Articles

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Scripting the radio interview: Performing *Desert Island Discs*

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Abstract

Scripting the Radio Interview: Performing Desert Island Discs

Desert Island Discs reveals much about the BBC's early approach to the radio interview. The radio programme calls for its audience, the host and a 'castaway' to engage in a fantasy where guests are invited to preselect musical records to accompany them on a fictional desert island. This concept acts as a vehicle in which the host asks questions or makes statements about the significance of these records, in order to unearth the private motivations of a public figure. This has proved itself as a predictable, reassuring and innovative format that all parties must commit to. This article addresses the first decade of the programme, where all interviews were scripted. Studying the origins of this series allows us to cast some assertions on the ways that scripting was used to communicate and mediate a host's persona and an interviewee's past and personality. The use of scripting was intended to create a sense of informality, humour and theatrical drama. Contextualizing these types of scripted exchanges further informs our understanding of the radio interview within our mediated cultural heritage.

Keywords

broadcasting history

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Introduction

Desert Island Discs (BBC Radio 4) is one of Britain's longest running radio programmes, yet it has only just started to receive academic attention. This article seeks to contribute to

the small yet growing area of study and to offer attention to scripted editions, because often, as Ytreberg shows us 'in academic studies of production, scripts are rarely mentioned' (2006: 423). *Desert Island Discs* was introduced during a climate of wartime censorship that relied heavily on scripted performance of its talks, a professional BBC moderator and a dependence on the established and skilled interviewee. The first episode was presented by Roy Plomley and aired on Thursday, 29 January 1942, having been pre-recorded two days earlier. Early editions were around 30 minutes in length and normally broadcast somewhere between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. on the BBC's Forces Programme.[1] Originally commissioned for just six episodes, over 75 years later, *Desert Island Discs* continues to be a permanent fixture in the schedule of BBC Radio 4.

This article will show how BBC's approach to scripted talk was designed to teach the listening public, the interviewee and the broadcaster the appropriate way to do an interview (see Bailey 2009). Using early archive recordings, speaking with contributors and examining the written archive, it will explore how these early interviews were written, recorded and edited. By examining examples like *Desert Island Discs*, academics can start to locate the practical ways that programme makers dealt with technological restrictions and show how on-air talk often conceals the hidden methods of production. Finally, this article reveals how scripting allowed for an imaginative and playful style of broadcast talk.

The steadfast format of *Desert Island Discs* calls on the audience, the host and the castaway (guest) to engage in a fantasy – interviewees are asked to select music that would accompany them if they were left alone on a fictional and unspecified desert island. This fantasy acts as a device that permits the host to ask or make statements about

the significance of these records, in order to unearth the private experiences or motivations of a guest. The inclusion of music serves as a centrepiece and grants permission for the interviewer to ask biographical sets of questions about the castaway's childhood, professional and private life. In doing so, it removes the impression that the interview will be a challenging or confrontational investigation – and rather positions the castaway with a tight frame of reference and clear expectations of what will take place.

The interview is now considered as a more spontaneous and authentic speech act – where one party asks the questions and the other answers. Now in live or documentary audio production, we might expect the questions to be scripted ahead of time by the interviewer who may need to prepare topics for discussion. On early episodes, *both* the questions *and* answers on *Desert Island Discs* were fully prepared and scripted ahead of time by the host – then performed by Plomley and his guest. Just as Lundell found in her study of the Swedish television interview (2009), scripted broadcast talk on these episodes of *Desert Island Discs* is performed just as if it is unscripted. This means that even in these early days of broadcasting, there is a conscious intuitional recognition that the interview should promote a sense of liveness. Cardiff (1980), Scannell (1996) and Montgomery (2001) are among those who have shown how ordinary, everyday and authentic talk came to be valued on air – which as we will later see was reflected in the tone, language and style of scripted talk on *Desert Island Discs*.

The challenges of smoothly inserting the castaway's musical choices into the programme, censorship restriction and control over timing and performance meant that *Desert Island Discs* was pre-recorded. Scripting each episode would ensure that speech could be performed in a cohesive and concise way (and of course, checked by censors).

Since few speakers were able to stick to the imposed time limits, scripting talk on radio was a means of establishing complete control over the timing of speech, for, "there was no such thing as off the cuff radio" (Symes 2014: n.pag.). The BBC offered producers instructions on how to write, deliver and produce these early scripts in order to sound as natural as possible. A successful script should resemble direct speech as much as possible, BBC producers of the time advised; 'if he takes his job seriously, he will scrutinise each sentence, asking whether he would have said it like that and if not, how'.[2]

It is necessary to briefly locate how these first and tightly controlled, pre-recorded broadcasts had evolved. A necessity to confront often controversial foreign issues, combined with self-regulation at the Corporation and a growing attempt to recognize the needs of the listener, meant that a talk alone might be thought to challenge the BBC's commitment to impartiality. A chairperson was now required (this was usually a man), to steer the content away from 'dangerous ground' while 'acting in points of fact as an umpire but not taking part in the discussion itself' (Ekersley 1929 cited in Cardiff 1980: 36). This ensured that opposing viewpoints were given equal time and that there was greater control over the growing number of speakers in a studio.

