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‘Brightening their leisure hours’? The experiment of BBC *Women’s Hour*, 1923-1925

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Abstract:

On 2 May 1923, the newly established BBC, launched *Women’s Hour*, a daily bespoke programme aimed at its female audience produced by Ella Fitzgerald, a former Fleet Street journalist. In December 1923 a Women’s Advisory Committee (WAC) was established to represent women’s interests at the BBC with eminent members who included the Chairman of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes, Lady Denman; the actress Dorothea Baird and the physician Elizabeth Sloan Chesser. The WAC, working with Fitzgerald and other BBC officials, introduced into *Women’s Hour* an innovative range of programme ideas. It also prompted a debate about the premise of the programme, whether it should be about domesticity or provide escapism from the ‘common task’ of housework. In addition the WAC challenged the *Women’s Hour* name. Through a consideration of the programme and the WAC, both of which were short-lived, this article explores how the BBC sought to address its female audience in the early 1920s.

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‘Brightening their leisure hours’? The experiment of BBC *Women’s Hour*, 1923-1925

In May 1923, the BBC was six months old. It had been established in late 1922 as the British Broadcasting Company, under the leadership of John Reith, with a remit to encourage the sale of wirelesses and to co-ordinate the new medium of radio in the UK.¹ It was a vibrant young company, the small staff of around 50 now based in rented offices at Savoy Hill in central London, just off the Strand. Broadcasting as an industry was brand new and there was a palpable pioneering spirit amongst the assortment of men and women who were employed in administrative, technological and creative roles. One excitement was the opening of the Company’s first bespoke studio where, on 2 May 1923, Reith (then General Manager) welcomed HRH Princess Alice, the Duchess of Athlone to officially open the new *Women’s Hour* programme.² Her inaugural fifteen minute talk on ‘The Adoption of Babies’ was coupled with another by the famous couturier Lady Duff Gordon who spoke on ‘Fashions’.³

Women’s Hour’s existence was short-lived, as a named entity it survived for less than a year, yet it introduced a format for women’s programming that would continue throughout the interwar years and into the Second World War, culminating in the establishment of the modern day *Woman’s Hour* in 1946.⁴ This article centres on the first three years of ‘talks aimed at women’ on the BBC. As Michelle Hilmes and Kate Lacey have shown in their studies of early wireless in the USA and Germany respectively, women were quickly identified as a key daytime audience who merited dedicated programmes; programmes that were produced by women.⁵ At the BBC, for the first seven months *Women’s Hour* was the responsibility of Ella Fitzgerald, an Assistant (then the word for producer) in the fledgling Programmes department. From January 1924, it was made in collaboration with a Women’s Advisory Committee (WAC), six distinguished individuals whom, it was believed, could guide the BBC on how best to represent the interests of the nation’s women.⁶ The WAC was

itself short-lived, it was disbanded in September 1925, however the debates it engendered provide a backdrop from which to view wider discussions about the position of women, particularly middle-class women, that were prevalent at this time.

Although the head office of the young BBC was in London, at first all programmes were local affairs, broadcast from a steadily growing raft of provincial stations (the London station, for example, was 2LO).⁷ It was not until 1924 that simultaneous broadcasting allowed output to be shared.⁸ Already by the start of 1923 pre-prepared ‘talks’ were an established part of the broadcast schedules, for instance Florence Roberts was the first woman to deliver a talk on the London Station on 3 March 1923, her topic ‘The Trends of Fashion’. With recording technology in its infancy, talks were always delivered ‘live’, with little guidance at first on how a script should be written or chance of rehearsal. It was something of a challenge in the early months to find speakers who could be persuaded to take part because of the novelty of wireless and the fewness of listeners.⁹ Ralph Wade, who was recruited to the BBC as an Assistant a few days before Fitzgerald, remembered his first job was ‘to sit down with the 1923 *Who's Who* in front of me and write to anyone who sounded as if they had done something colourful in their lives’.¹⁰

The notion of public service broadcasting was formulated during the first months of the BBC. In *Broadcast over Britain*, published in 1924, Reith laid out his vision of radio as a public utility, adamant that broadcasters should adopt a ‘high conception of the possibilities of the service’.¹¹ This meant that rather than offering the mediocre, wireless should extend the horizons of listeners; it should educate and enlighten as well as entertain.¹² The public nature of radio entering the private sphere of the home was a further challenge, how should the BBC address its audience, especially as wireless was primarily consumed within a domestic and

familial context, with women a core listenership?¹³ The enfranchisement of women in 1918 (albeit only those over the age of 30) and the extended professional and civic responsibilities introduced by the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act had given a new agency to women within public life. As Michael Bailey has argued, radio attempted to reconcile these two spheres, addressing women both as housewives and mothers but also recognising their enhanced function as citizens.¹⁴ Maggie Andrews has explored how wireless itself was ‘feminised’, as it entered the home.¹⁵ She leaves no doubt as to radio’s transformative role in women’s lives at this time, bringing not only enlightenment and entertainment but also company into often isolated existences. This article takes our understanding further. Through a focus on the early *Women’s Hour*, the mechanics of a pioneering BBC programme can be unpicked revealing not only how it sought to address its female audience but also the ways in which this was influenced by the perceptions and interests of its producer, Ella Fitzgerald, coupled with the viewpoints of the individuals who made up the WAC.

Why Women’s Hour?

