio.

Turning to specific concepts and theoretical argument within the subject it would be truer to say that there are ‘clusters’ of writing about radio-related themes rather than distinct radio specialisms. The nature and effects of talk on radio is one of these clusters as is the phenomenon of community radio. A small but important collection of writings exist on music radio (which include the role of the radio DJ) and the technological innovations of web radio, digital radio and podcasting are all areas of interest. The intensely commercial nature of much of the radio industry and the impact of this on content and the public sphere has been examined and often contrasted with public service broadcasting. Distinct genres within radio including the radio feature, radio news and radio drama have all been researched and discussed. At the margins of the subject is work on the broader field of audio, which includes the use of mobile phones and personalised media (such as the iPod). Finally, radio history has been and continues to be a particularly rich seam of research potential.

A more detailed look at some of these areas of research helps to illustrate the current direction of this subject. Montgomery’s early analysis of ‘DJ talk’ (1986) articulated the essentially artificial and performed nature of ‘broadcast talk’ (a term subsequently coined by Scannell, 1991). Montgomery’s characterization of DJ talk as ‘a discourse obsessively concerned with its own conditions of production and consumption’ (1986: 423) has proved influential. Brand and Scannell’s masterly analysis of the performance of the British DJ, Tony Blackburn (1991) incorporated ideas not only of talk but also of the fluid ‘persona’ of the DJ and the paranoid ‘discursive world’ over which they rule. More recently, Tolson has developed and codified the analysis of what he calls ‘media talk’ and has broadened the field with analysis of talk on radio sport and news. The work of Atkinson and Moores on ‘therapy radio’ (2003) has further developed our understanding of speech performance with in an important account of the performance of ‘intimacy’ on air.

Changes in the technology used to produce and transmit radio and related forms of audio have been an ongoing area of radio studies research. The highly influential historical account of radio listening in America by Douglas (1999) links the rise of an autonomous youth culture and the introduction in the early 1950s of the portable transistor radio. Other historical accounts have looked at the invention of sound recording on production (see Street, 2006) and the democratic possibilities recording created for getting the voice of the citizen onto air. There can be no doubt that in the day-to-day teaching and networking of radio scholars the impact of the internet and personalised, digital technologies on radio has been a major concern and interest. Internet radio, digital radio and the phenomenon of the podcast have all be seen as either threatening conventional radio or offering it new opportunities. For radio studies this has been a useful area because it has forced some re-evaluation of the precise nature of radio and how it differs from what might be called ‘audio’. The

use of the iPod to listen to downloaded speech podcasts goes to the heart of this dilemma. Bull's writing on the iPod describes a 'personalised soundworld' to which the cocooned, urban listener retreats (2005). The iPod makes possible 'intimate, manageable and aestheticised spaces' which are often a relief from an alien environment. Bull's intervention is important because it contributes to an understanding of the nature of radio listening without itself being concerned with radio; it forces the radio scholar to think about the boundaries between broadcast radio and the wider study of sound culture.

Radio is characterised by a particularly high level of organisational diversity. In the US, commercial radio, often part of huge media conglomerates, is dominant. In the UK, public service radio in the form of the BBC is the main provider, and globally small community radio stations are extremely important. The study of the impact of relentless commercial pressures on American radio has been an important part of the subject. Hilliard and Keith's (2005) almost apocalyptic account of the virtual destruction of 'localism' in American radio by the Republican leaning media giants is an important example. A part of this has been the growth of radio formats which have served to commodify and standardise radio's output. Berland's influential analysis of this process is strongly reminiscent of the Frankfurt School (especially Adorno) with references to radio's narcotizing function (1993). The study of community radio, especially as a global phenomenon, has been a major undertaking within radio studies and given it a genuinely global perspective. Much of this work can be seen as part of a less theoretical and more policy-oriented intervention with particular attention given to issues of regulation and the use of radio for development.

In the US, there has been what Hilmes has called 'a blossoming of radio studies' since 1990 (2002:1) and almost all of that has been in the important field of radio history. American radio history has been adorned by two particularly important texts; both Hilmes (1997) and Douglas (1999) are feminist, cultural histories which locate the medium in the wider national and social/ cultural context. Douglas's work, arguably the more idiosyncratic, gives particular prominence to the culture of radio listening while Hilmes contribution is nicely captured in the words of the radio historian, Jason Loviglio: 'much of the best research in radio studies today can be described as Hilmesian' (Loviglio, 2005: xi). Hilmesian research is rooted in the archive, and as a result is richly detailed, while at the same time reflecting on wider cultural trends. This approach is also a feature of much British radio history including Lacey's work on pre-war German radio (1996) and Hendy's monumental history of BBC Radio Four (2007).

It seems likely that radio studies will continue to flourish with further research on personalised media as these become yet more ubiquitous features of everyday life. Radio history will receive further impetus from the continuing availability of online audio archives and, at least in the UK, the growth of community radio will contribute to that sub-field. In a sense the first decade or so of the new subject needed to argue the case for the importance of radio. That task behind it, radio scholars will be more ready to embrace the wider categories of audio, sound and culture in research which is less defensive and more inter-disciplinary.

SEE ALSO: Media Studies; Television Studies.

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Mini Bio:

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