No recording exists of the first types of interviews, but this type of interaction came to be classified as what we still would recognize today as the discussion and the debate (see Cardiff 1980). BBC interviews came to be characterized by tightly scripted dialogue, rehearsed and structured speech, with this professional middle-class host, 'interviewing' or chairing a discussion with a well-known public figure. As Russell remarks, '[f]ear of unsuitable utterance, whether inappropriate political statement or simple nervous stammering, meant that programmes were tightly and sometimes

unsympathetically scripted' (2004: 133). There was to be a different name for this interviewing style: the interlocutor technique. This new role invited questions from a host to provide a sense of balance (Cardiff 1980). Even though most interactions were scripted, this introduction of dialogue instead of the widely used talks monologue brings with it a host of related issues into the foreground. These interlocutors were made aware of the importance of keeping programmes running to time, of remaining impartial and giving equal time to opposing and often controversial points of view. During these discussions, an impartial BBC chair was to reside over the contrasting opinions of his guests and manoeuvre the encounter towards a satisfactory and safe resolution. As a result, there were now editorial decisions to be made, which had not been required when planning the talks. These included a conscious decision about who should have the most airtime, who would speak first, who might ask the questions, who must answer the questions, who would set the tone, when one might be silenced, cut off or excluded. The Corporation would now need to cope with the growing demands of fairness, impartiality and entertainment through this new style of broadcast talk, the interview (see Lundell 2009).

Research context and methods

The examination of such questions, statements and directions revealed in *Desert Island Discs* scripts reveals much about the context of production in early BBC broadcasts and shows us how early interviews were supposed to sound. It can also tell us a great deal about the evolution of the interview as a technique.

Scholars have commented on the musical tastes of *Desert Island Discs* guests and contemplated the recollection of memory in psychological terms (Blake 2013; Webb

2013; Conway 2013). Others have clarified the construction and representation of national identity (Hill 2013) or pondered over the inclusion of desert islands as a concept within fictional literature, poetry and films (Graziadei et al. 2017). Both Mullany (1999) and Heritage (1998) have used audio extracts to determine levels and strategies of linguistic politeness in questioning procedures, while Knox and MacDonald (2017) note the relationship between occupation and music preferences. Meanwhile, Cohen and Duberley (2013) have discussed how professional careers of female scientists have been constructed and represented on the programme by castaways, and McDonald (2014) has investigated the musical taste of medical doctors who have appeared on the show. More recently Hendy (2017) has offered an analysis of *Desert Island Discs* place in British culture and the emotional patterns heard in the later decades – assessing the value of this to BBC Radio 4 and their listeners.

Over 3000 castaways have appeared since 1942, and all are considered to be public figures – those well known due to their professional work in music, charity work, art, sports, entertainment, politics, broadcasting or academia. Littler's research (2013) confronts notions of public access, participation and representation on *Desert Island Discs*. Looking at those who embody this type of 'star' status can offer us a glimpse into the privileged past of radio's powerful voices. Celebrities, as Tolson has suggested, can 'personify contemporary beliefs and concerns about the human condition and their talk, in this context, is designed to construct them as representatives of this' (2006: 155). The inclusion of a celebrity castaway (and our discussion of this phenomenon) can tell us important things about how a certain type of voice, above others, is deemed discursively powerful and as such, 'legitimately significant' (Marshall 1997: x).

The ever-increasing online catalogue released by the BBC currently contains over 1500 digital editions of *Desert Island Discs.* These are released as podcasts and available for both the public and research community to share, download and keep. These interviews can now be considered by both the listening public and the academic researcher as a valuable cultural resource. Cohen and Duberley (2013) are among those who have expressed delight in finding open and public access to such a large range of resources, meaning that researchers are permitted to conduct their investigations at a low cost, and at their own convenience. Nevertheless, as with many public collections, the researcher has little say over the quality of this audio, the amount or availability of archive material, and so must work around these constraints. Moreover, content that could potentially cause embarrassment to the Corporation might have been omitted, while earlier recordings have been re-edited, or lost. To date, there are only a small number of episodes available to listen to from the 1940s, which means we remain reliant on archived scripts for many of the early editions. So, while the *Desert Island Discs* digital online collection is free to use and relatively accessible, it is also carefully protected, shared and delivered by those stakeholders with a vested interest. Interviewing castaways, examining scripts and exploring archive recordings lead to a further understanding of just how questions were formed, how guests were approached or how answers were scripted, which then allows for further awareness of what was deemed acceptable mediated interaction during this time. For the purposes of this article, I focus my attention on the early days of the programme – the period spanning from 1942–54, when all 204 episodes were fully scripted, pre-recorded and edited by the host and

production team. As Ytreberg (2006) has shown in his work, it is vital to note the history of scripted performance, and to explore these types of broadcasts in academic research.