In December 1922, the first four members of staff had been recruited to the BBC. Alongside Reith and a Company Secretary were two men with responsibility for programming, Arthur Burrows, as Director of Programme and his Assistant Director, Cecil Lewis.¹⁶ And it was Lewis who first outlined the idea of *Women’s Hour* at a meeting of BBC Station Directors (the managers of the provincial stations) on 18 April 1923.¹⁷ It was to be one of a trilogy of programmes, *Children’s Hour*, *Women’s Hour* and *Men’s Hour*, to be broadcast from 1 May to tie-in with the opening of the new Savoy Hill studios and it was expected that all provincial radio stations would produce their own versions.¹⁸ These were to be recurrent programmes, broadcast at the same time each day apart from Sundays and, while Head Office

would provide manuscripts, these could be substituted for high quality local talks. *Children's Hour* had already been established (it was first broadcast in December 1922); the distinct programmes for women and men, it was explained, would carry items of particular relevance to these groups.¹⁹ Ella Fitzgerald had almost certainly been appointed to produce the London edition of *Women's Hour* while Ralph Wade, it appears, was to work with Burrows and Lewis on the general London talks output and the bespoke programme aimed at men.

The development of a dedicated programme for women is not unexpected. Women's pages had been introduced into newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror* in the early 1900s, the *Manchester Guardian* following suit in 1922.²⁰ There was also an ever burgeoning market for women's magazines; *Good Housekeeping*, for example, was founded in 1922.²¹ A specialist programme for men is more surprising, especially as there was already a superfluity of 'masculine' items within the BBC's general evening talks. An explanation for a 'men's' programme is most likely due to the highly experimental nature of the early BBC, everything was novel with few structures or systems yet in place. The BBC would have been aware that its daytime audience was largely female. This was an era when there was a cultural expectation that married women did not work; the early 1920s, for instance, saw the consolidation of marriage bars in professions such as teaching and the Civil Service.²² *Women's Hour* was to be placed at 5.00pm. This was considered to be daytime because men would not yet have arrived home from work and, apart from an hour's concert each morning, nothing else was broadcast during the day until *Children's Hour* at 5.30pm. *Men's Hour*, on the other hand, was to be at 10.00pm, presumably reflecting a belief that they were the prime audience at this time, and a middle-class audience, as suggested by the topics that were broadcast. Those deemed appropriate for the London station included 'How a

Business Man can Keep Fit', 'Carburettor Troubles,' 'Next Week's Sporting Fixtures' and 'Light Weight Camping'.

The existence of *Men's Hour* was brief. By September 1923, it had dwindled to three times a week in Newcastle and twice a week in Birmingham. London continued to broadcast a specific *Men's Talk* (as it was called on 2LO) on Thursday evenings, including frequent motoring talks by Captain Twelvetrees 'a well-known writer on motor and general engineering matters', but after 9 October 1923, *Men's Talk* disappeared from the schedules.²³ The disappearance of the named programme did not mean the end of broadcasts of particular interest to men, nor did it herald an end to Captain Twelvetrees, his motoring talks continued until the end of the year. The specifically masculine nature of the late evening talks also endured until early 1924 when 'The Humours of Football', 'How to Become an Electrical Engineer' and 'Models and Model Railways' gave way to more gender-neutral subjects and an occasional broadcast by a woman.²⁴ There is no documentation as to why *Men's Hour* was discontinued. Most probably the designation of a specific time slot and programme for men came to be seen as unnecessary in an evolving schedule where talks of a masculine nature could be absorbed into the general mix. Again, it may have been felt that a programme aimed specifically at men was potentially alienating to a large part of the evening audience. Certainly by the Station Director's meeting in December 1923, *Men's Hour* had ceased to be discussed. *Women's Hour*, on the other hand, was to be given an elevated status, as will become apparent.

The role of Ella Fitzgerald

Mrs Ella Fitzgerald took up her position as an Assistant in the Programmes department on 7 April 1923. Very little is known about her life prior to her arrival at the BBC except that she was born and brought up in Dutch Guinea where her father owned a mine (she was still living in South America aged nineteen) and that she had worked in Fleet Street, at some point as a film critic on the *Daily Sketch*.²⁵ She was a married woman (possibly already divorced) in her mid-thirties when she came to Savoy Hill and was probably taken on because of her good contacts and her background in journalism which would have been seen as advantageous for the proposed *Women's Hour*.²⁶ How involved Burrows and Lewis were in the production of the programme is unknown; Fitzgerald would certainly have discussed her ideas with them but to what extent they vetoed them is unclear. However, their responsibility for the BBC's expanding Programmes Department would have left them with limited time to have been intricately involved.

Looking back to her early days at the BBC (she would retire in 1947, as an Overseas Press Officer), Fitzgerald recalled the haphazard nature of the job.²⁷ *Women's Hour* was broadcast every day except Sunday which meant there was a requirement for twelve talks each week. One way to lessen the burden of finding speakers was to install regular contributors and very quickly Mrs Peel's 'Kitchen Conversations' and 'A Nursery Chat' by the House Physician of a London Hospital were instituted. Mrs C.S. Peel would have been well-known to listeners; she had been Editor of the *Daily Mail's* Women's Page during the First World War and was also a writer of cookery and household books. Whether the 'house physician' was a man or woman is not known, but these two items immediately indicate a strong domestic theme to the talks. The 'nursery chat' also suggests an awareness of the trend towards social

maternalism, that mothers were responsible for the welfare of their children.²⁸ Fitzgerald recalled how, in order to make her allowance stretch, she ‘exploited former Fleet Street colleagues shamelessly’ marvelling how several had come ‘once or twice, without fees, just for the novel experience’.²⁹ It is very likely that Mrs Peel was one of Fitzgerald’s contacts; she certainly utilised the services of Edith Shackleton, a ‘literary critic and feature writer,’ her sister Norah Heald of the *Daily Mail* and Norah Hogg the woman’s page editor of the *Evening Standard*. Fitzgerald was brazen that when *Women’s Hour* had started, it was effectively a ‘composite model of the various women’s pages’.³⁰