The interview and the island

The idea for *Desert Island Discs* was pitched by freelance British broadcaster Roy Plomley and commissioned by Leslie Perowne, the BBC's then Head of Popular Record Programmes in 1941. In each episode, all parties would be invited to indulge upon a shared cultural memory, based on this universal myth of imagined life on an unidentified, intangible deserted island.

As a setting, the use of a desert island had proved to be a popular narrative world for authors before the 1940s (and later in film and television) but this was one of the first instances that the model was adapted to British radio. This playful concept of finding oneself alone on a deserted island would have proved particularly enticing for listeners and tells us something about the collective cultural values, fears and tensions of Britain during this time. The format transcended listeners, contributors and its host's far from civilization, and away from the harsher daily realities of wartime evacuation, blackouts or rations. Instead, it urged its listeners to embrace a utopian environment, a warm, isolated and relatively safe space in which they are surrounded by their favourite choices of music, played out in an uninhibited space surrounded by sunshine and sea. The concept compels a sense of escapism and self-reflection, positioning the contributor and the listener as a lone protagonist – unbound by the constraints or freedoms of daily life and forced to defy nature. It allows for both participants and audiences to confront various contradictions; between the self and the other, loneliness and companionship, survival and death – all which would have been especially appropriate for soldiers and the public,

who would have regularly tuned into the Forces Programme. It also called for an escape from a very real threat of invasion by the potentially threatening 'other'.

Unlike other more contemporary uses of the concept, *Desert Island Discs* centres upon the preparation of the castaway's forthcoming journey *to* an island – rather than positioning them on it and already alone. This allows for listeners to relate further with the castaway, who shares and inhabits a more familiar ground before being sent off to this exotic unknown location. We are presented with an image of the abstract destination as an idealized sanctuary. Here is an extract that featured actor John Mills and host Roy Plomley. The episode originally aired on Tuesday 11 December 1951, 6.20–7 p.m.:

> **Mills:** From what you've told me about this island of yours, there's not very much going on.
>
> **Plomley:** Frankly, very little.
>
> **Mills:** With only coconuts, sun, sea and sand in the present, I think the best thing to do would be to retreat into the past – and that's what I've had in mind while I've been mulling over this business of which records I'd take with me.

All parties are compelled to commit to this imagined journey towards this fictional island, and fully engage with it during the interview exchange. We might also suggest that its strict formula, its stable use of gentle theme tune and the familiar (often dry) tone from Roy Plomley also looked to create, in its own way, a comfort to its audience. The rigid requirements of the series meant that all content, whether scripted or unscripted, must be built around these items, acting as a reassuring experience for regular listeners. And, during times when the United Kingdom was experiencing a sense of collective fear, this would have proved reassuring to its audience.

The BBC's Handbook proclaimed in 1947 that 'radio has always been a medium well suited to the nostalgic', and *Desert Island Discs* endorsed this method of engaging with private and public memory. *Desert Island Discs* tapped into a national fixation with celebrity culture, evoking notions of sentimentality, memory and escapism. The stable and predictable structure of each episode seemingly encourages the castaway to reflect on past personal meanings, conceivably to establish a profound and entertaining understanding of their professional or personal lives. This type of scripted interview talk frequently stimulated a sense of collective cultural belonging and an idealized return to the past. If we take actress Margaret Lockwood's first appearance as a castaway in 1951, we can see how her talk typifies the scripted performance of its guests (Lockwood 1951: n.pag.). Margaret Lockwood's memories are presented in a romanticized and patriotic way as she introduces her first musical choice, the *Eton Boating Song*. The track is faded up to accompany the end of her speech, which centres on a nostalgic and romantic sense of English life from the 1860s:

> it [the Eton Boating Song] always conjures up for me a very pleasant English scene. The River Thames in mid-summer, the days before petrol launches. Lovely ladies and parasols and flowing white gowns. Willow trees and whiskery gentlemen in straw hats and blazers. All the charm of the three men in a boat period.

Actresses like Margaret Lockwood and John Mills came well equipped to produce clear and polished performances. They were able to read convincingly, adding in subtle speech nuances like pauses, changes in tone and stresses. After all, a clear and concise guest succeeds in maintaining the attention of the listening public, while a big name works to attract the audiences' initial attention to the show in the first place (see De Jouvenel 1961).

Retreating into the past: The interview process

Even though the scripted content of these first 204 fully scripted episodes has limited the amount of personal expression from the castaway, it could be proposed that this type of interview format was one of the first attempts of radio that foregrounded an exploration of the 'politics of the personal' within the public sphere (Marshall cited in Allan 2005: 28). It also raises questions about the fascination and representation of the celebrity interviewee. On the one hand, the listener is invited to overhear privileged information about the castaways, yet on the other hand, the format allows them to imagine that celebrity adrift away from lived reality, exiled on a desert island. This celebration of individuality in programmes like *Desert Island Discs* actively promotes a sense of the celebrity's achievement, revelation and transformation, often from a time before they were famous. According to Marshall (2005), those who hold celebrity status are the very embodiment of a collective power allocated to an invested person by the public. In this case, the castaway is presented as special and separate from us (banished away) yet conversely as ordinary – through details of their past challenges or triumphs. McMullen reminds us how contemporary celebrity interviewees intentionally portray themselves as modest, normal or similar to the public. By calculatedly 'doing modesty', humility and presenting themselves as 'not extraordinary' contributors, consciously decrease the distance between the celebrity and the 'ordinary folk' who listen (McMullen 2005: 567).

At the start of each episode, the signature theme tune 'By the Sleepy Lagoon' (1930) accompanied an opening announcement by a BBC announcer, whose job it was to set the scene, introducing the host, who speaks first to the listening public. The decision to address the unseen listener before the studio guest is still heard today, and can be

regarded as an attempt to draw in listeners who may not have heard of the castaway, to disclose the intention of the format and to include the audience in the encounter. Naming the castaway so early on and outlining their brief biography works to justify their inclusion on the programme, it signals that their credentials are worthy of on-air appearances and sets the scene for the forthcoming encounter.

> Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. On our desert island this evening is an exceedingly popular actor – popular in both the theatre and on the screen, where his performances have twice won him the National Film Award. It's John Mills.

In these early scripted editions, guests had less input into the management and maintenance of their public image, but the programme acted as a means of promoting their professional accomplishments. At the end of each episode, a link was read out by Roy Plomley or the announcer: 'Jack Hulbert is now appearing in "The White Sheep of the Family" at the Piccadilly Theatre, London'.[3] Not only did this create a professional motivation for guests to appear on the show, it further legitimated their celebrity status. *Desert Island Discs* is scripted in a way that preserves a familiar persona and continues to shape public awareness of them as a performer (see Thomas 2007). This scripted extract is from the very first episode in 1942 and features comedian and actor Vic Oliver. All words and directions are scripted by Plomley.

> **Roy:** That was your last one, Vic.
>
> KNOCK ON DOOR.
>
> **Roy:** Yes?
>
> OPEN DOOR
>
> **Voice:** Telegram for Mr Vic. Oliver
>
> **Roy:** Thanks. Do you want to open it, Vic? It might be urgent.
>
> **Vic:** I daren't open it. I'm expecting bad news.

> **Roy:** I'm sorry to hear that.
>
> **Vic:** Yes. My goldfish isn't at all well. Open it for me, Roy, will you.
>
> **Roy:** Surely. (OPENS TELEGRAM) It's from Bebe Daniels and Ben Lyron.
>
> **Vic:** Is it? I didn't know they could write. What do they say?
>
> **Roy:** It says: DEAR VIC, HAVE JUST BEEN LISTENING TO YOU ON A DESERT ISLAND. WISH IT WERE TRUE. BEBE AND BEN.

This excerpt contains a reference to the castaway's broadcasting career – which builds upon his character and professional identity by alluding to his on-air association with his colleagues from the popular BBC radio series *Hi Gang! High Gang!* This was a light-hearted scripted comedy series that ran from 1940–49, where Vic Oliver performed alongside both Bebe Daniele and Ben Lyron.

The interview process

Any host of *Desert Island Discs* would need to navigate a good working relationship with the talent whilst all the while having to maintain the interests of the BBC and attract the approval of the listening public. Roy Plomley was awarded the responsibility of writing the scripts, contacting the castaway and conducting research. He would be tasked with the power of choosing his guests, of composing their words, for the overall tone and shape of the programme. It was his responsibility to initiate the topics worthy of discussion, control the agenda, lead the dialogue and have the first and last word.

> **Roy:** Good-night, Vic. You see! That's what you get for being ship-wrecked on a desert island.[4]

Radio presenters, and particularly, those who are associated with a programme, bring with them a sense of expectation regarding their individual distinct interviewing style. Their on-air personalities are considered a brand, which they use to maintain listener

loyalty, adhere to the expectations of the network and genre, provide a secure sense of expectation to their interviewees and create a sense of familiarity and consistency to the programme. This also would help secure new interviewees and establish a clear sense of the tone of the interview. Bonner (2011) has reflected upon the way the presenters' on-air identity might affect any interaction with their interviews, a point, which is especially relevant for hosts of long-running formats like *Desert Island Discs*. Broadcaster Anna Raeburn appeared as a castaway in 1978 and said, "I don't think I had any idea about what an institution I was with. I just liked Plomley; I thought he was a very likeable man" (Raeburn 2013: n.pag). Evidently, the importance of the host is central to the success of this programme, as Ytreberg has found 'the host in many ways *is* the format' for they embody 'the formats' norms of performance and interaction' (2004: 685).