Other weekly or fortnightly talks introduced in the first few weeks by Fitzgerald encompassed fashion (which continued to be given by Lucille Duff Gordon), poultry keeping, beauty culture, tennis, dancing and bridge. Fitzgerald herself gave two weekly talks; ‘Copy Cat: In and Out of the Shops’, was an early consumer item for which she used her lunch hour to gather material and ‘Ariel’s Society Gossip’, was probably a round-up of society news.³¹ She also enticed a number of notable women to Savoy Hill in the opening weeks, Lady Emmott (a former suffragist who sat on many local government committees) who spoke on ‘How Local Government affects the Home’ and Alderman Miss Smee (who sat on Acton Council, chairing its Public Health committee) on ‘Women and Public Health’.³² These early talks reflect an understanding of an audience who were interested in their appearance, had time for leisure and were also grappling with the notion of citizenship. They also indicate a listenership that was patently viewed as middle-class. Marion Cran, who would become the BBC’s first celebrity gardener, gave her first ‘Gardening Chat’ in August 1923 while talks on topics such as ‘Electricity in the Home’ and ‘Hints for Holidays’ were unlikely to have been of relevance to most working-class women at this time.³³ Similarly, the recurring ‘New Careers for Girls’ advocated occupations such as Museum Curator, Solicitor, X-Ray

Operator, Welfare Worker and Journalism (amongst many others) which would have been available only to well-educated young women.³⁴ One striking feature of the vast majority of talks is that they were given by women, either journalists who could write a lively script or women who were associated with a particular topic or who had expertise in it. In this way *Women's Hour* made broadcasting for women by women both expected and acceptable.

There is no way of knowing, however, who the actual audience for *Women's Hour* was as BBC Listener Research was not introduced until 1936.³⁵ In 1923, those able to tune into the London programme would largely have been the wives of amateur wireless enthusiasts, numbering in the low-to-mid thousands. Most receiving sets were home-assembled from parts and kits, this 'toy' then became the hobby of the husband or son.³⁶ Yet *Radio Times*, launched in November 1923, shows that within a year most early commentators were agreeing that radio was a positive force for women. 'It is a monotony breaker and a loneliness dispeller... the finest household invention of the age', was the observation made by an aged grandmother in April 1924.³⁷ The columnist Robert Magill would have concurred describing his belief that the housewife's life had been transformed by wireless:

If you could see her alone on some mornings, you would find her peeling potatoes for lunch, with the headphones on, listening to a speech from the Prince of Wales, and weeping so many tears because of the solemnity of the occasion that she doesn't have to put any salt in the saucepan.³⁸

That the woman listener was becoming increasingly working class was highlighted in *Radio Times* in November 1924 when Harold Begbie wrote about the importance of radio in 'humble homes'. Here he expressed his view that there was 'no part of the world where you

may see more aerals than the East End of London' adding that 'though they may be rigged up by ingenious boys, it is the women who do most of the listening'.³⁹ A wireless set would become an essential item in most working-class homes, offering easy access to music and entertainment as well as the possibility of self-improvement.⁴⁰ At the close of 1923, the number of BBC licences purchased was just over half a million, a year later this had risen to more than a million. With an estimated five listeners per wireless, the BBC was soon establishing itself as a vital component of national life.

However, unlike a newspaper or a magazine where the readership was self-selecting the BBC, in the beginning at least, operated only one network.⁴¹ How to create a single programme that would appeal to women of all social classes; urban, suburban and rural; young and old; married and single; who represented a plethora of other cultural, social and political distinctions was always going to be an impossible task. This was acknowledged by the novelist Mrs Belloc Lowndes in her September 1924 *Radio Times* article, 'If I Planned the Women's Hour' as she reminded readers that 'thousands of women belonging to difference social castes, of widely differing monetary conditions and of ages ranging from, say, eighteen to eighty, are listening'.⁴² In her spirited response to Belloc Lowndes in October 1924, Fitzgerald underlined this crucial point reiterating that, unlike the women's page of a newspaper 'no such catholicity of choice is open to women listeners, since there is a common programme for all.'⁴³ 'In order that all sections of the public may be provided for', Fitzgerald stressed, "'variety" must be the watchword of the organiser of the talks and "general interest" the key-note of their composition.'

Fitzgerald had contributed an illuminating article to *Radio Times* a year earlier in which she hinted at the imagined audience for *Women's Hour*.⁴⁴ In 'Wireless and Women: The New

Angel in the House', she conjured-up a humorous description of herself as the harassed wife and mother at home, her husband out at the office, who, having settled the children to their tea, tuned in to the radio at 4.55pm. As a talk on careers for women was announced, chaos broke out as the son overloaded his teacup with sugar and the daughter swallowed a plum stone which resulted in only intermittent snatches of the programme being caught.

Fitzgerald's visualisation, though evidently tongue-in-cheek, was clearly of a middle-class family, a reality reflected in the nature of the talks that she produced. However, her position in November 1923, as an isolated and largely autonomous producer of 2LO's *Women's Hour*, was about to change.