Scripts and BBC audio archive reveal that Roy Plomley was respectful and conservative in his tone, and against prying into the uncomfortable or messy private lives of his castaways. Castaways trusted him and his team to be civil and polite, not to ruffle the surface, or to grill or challenge, even when their words were no longer scripted. *Desert Island Discs* was to be a mutually beneficial and pleasurable encounter, to help build on the existing public personality of its guests, while ensuring that its host protected his place as a respected BBC figure, and friend to the stars. According to Plomley, '[t]here are few people, however busy, who will not be tempted to put aside an afternoon to have a pleasant lunch, listen to their favourite music, and then get paid a fee for talking about themselves for half an hour' (1980: 36).

The interview in this case can be seen as a transaction, and it was in the interests of all parties involved (interviewer, interviewee and institution) to foster the public

façade of the professional performer in order for the programme to grow, continue and be a success (see Ytreberg 2007). The use of scripted humour and irony parodied and played upon the recognized public identity of his guests, exemplified here with a scripted exchange from 1951 with comedian Tommy Trinder.

> **Plomley:** Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. On our desert island this evening is Tommy Trinder.
>
> **Trinder:** Is that all you're going to say about me? Nothing about noted raconteur, celebrated merry Andrew and highly recommended refined entertainer?
>
> **Plomley:** I think we know all that Mr Trinder

It was the norm that scribbled handwritten messages and autographs would appear at the top of scripts. Lady Eleanor Smith wrote on hers '[m]any thanks for being so helpful, also cocktails!'[5] References to apparent personal connections between Plomley and his castaways can also be heard in audio recordings. In a scripted episode from 1951, he makes an intentional association between himself and his castaway, comedian, writer and actor Jimmy Edwards.

> **Edwards:** … you were at the same school, you remember them
>
> **Plomley:** I do indeed

This refers to the shared history between Roy Plomley and Jimmy Edwards, insinuating that they are from a similar background. It could be argued that this elevates the position of the host as someone tightly linked to celebrity in stature and common history. It indicates that the interviewer and interviewer have an equal social relationship, both as broadcasters and entertainers who are members of a collective club. It suggests that both Edwards and Plomley are deserving of airtime, but at the same time, succeeds in causing a sense of detachment between them and the listening public, by elevating them to join a special community of those worthy of appearing on air. Here is an evidence of a

broadcasting hierarchy, where the interview was formed for the benefit and ease of well-connected people who socialized in the same circles and supported each other's careers. This is not based on a formal set of policy guidelines, rather on an exclusive set of social networks and contacts.

The pre- and post-recording process of *Desert Island Discs* also cultivated this idea of companionship, informality and amiability – revealing the potential power of subtle social relationships. Every six weeks, Roy Plomley and his producer would decide on which potential castaways to approach. The BBC Bookings Department would contact the selected guest and negotiate a fee. Roy Plomley would go to meet with his interviewees to conduct his research and get them to agree to be on the programme. Occasionally, if this pre-interview meeting was not possible, (the guest lived away from London), then the script would be devised using handwritten notes, sent by the castaway to Roy Plomley. Entertainer Vic Oliver was visited in the wings of the London Hippodrome, '[h]e gave me a list of records and his reasons for choosing them, and I went away and wrote a script' (Plomley 1980: 14). This list of records would be passed on to the producer, whose job was to order the records from the BBC's Gramophone Library. Meanwhile Roy Plomley would visit the News Information Office to conduct his research, making use of press cuttings, references and carrying out telephone calls to mutual acquaintances to find out more information about his guest. He wrote that this preliminary research material was 'the essential ingredient of a good interview. It has a disarming effect on a new acquaintance to find that you have primed yourself to talk about his interests […]' (1980: 23).

Throughout his time on *Desert Island Discs*, Roy Plomley often took his castaways to a members-only club, the pub or out to lunch before or after recording in the studio, with an intention to develop a rapport. The pre-interview interaction was used here in a number of ways: (1) to relax the castaway and establish their trust in the host, (2) to act as a means of researching the castaways life story, and clarifying their identity, (3) as a way of judging the quality of guests musical choices and (4) to establish a personal and professional connection between the BBC, Roy Plomley and the well-known stars of the day. The format has become such a tradition of UK radio that castaways continue to see their inclusion as a means of entry to an elite club. Physicist Professor Jocelyn Bell Burnell appeared as a castaway in 2000, "[i]t's a great honour, a great, great honour" (Bell Burnell 2013: n.pag.).

Scripted style

Scripting, as Crisell (1994) points out, does imply an impression of absence – a filter between natural, spontaneous speech to an inference of rehearsal and preparation. *Desert Island Discs* sought to encourage a sense of idiosyncratic individuality, which contrasted with the 'studied, controlled, balanced – in a word, professional presentation', which had dominated the schedules (Kumar 1975: 74). While the programme had to follow pre-approved rules of interview presentation, early copies can reveal that Plomley drew on several devices in order to bring personality and to the scripted interview and enhance the likability of himself and his guest. This playful dialogue was an artificial composition. Each line was carefully constructed, (like a radio play or 'skit') containing instructions, cues and dialogue. Clear instructions are written into the scripts, and on occasions included explicit directions. Plomley often underlined words on the script as a reminder

to emphasize certain words 'there is always a chance of a rescue, of course'.[6] As Ytreberg has noted, 'a great number of scripting devices work not by dictating the specifics of people's performance but by directing and setting them up in various ways' (2006: 424). It is natural to dismiss scripting as formulaic and stilted, yet he employed a series of playfully creative techniques. In this extract from actor and comedian Vic Oliver's early appearance as a castaway, brackets are used in the script to indicate instructions to both parties:

> **Roy:** I had no idea photography was invented as long ago as that. Shall I read out your list of records?
>
> **Vic:** Please do.
>
> **Roy:** (READING) 1. Vic Oliver joins the Army. 2. The Army Joins Vic Oliver. 3. Vic Oliver's Twists. 4. Vic Oliver tickles your fancy. 5. Vic Oliver tickles the Ivories. 4. Vic Oliver. […] Oh, no. (TEARS PAPER)
>
> **Vic:** Hey, what are you doing?
>
> **Roy:** I'm sorry – no advertising
>
> **Vic:** But you shouldn't have torn it up. You have wounded me as an artist. Besides, it had my autograph on it.
>
> **Roy:** Perhaps it was rather stupid of me.

Plomley's questioning style was largely respectful and polite. Instead of posing long questions, he opted for statements, which were often followed by questions such as, 'Noted', and 'Good. Let's hear the first one'. These declarations also work to create a sense of validation and acceptance, signalling that Plomley knows about the topic already. Hence, he is in control of the relationship and it is his job to move the conversation forward with phrases like 'Exciting days indeed. And then?' along with comments like 'Yes I can see that'.

Plomley scripted himself into a position of authority. Below is the opening from an episode first aired in 1952, which saw ventriloquist Peter Brough interviewed alongside his 'companion' Archie Andrews:

> **Andrews:** Hello Brough, are we all set?
>
> **Brough:** Why Archie, what are you doing here?
>
> **Andrews:** Well we're off aren't we – to this desert island. By Jove, I'm looking forward to it – going to have a wonderful time. Think of all that nice sea and sunshine, lovely sleepy lagoons, beautiful hula hula girls, wonderful moonlight nights – ah, that's the stuff.
>
> **Brough:** My dear boy, you've got it all wrong; this is a record programme. And this is Mr Roy Plomley who is in charge here.

Jokes, laughter, quotations, pauses, exclamations, instructions and questions were included in the scripts to mirror spontaneous conversation and promote a sense of cohesion and natural flow as the content moved from record to record.

> **Plomley:** You said a moment ago, quite casually, something about the rescue ship coming […]
>
> **Lynn:** There will be a rescue ship, won't there?
>
> **Plomley:** There's nothing in the contract about it – but it's good to be optimistic. That's fine.

During these scripted episodes there is a conscious effort to enact a sense of liveness by posing simulated questions, mirroring a soap opera or play, musing casual (yet scripted) queries like 'I do wonder what your last record will be, which composer'[7] even though he of course, has the answer in front of him. Plomley also uses intentional hesitations such as 'um' and more typical interview questions such as 'who' and 'how' but in a formal way, mirroring the style of a research questionnaire or job interview[8]:

> **Roy Plomley:** How and when did you first get this enthusiasm for brass?

> **Jimmy Edwards:** Oh well now that's a question. It started when I was at school.

By mirroring the informal character of daily conversation, the listener should feel more connected to the content of those voices heard in the distance from the wireless. As Cardiff observes, personal modes of address, informality and such 'carefully placed hesitations and slip of the tongue' sought to achieve a style that 'transcended both ordinary speech and the written word' (1980: 31). Most of the surviving scripted editions of this period (1942–54) featuring an entertainer or actor showed at least one of these scripted techniques simulating liveness or humour.

Control of speech

Roy Plomley and his production team seemingly trusted some castaways over others. When Vera Lynn, the seasoned broadcaster of *Sincerely Yours* (BBC Forces Programme, 1941) appeared on the show in 1951, she was awarded the unusual opportunity of being able to ad lib. This might well have been because Lynn was already a broadcaster and would understand what was required of her. There was little risk she would say something controversial or fall silent.

> **Lynn:** Ad lib. Must hear new tunes. Hear own records. Cup of tea, feet up, bit of quiet.
>
> **Lynn:** Ad lib. Five. Visualise in ballet frock. Cheeky fairy. Never grow any older.

This question of trust in an interviewee is significant here, and often shapes the entire dynamics or sound of an interview interaction. This becomes evident not only in these early editions but in the vast case of any interview recorded today both in the United Kingdom and internationally – whether face-to-face or down the line, for edited features or live studio encounters. In the case of *Desert Island Discs*, it is worth noting that this trust is limited to a very select few in these early days and appears dependent on the résumé of the castaway. The choice of castaways can be seen to mirror varying

definitions of what the BBC would consider to be an appropriate guest. For instance, musician Ed Sheeran appeared in 2017 while it took Paul McCartney until 1985 to appear for the first time. The definition of what constitutes to be a public figure (and what artistic expression is culturally valued or relevant), and who is worthy of an invitation could be seen to replicate the changing values of the Corporation over the years.