The Women's Advisory Committee

At the Station Directors' Meeting of 11 December 1923 a radical adjustment was announced to the way *Women's Hour* was to be run; a national Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) was to be established to oversee the programme.⁴⁵ Fitzgerald was required to work closely with the WAC, which was the second of the BBC's National Advisory Committees.⁴⁶ Its remit was to represent women's interests throughout the BBC but with particular reference to *Women's Hour*. Asa Briggs, in the first volume of his history of the BBC, is dismissive of the Committee, doubting the necessity of bringing together a group of eminent women to make suggestions about 'simple summer drink and salad recipes'.⁴⁷ In reality, the WAC was far more dynamic; the fact that women's programming was deemed worthy of its own committee confirming its significance. Six individuals would ultimately accept a position on the WAC, each representing an area of women's lives the BBC deemed it important to reflect. Lady Gertrude Denman, the Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, was to represent 'Village Clubs'; the actress Mrs H.B. Irving (Dorothea Baird), 'The Stage', the

physician Dr Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, 'Hygiene, Mothercraft and Psychology'; Mrs Violet Cambridge, Honorary Secretary of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association, 'Women's Sport'; Mrs Hardman Earle who had worked for the Ministry of Food and Public Kitchens during WWI, 'Women's Vocations and Careers, Housing and Home Matters' and Miss Evelyn Gates, Editor-in Chief *The Women's Yearbook*, was to represent 'Professional Women's Interests'. A seventh member, the Labour politician Margaret Bondfield, was due to represent 'Women's Interests, Artisan and Labour generally' however she found she was unable to attend meetings and proffered her resignation in February 1924. Despite the absence of Bondfield, this was an impressive group of women to have assembled with a broad range of expertise that looked beyond the domestic sphere.

While the process by which these women were selected is lost, the minutes of the WAC survive and show lively debate.⁴⁸ As well as Fitzgerald, other BBC senior officials attended the meetings including Burrows, Lewis and Reith's deputy, Admiral Charles Carpendale. The WAC met for the first time in January 1924 and four more times that year until the final meeting in December 1924.⁴⁹ Many innovative ideas were suggested and piloted, reflecting the pioneering nature of broadcasting at this time. The WAC also touched on many of the central issues that would preoccupy the producers of women's programming throughout the 1920s and 30s: the time of day women could best listen; the quality of a woman's voice; whether subjects should be domestic in nature or take the housewife out of the home; how humour could be injected; the different value given to daytime and evening talks (evening talks were always held in higher esteem) and whether women should be identified as a separate group. Unsurprisingly, the topics suggested by the WAC reflected a middle-class lifestyle which was the lived experience of the six women. Perhaps if Bondfield had been able to participate, a different perspective might have been given. But the ethos of the BBC

was one of ‘uplift’, about bettering the listening public which, by implication, meant middle class.⁵⁰ The principle established by Fitzgerald that talks should predominantly be given by women was vigorously maintained.

At the meeting of 25 January 1924 it was decided that the two of the most pressing issues, the subjects broadcast on *Women’s Hour* and its timing, should be put to a listener vote, the first example of listener participation of this kind on the BBC.⁵¹ Fitzgerald suggested that Hardman Earle and Gates should appear on the programme the following Saturday to put these concerns before the audience and that the ‘future policy should be based on the plebiscite result’.⁵² In an animated *Radio Times* article in October 1924, Fitzgerald looked back to the occasion and evoked how Mrs Hardman Earle ‘had stated the case for practical talks on topics relating to the welfare of the home’, while Miss Evelyn Gates ‘had put forward the argument that women looked to the wireless as a potential means of brightening their leisure hours’.⁵³ It had galvanised the listener, Fitzgerald claimed, with 75 per cent of responses imploring the programme ‘to abandon at once and for ever all talks on “domestic subjects”’.

Her interpretation of the plebiscite, however, was misguided. In fact the Minutes of the 20 February WAC meeting show that of the 326 letters received, 187 had supported ‘leisure’, 52 had supported ‘domesticity’, 61 had asked for a compound of domestic and non-domestic subjects and 26 had requested no change. The five most popular subjects were shown to be ‘Light Educational Talks’, ‘Travel and History’, ‘Furnishing Schemes and Renovations’, ‘Readings from Fiction’ and ‘Gardening’. Quite why and how ‘domestic’ and ‘non-domestic’ items were categorised is unclear, for example gardening was not perceived as domestic whereas cookery undoubtedly was. Cookery was the one topic that the majority demanded

should 'be eliminated'. Considering that the listenership would probably then have numbered in the tens of thousands, the response was proportionally small, nevertheless, it was decided to reduce the number of talks on domestic subjects from a third to a quarter of the output.⁵⁴ The plebiscite also disclosed that 'the most suitable time was evidently between 3.30 and 4.30pm' and as a result the programme was also moved to a new time slot of 4.00pm.

Fitzgerald's 1924 *Radio Times* article points again to the perceived middle-class audience for *Women's Hour*. She revealed how the issue of subject matter had been broached with 'all the women they had met...housewives in little villas; business and professional women; women of the fashionable world'. Their response was curt and to the point, Fitzgerald disclosed, 'almost without exception they broke it to us – and not always gently! – that women were suffering from "domestic indigestion"'. The article concluded:

Is it to be wondered at then that for "the cure of constipation" we substituted a tour of Constantinople, that talks on the English country-side replaced those on the stocking of the kitchen cupboard! That instead of a series of talks on diets, we have debates on topical questions, that addresses on careers and hobbies have succeeded those on calories and how to dye the bathroom curtains?⁵⁵

Ironically, by the time that Fitzgerald wrote her *Radio Times* article, *Women's Hour* as a named entity had ceased to exist; the title was abandoned in March 1924. It was Irving who had first raised an objection to the *Women's Hour* title at the WAC meeting on 25 January. At the meeting on 20 February, Denman added her weight to its abolition, a move seconded by Sloan Chesser.⁵⁶ Carpendale and Lewis, who were representing the BBC, agreed that the name should be dropped with Lewis proposing that 'Women's Topics' should instead be

given in conjunction with the afternoon concert. Carpendale then recommended that rather than using the word 'women's' it would be preferable to announce that in future there would be talks between 4.00 and 4.30pm which it was hoped everyone would enjoy, especially women. This was not satisfactory to Denman who was adamant 'that the word "women's" should be gradually dispensed with, the title alone indicating the subject'. The abolition of the name was approved and from 24 March 1924, *Women's Hour* is no longer listed in the schedules. Instead, from 4.00pm 'two talks of general interest but with particular appeal to women' were 'interlarded' with the afternoon concert.⁵⁷

Why was the WAC so hostile to the *Women's Hour* title? The minutes cast no light on the behind-the-scenes discussions but a dislike of special treatment for women was part of the ongoing feminist debate of the 1920s. Expressed by women's groups such as the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship and the Six Point Group it centred on whether women should seek first to identify themselves as citizens rather than as women.⁵⁸ The belief that women should not differentiate themselves from men in the quest for equality had been seen for, for example, in the absorption of the separate Women's Labour League into the Labour Party in 1918.⁵⁹ Some of the members of the WAC appear to have been concerned that, by singling women out, the BBC was potentially demeaning them. In the event, the identification of a particular programme title with women may have conferred durability, as has been the case with the BBC's long-running *Woman's Hour*. In 1992 the programme fiercely campaigned to keep its name.⁶⁰ The loss of the *Women's Hour* title in 1924 may have had a negative impact on the visibility of women's programming at the BBC. While *Children's Hour* remained a constant and was frequently picked out as a separate entity in BBC Year Books, in reports, in tables of listening habits and so on, programmes for women

are almost never mentioned. If the name *Women's Hour* had continued, women's programmes may correspondingly have been foregrounded.

Although the *Women's Hour* title disappeared from the London schedules, provincial women's programmes continued to use the name, or an equivalent, so Birmingham maintained its *Women's Corner*, Newcastle its *Women's Half Hour* and Bournemouth its *Talk to Women*. Manchester's *Mainly Feminine* was overseen by its own North Region Women's Advisory Committee (NRWAC) the initial meeting of which, held on 13 October 1923, attracted fifteen local women including Mrs E.D. Simon, Honorary Secretary of the Women Citizen's Association; Dr Phoebe Sheavyn of Manchester University; Miss Violet Hewitt from the Church League for Women's Services and Miss Olive Schill, Honorary Secretary of the National Council of Women.⁶¹ Briggs is almost certainly right to describe this as a committee where many women would have already been known to each other. Whether it was 'cosy' is not so certain; the minutes of meetings suggest, rather, that the committee members took their duties very seriously.⁶² It is not clear who was responsible for producing women's talks in Manchester at this time. The NRWAC, however, appears to have been more active than its counterpart in London. By November 1924 it had met eight times and under its auspices 77 talks had been arranged including 21 on travel, 15 on women's interests and citizenship and 11 on child welfare issues.⁶³

In London topics of interest to women also continued to be broadcast. The WAC remained active and many of its recommendations were incorporated into the output. These included legal talks on issues of concern to women; a series of talks on psychology, (a particular suggestion of Dr Sloan Chesser); higher profile career talks which were now given by experts in the field; a broader range of travel talks and talks on hobbies by which listeners could earn

pin-money. Later programmes also included debates. ‘That Woman is Nearer Barbarism than Man’; ‘That the Advantages of Education are Grossly Overrated’; ‘That the Eastern Woman is More Successful in Married Life than her Western Sister’ were designed both to inform and entertain. The BBC was prohibited from broadcasting any material that might be considered controversial (the ban was finally lifted at the start of 1928) so these debates would have been non-political in nature.

The 4.00pm debates were the first occasion that two discussants had appeared within a BBC programme, a format that would be developed and expanded on within the general output during the next few years.⁶⁴ Likewise, the afternoon women’s programme was where ‘interviews’ were first piloted, an idea instituted by Lewis.⁶⁵ Amongst those interviewed were the film star Gladys Cooper, the novelists Rebecca West and Ruby Ayres and the suffragist leader, Millicent Garrett Fawcett as well as ‘real’ people. A London Flower Girl, a Charwoman and a Policewoman anticipated the highly popular *In Town Tonight* by a decade.⁶⁶ Humour too was injected into the schedules, with several talks each week ‘in a lighter and more amusing vein’. The perennial ‘Domestic Service Problem’ was also addressed and would be the first experiential series on the BBC. The lack of servants was a constant concern for the middle and upper classes during the interwar years; domestic staff were regarded both as a practical necessity and as a demonstration of social status.⁶⁷