In the case of *Desert Island Discs*, the pre-recorded format freed the castaway and Plomley the obligation of being in a studio on the day of broadcast, and it allowed for the music to be inserted in after recording to fit with a specific duration. Scripting interview exchanges had its advantages for the interviewer, the institution and occasionally, the interviewee. There was no pressure for either party to remember what to say, no risk of making embarrassing mistakes, no danger of awkward silences or pauses, little opportunity to say something critical or controversial and little difficulty editing content at the post-production stages, following the interview recording. It allows for the music to be faded up under the scripted words of the guest. Scripting protects interviewees from the risk of public humiliation, of triggering a negative reaction from the government and of the perceived threat of silence. As Scannell sums up, it dealt with the 'terrors' of live performance (2003: 105). Scripting also succeeds in controlling the tone, the pace and the delivery of each line, like a play. Most important of all, it maintains control over the timing of speech. Rehearsal, (if deemed necessary) is possible and ensures that the on-air relationship is cordial and amicable. It was rare to play the music in directly, and guests would just supply the details of the gramophone choices and introduce them on tape.

There is an argument here that these early castaways and presenters spoke *at* their listener, rather than *to* them. As Scannell suggests, most listeners now can tell the

difference between scripted and unscripted talk, which can sound 'flat, dull, lacking in spontaneity and immediacy' (2003: 106). The on-air performance of the castaway during the scripted years may sound stilted and artificial to modern ears, but it is questionable whether the listening public would have been aware that the words coming from these well-known and highly regarded castaways were not their own, but instead choreographed, constructed and edited by the host and his team. It is also worth noting that the apparatus of broadcasting delivery would have supported a more precise, measured performance. Any voices heard through the receivers at this time would be distant and broken in places, meaning that the use of these guests who had professional broadcasting experience would arguably favour a clear delivery.

Yet scripting also favours the literate and the more practiced performer. It ignores the idea that authentic biographical experience should be told by the very person who has experienced these events, rather than a professional mediator of memories who can interpret these events. We do not own our own stories. Instead, it assumes that there is a need to caricature a person's personality to the public, for their stories to be heard. Furthermore, it suggests that performance is a key ingredient of broadcast talk, and that the public, or public figure cannot be trusted to appear on air if they have not been instructed, written for or coached.

The series (after a short break of nearly a year from 1953–54) went on to be presented by Plomley until his death in 1985, yet the format and ideals of this early era – of revealing the personal motivations of public figures remained steadfast. By the autumn of 1954 and after 204 episodes, he no longer had to submit his scripts for approval before recording his interviews.[9] While the questions and music would still form a structure, the

castaway could be allowed to speak without a script and in their own words. The reason for this change is not clear (there was a twelve-month hiatus when the programme stopped in September 1953 before returning once more in 1954). But after its return, we can see how methods of editorial control largely shifted from the pre-interview stage to the editing stage. BBC producers were slowly accepting this new form of unscripted exchange but were keen to stress that if new technique of unscripted exchanges became a common occurrence, then it should be pre-recorded.

In 1958, BBC radio features like *The Radio Ballads* by Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker and Peggy Seeger represented a tentative institutional and cultural shift, occurring first in regional networks and heard in the work of producers like Olive Shapley, Denis Mitchel, Lawrence Gilliam and Joan Littlewood. Here we hear the inclusion of more authentic and ordinary vernacular expression, indicating a trend towards both aesthetic and artistic experimentation in radio content and a very different approach to the interview. This (and the inclusion of vox pops and later the radio phone-in) displayed a real difference in sound to these early celebrity interviews and began to focus on the lived experiences of the working class. Now with more opportunity to record on location, producers began to find ways to foreground a more natural and quotidian sound of the ordinary contributor in the radio interview. Unlike the clean and professional sounding *Desert Island Discs*, emphasis began to be placed on capturing the raw minuscule details of real speech that proved fascinating – where the smallest sounds (or silences) became significant and revealed as much as the words.

Even so, the agreeable questioning style and conscious avoidance of controversy in the following decades, meant that *Desert Island Discs* continued to offer ‘reassuring

continuity to a section of the audience feeling overwhelmed by change elsewhere' (Hendy 2007: 32). But a different approach to the interview was gaining momentum – especially with concern to well-known public figures. In the United States, Ed Murrow-presented *Person to Person* (1953) came to inspire a more pressing and interrogative questioning performance. Inspired by this new approach, television producer Hugh Burnett then outlined his vision for a new British television programme, *Face to Face* in 1958, which was to be more invasive than the pleasant interview exchange heard on *Desert Island Discs*. According to a 1978 memo from Hugh Burnett to the Assistant Head of Television: '[t]here is room in out output [for] […] exhaustive questioning of distinguished people on highly controversial and personal topics...[the programme] would lay out boldly the history, beliefs, prejudices and character of a single human being' (cited in Holmes 2007: 437). *In the Psychiatrists Chair* (BBC Radio 4, 1982–2000), also adopted this public and probing form of celebrity interviewing. According to Mass Observation Records, some listeners reportedly felt somewhat uneasy about the more penetrating questioning techniques used by the host (Dr Anthony Clare) to his interviewees (Hendy 2007). In comparison, *Desert Island Discs* continued to offer a more traditional, unobtrusive and gentler approach, helped perhaps through its use of music.