Beginning on 4 October 1924 with an introductory talk by the Labour MP Dorothy Jewson (Jewson had a particular interest in women’s employment issues), the ensuing five talks were from an ambassador’s wife who had run a large establishment; a professional woman who left the running of her home entirely to her servants; a woman on a modest income who had only one maid; a maid-servant and a man-servant.⁶⁸ Listeners, both mistresses and maids, were also invited to send in essays on the subject, for which there was a prize.⁶⁹ Although the

issue of servitude itself was not discussed (nor would it be when the topic was broached by the BBC on several further occasions in the 1920s and 30s) the series sought to reflect a range of viewpoints including those of servants themselves. For the next ten years these voices would largely be lost to broadcasting as BBC talks became increasingly professionalised and expert led.⁷⁰

What was it like to give a talk at this time? Photographs of the early studios at Savoy Hill show voluminous curtain-draped rooms with a strategically placed microphone installed within a large wooden contraption on wheels, at which contributors would stand to speak. Lady Cynthia Asquith was one of these, a November 1924 *Radio Times* article capturing the experience. ‘My Ordeal at the Microphone’ portrayed the trepidation of walking down Savoy Hill and arriving in the ‘torture chamber’ of the vast studio.⁷¹ After being asked to sit and wait her turn Asquith heard her name announced and, once at the microphone, she tried desperately to remember the guidance given as to how she should deliver her script; the instruction being that it should be done in ‘quite your normal voice’. While fearful that she would read either too fast (leaving a gap in the afternoon’s entertainment), or too slow (so throwing the schedules into disarray), she managed exactly her ten minute allocation before she was politely thanked and emerged onto the street. Elise Sprott, who would later play a pivotal role in the development of the BBC’s *Household* and *Morning Talks*, gave her first broadcast for women on 13 June 1924, on ‘Continental Fashions in Food’. Reminiscing on the occasion, she described how she had met with Fitzgerald to suggest a series of talks based on her travels in Central Europe. Sprott was somewhat scathing, however, that very little rehearsal had been called and also that ‘voices were often judged over the telephone’.⁷²

The Demise of the Women's Advisory Committee

There was no indication that the WAC meeting on 12 December 1924 was to be its last. The discussions appear to have been buoyant, but no date was set for the next meeting. Yet nine months later, in September 1925, a letter was sent to all WAC members notifying them that as only one women's talk was being given in the afternoon and as the title *Women's Hour* no longer existed, the need for an advisory committee to meet regularly had disappeared. The reduction to a single talk, the Committee were informed, was due to requests for more music.⁷³ The letter was signed by J.C. Stobart. Stobart, a former HM Inspector of Schools, had been enticed to the BBC in the summer of 1924 as Director of Education. As part of his duties he had assumed responsibility for all talks, including those aimed at women. However, women's issues were evidently of limited interest to him, his primary concern was school broadcasting which had become a daily term-time fixture on the BBC from January 1925.

With the demise of the WAC Fitzgerald was left alone to produce the afternoon talks of interest to women, which continued to largely eschew domesticity in favour of, for example, books, history and travel. Yet even the single daily talk was no longer protected; it would often be replaced in the schedules by schools programmes, concerts or other prioritised broadcasts. This marginalisation of the output aimed at women would endure until January 1927 when Hilda Matheson began her tenure as Director of Talks working with a new Talks Assistant, Elise Sprott.⁷⁴ Fitzgerald had, by this time, been transferred to a new post. In September 1926 she joined the BBC periodical *World Radio* where she would become Assistant and then Deputy Editor, her journalism skills being put to a more pertinent use.

The *Women's Hour* and the ensuing afternoon talks thus provide a vivid snapshot of what was deemed by the BBC to be of interest to women in the early 1920s. There is a vitality about the subjects; an eagerness to enlighten, as well as to inspire and entertain. There was no blue-print for the broadcasts aimed at women rather, like all BBC output, they developed in an ad hoc way. The guests selected and the topics identified were largely at the behest of Ella Fitzgerald and the members of the Women's Advisory Committee and reflect both their personal interests and their perception of the audience at this time. That this was predominantly from a middle-class point of view is clear, an assumption supported by the listener plebiscite.

The scheduling of *Women's Hour* during the daytime, when married and leisured women (that is, those not in paid employment) would have been at home, accounts for the domestic nature of many of the talks, on practical topics such as cookery and housecraft. But there was also a strong sense that the programmes should 'brighten their leisure hours'; that it should embrace items 'that would take the mind of the woman listener from her domestic cares'.⁷⁵ Many innovative ideas were trialled including celebrity interviews, debates and personal experiences. Citizenship was also important in an era when the enfranchisement of women remained high on the political agenda. Again, fundamental issues that would haunt future producers of the BBC's women's output were identified in these early years, most pertinently how to create a programme that could appeal to the diversity of a listenership who were differentiated not only by social class, age, location and marital status but also by education, political viewpoint and cultural taste. The time that women could best listen would also continue to be a thorny issue, one that was still pertinent in the 1990s, when *Woman's Hour* was moved from the afternoon to the morning, adding fuel to the campaign to save the programme's name.⁷⁶ But a central principle established in the early 1920s would remain,

that those who spoke to women on the BBC should predominantly be women, as should those who produced the programmes aimed at women.

Women's programming in the ensuing years would continue to reflect the different concerns and styles of its women producers who remained passionate about giving the BBC's female daytime audience the best possible listening experience. But while the growing institutionalisation and professionalisation of the BBC meant that much of the vivacity and impromptu nature of the early *Women's Hour* was lost, the experiment paved the way, providing a framework for future programming to be built upon.

¹ For a detailed history of the foundation of the BBC see Asa Briggs (1961) *The Birth of Broadcasting, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom Vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) pp.94-142. In 1927 it would be reconstituted as the British Broadcasting Corporation, its commitment to public service broadcasting enshrined by royal charter.

² John Reith would be General Manager, Managing Director and finally Director General from 1927.

³ BBC Programme Records, 1922-1926.

⁴ See Kate Murphy (2016) *Behind the Wireless: An Early History of Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) Chapters Six and Seven; Sian Nicholas (1996) *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); Kristin Skoog (2014) 'Striving for Editorial Autonomy and Internal Recognition: BBC Woman's Hour' in Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara eds. (2014) *Women and the Media. Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present* (London: Routledge) pp. 99-112.

⁵ Michelle Hilmes (1997) *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press); Kate Lacey (2013) *Listening Publics: The Politics of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity).

⁶ BBC WAC:R16/219: Advisory Committees: Women's Advisory Committee 1924-1925, Minutes of Meeting held on 20 February 1924.

⁷ In April 1923 these were Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Cardiff and Glasgow. Bournemouth and Aberdeen were added later in October that year.. Relay stations were opened in other major cities from November 1923, which expanded the broadcast network considerably.

⁸ For a discussion on simultaneous broadcasting see Mark Pegg (1983) *Broadcasting and Society 1918-1939* (London: Croom Helm) pp.18-22.

⁹ For a discussion on the general development of talks see Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting* also Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff (1991) *A Social History of British Broadcasting 1922-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell). At the close of 1922, licence holders were estimated at 36,000, Pegg *Broadcasting and Society*, p.7.

¹⁰ Ralph Wade (no date) *Early Life in the BBC*, unpublished manuscript.

¹¹ John Reith (1924) *Broadcast over Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton) p.57, 17-9, 26-7.

¹² Reith believed broadcasting could help create an informed democracy, enabling men and women to take an interest in an array of issues from which they had previously been excluded. See D.L. LeMahieu (1988) *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communications and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

¹³ See for example Kate Lacey (2013) *Listening Publics: The Politics of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity).

¹⁴ Michael Bailey (2009) 'The Angel in the Ether: Early Radio and the Construction of the Household' in *Narrating Media History*, ed. Michael Bailey (London: Routledge) pp. 52-65.

¹⁵ Maggie Andrews (2012) *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London: Continuum).

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- ¹⁶ Both Burrows and Lewis wrote books about the early BBC. Arthur Burrows (1924), *The Story of Broadcasting* (London: Cassell and Company); Cecil Lewis (1924) *Broadcasting from Within* (London: George Newnes).
- ¹⁷ BBC WAC; CO9: BBCo Station Directors Meeting: Minutes: 1923-1927, 18 April 1923.
- ¹⁸ The programme was given different names at different stations.
- ¹⁹ The history of 'Children's Hour' is told in Wallace Grevatt (1988), *BBC Children's Hour: A Celebration of Those Magical Years* (Lewes: The Book Guild).
- ²⁰ LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy* pp.39-43. Women journalists were frequently employed to work on these pages, see Andrew Bingham, (2004) *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) pp. 39-42.
- ²¹ For a discussion on women's magazines in the interwar years see Fiona Hackney (2011) *"They Opened Up a Whole New World": Feminism, Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in Women's Magazines, 1919-1939* (unpublished doctoral dissertation) University of London.
- ²² See Alison Oram (1996) *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Helen Glew (2009) *Women's Employment in the General Post Office, 1914-1939* (unpublished doctoral dissertation) University of London.
- ²³ *Wireless World and Radio Review*, 23 June 1923.
- ²⁴ The first woman to broadcast in the late evening slot was Dr Octavia Lewin, who spoke on 'Nose Breathing' on 9 January 1924.
- ²⁵ *Ariel*, April 1936, October 1937. *Ariel* is the staff journal of the BBC, founded in 1936.
- ²⁶ There is a reference to Mrs Fitzgerald in a document dated February 1937 where she is listed as divorced, a reference to 'husband on staff' appears to be linked to her name. BBA/WAC: R49/371/2: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy: File 2, 1936 – July 1939.
- ²⁷ *Prospero*, June 1969. *Prospero* is the newsletter for retired BBC staff.
- ²⁸ See Jane Lewis (1990) *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm).
- ²⁹ *Prospero*, June 1969.
- ³⁰ *Radio Times*, 17 October 1924.
- ³¹ *Prospero*, June 1969. Fitzgerald recalled 'I still cherish the memory of the entire board of directors awaiting my arrival at a London store to ask what the charge would be for a broadcast about their new departments'.
- ³² Broadcast: 4 June 1923, 18 June 1923.
- ³³ Broadcast 11 August 1923, 20 July 1923, July 17 1923 and the following 8 weeks.
- ³⁴ Broadcast: 23 July, 20 August, 10 September, 24 September, 4 October.
- ³⁵ The vast historiography of the BBC is similarly largely silent on the issue.
- ³⁶ See for example *Radio Times*, 3 October 1924, 'Is Radio Fair to Fathers?'; 17 October 1924, 'Radio and the Human Boy: Does Wireless Waste his Time?'
- ³⁷ *Radio Times*, 18 April 1924, 'Women and Wireless: Radio a Great Home Maker'.
- ³⁸ *Radio Times*, 5 September 1924, 'Women and Wireless'. Listening to wireless even influenced women's fashion. According to *Radio Times*, 11 January 1924, gold and silver net caps, designed specially to prevent the hair being disarranged when listening with headphones, were being sold in large numbers to women wireless enthusiasts, 'who will soon be numbered in the hundreds of thousands'.
- ³⁹ *Radio Times*, 9 September 1924, 'The Good Fairy in Mean Streets: The Influence of Radio in Humble Homes'. Shaun Moores' oral history interviews with men and women in Warrington in North West England who had crystal wireless sets at this time, shows that most were working class. Shaun Moores, (1988) "'The Box on the Dresser": Memories of Early Radio and Everyday Life', *Media, Culture and Society* 10(1) 23-40.
- ⁴⁰ See for example Hubert Llewellyn Smith (1930-1935) *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, 9 volumes (London) p.8; B. Seebohm Rowntree (1941) *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York* (London: Longmans) pp.406-12; Hilda Jennings and Winifred Gill (1939) *Broadcasting in Everyday Life: A Survey of the Social Effects of the Coming of Broadcasting* (London: BBC).
- ⁴¹ From 1927 this was extended to the possibility, at times, of two programmes via the Regional scheme. See Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society*, pp.22-5.
- ⁴² *Radio Times*, 26 September 1924, 'If I Planned the Women's Hour' by Mrs Belloc Lowndes.
- ⁴³ *Radio Times*, 17 October 1924, 'In Reply to Mrs. Belloc Lowndes' by Ella Fitzgerald BBC Programme Staff.
- ⁴⁴ *Radio Times*, 30 November 1923. The article made no reference to her BBC role, it was simply authored by Mrs E Fitzgerald.
- ⁴⁵ BBC WAC; CO9: BBCo Station Directors Meeting: Minutes: 1923-7, 11 December 1923.

- ⁴⁶ In May 1923, the BBC had established its first Advisory Council on Religion. During the next few years other Committees were set up to represent Children's Hour, Music, Education and the Spoken Word. For more on the reasoning behind the BBC's Advisory Committees see Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting* pp. 240-50.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid. p.245.
- ⁴⁸ BBC WAC: R16/219: Advisory Committees: Women's Advisory Committee 1924-1925.
- ⁴⁹ The first meeting on 18 January was poorly attended (with only Sloan Chesser, Hardman Earle and Gates present) so was minuted as a 'preliminary'. Those representing the BBC on this occasion were Burrows, Lewis and Fitzgerald.
- ⁵⁰ See David Hendy (2013) *Public Service Broadcasting* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) pp.58-9.
- ⁵¹ In attendance at the meeting were Lewis and Fitzgerald for the BBC; Denman, Hardman Earle, Gates and Irving for the WAC.
- ⁵² Minutes of WAC meeting, 25 January 1924.
- ⁵³ *Radio Times*, 17 October 1924.
- ⁵⁴ Minutes of WAC meeting, 20 February 1924.
- ⁵⁵ *Radio Times*, 17 October 1924.
- ⁵⁶ Present at the 20 February meeting were Carpendale, Burrows, Lewis and Fitzgerald for the BBC; Denman and Sloane Chesser for the WAC.
- ⁵⁷ Minutes of WAC meeting, 30 April 1924. Present at the meeting were Carpendale, Burrows and Fitzgerald for the BBC; Cambridge, Sloane Chesser, Gates and Irving for the WAC.
- ⁵⁸ See for example June Hannam 'Women and Politics' in June Purvis ed. (1995) *Women's History in Britain: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press) pp.234-6.
- ⁵⁹ See for example Cheryl Law (1997) *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement 1918-1928* (London: I.B. Tauris) pp 47-48, 55.
- ⁶⁰ Sally Feldman 'Twin Peaks: The Staying Power of BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour' in Caroline Mitchell ed. (2000) *Women in Radio: airing differences* (London: Routledge) pp.64-7.
- ⁶¹ BBC WAC: R6/56: Advisory Committees: North Region: Manchester Station: Women's Advisory Committee Minute Books 1922-1925. Olive Schill would join the BBC's Manchester staff in 1928, as an Assistant.
- ⁶² Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting* p. 245
- ⁶³ The NRWAC held its final meeting in September 1925. There are hints that Advisory Committees were set up to oversee women's programmes at other provincial stations, but only those of London and Manchester survive.
- ⁶⁴ The idea was first mooted at the WAC meeting on 25 January 1924.
- ⁶⁵ Minute of WAC meeting 20 February 1924.
- ⁶⁶ For a discussion on *In Town Tonight* see Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History British Broadcasting*, pp. 171-6.
- ⁶⁷ See for example Alison Light (2007) *Mrs Woolf and the Servants: The Hidden Heart of Domestic Service* (London: Fig Tree); Lucy Delap (2011), *Knowing their Place; Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- ⁶⁸ *Radio Times*, 17 October 1924.
- ⁶⁹ When these came to be judged, at the final WAC meeting on 12 December 1924, it was considered that those of the maids were superior to those of the mistresses with two of the maids' entries and one of the mistresses winning. The winners received two guineas each and the essays were read on the programme the following day.
- ⁷⁰ See Kate Murphy 'From Woman's Hour to Other Women's Lives: BBC Talks for Women and the Women who Made Them, 1923-1939' in Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara eds. (2014) *Women and the Media. Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present* (London: Routledge) pp.31-45.
- ⁷¹ *Radio Times*, 21 November 1924. Lady Asquith delivered several talks including bargain shopping and pets.
- ⁷² *London Evening News*, 30 June 1936.
- ⁷³ Letter to members of the WAC Committee, 30 September 1925.
- ⁷⁴ See Murphy *Behind the Wireless*.
- ⁷⁵ *Radio Times*, 15 February 1924.
- ⁷⁶ Feldman, op.cit.