There have been exceptions, and the programme has not always remained free of controversy. Interestingly, the questioning style of the presenter at times gets as much attention as the answers of the castaway. In 1996, presenter Sue Lawley was criticized for overly invasive questioning when speaking with Gordon Brown (the future British Prime Minister) and she received condemnation for failing to hold her castaway to account

when speaking with British Union of Fascists supporter Lady Mosley in 1989. Recently, the shows fifth presenter, Lauren Laverne has found herself the target of the British press for taking a 'lightweight' approach to her interviews (Aroesti 2020). A delicate balancing act seems to be valued here; hosts of *Desert Island Discs* are not respected for prying insensitively, yet all the while must appear to delve deeper to reveal a person's life history and personality.

Concluding note

The case of *Desert Island Discs* can reveal much about the BBC's early approach to the radio interview. Regarded by all as a tool to promote appropriate delivery of on-air speech by broadcasters and interviewees to the public, it was also used as a means of mediating, celebrating and promoting the performances of public figures. The use of scripting was intended to create a sense of informality, humour and theatrical drama – while, showing the importance of the off-air production process and its influence on those who experienced the interview. Finally, this programme shows the use of a predictable, reassuring and innovative format that all parties must buy into for the interview to succeed.

The format has always been centred on the impression that the interview could be used as a pathway to gain insight into the private motivations of public people – yet, of course, in reality the performative method of recording in the form of a radio play prioritized a highly constructed and tightly controlled interaction. The gentle scripted question/answer style consciously made use of theatrical or conversational devices to promote the illusion of spontaneity and liveness, often exploited to promote the professional persona of the castaway or highlight the status of the interviewee. Yet

despite evidence of Reithian cultural values, censorship and the pressures from BBC management, we can see value in seeing how the scripted exchange was used on radio, *and* as a meaningful topic for academic attention. In its early years, the interview was used as a creative device, and as such should not be dismissed. Instead, scripting allowed for a certain and important type of imaginative and resourceful techniques. *Desert Island Discs* should be seen as a template for the early radio interview – and one that allows us to observe the internal workings of the BBC, a reaction to wartime conditions and an attempt to create a performative interaction that celebrated the achievements of the interviewee and the public figure.

The BBC's approach to scripting talk was designed to teach the listening public, the interviewee and the broadcaster the appropriate way to carry out an interview (see Bailey 2009). The scripted interview was influenced by issues of technological restriction, institutional control and censorship policy. By examining examples like *Desert Island Discs*, we start to locate the practical ways that programme makers dealt with such restrictions and how on-air talk often conceals the hidden or undisclosed methods of production. Alongside well-established, long-running series like *The Archers* (1950), *Woman's Hour* (1946), *Just a Minute* (1967) and the *Shipping Forecast* (1967), *Desert Island Discs* can still be regarded as a staple ingredient of the Radio 4 schedule – and one worthy of study.

This article then seeks to encourage further research to make use of both the rich assortment of written and audio archive – to further compare contemporary episodes with those produced in its first decades and to hear more from those involved in the making of the programme. As we have seen, access to the microphone was available here for those

who already occupied other positions of power, whether economic, political or cultural. To this day, the programme continues to largely feature a collection of presenters and castaways who form a broadcasting establishment – floating between the worlds of academia, business, charity, media, politics, publishing and sport– separated from the listening public, presented to us as ordinary, yet at the same time extraordinary.

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Desert Island Discs with Lady Eleonor Smith and Vic Oliver (1943), BBC Forces Programme, UK, 5 October.

Desert Island Discs with Margaret Lockwood and Roy Plomley (1951), BBC Home Service, UK, 25 April.

Desert Island Discs with Tommy Trinder and Roy Plomley (1951), BBC Home Service, UK, 6 June, 6.20 p.m.

Desert Island Discs with Jimmy Edwards and Roy Plomley (1951), BBC Home Service, UK, 1 August.

Desert Island Discs with Jon Mills and Roy Plomley (1951), BBC Home Service, UK, 11 December, 6.20–7 p.m.

Desert Island Discs with Vera Lynn and Roy Plomley (1951), BBC Home Service, UK, 18 December.

Desert Island Discs with Peter Brough, Archie Andrews and Roy Plomley (1952), BBC Home Service, UK, 5 February.

Desert Island Discs with Lady Mosley and Sue Lawley (1989), BBC Radio 4, UK, 09.05 a.m.

Desert Island Discs with Rt. Hon Gordon Brown and Sue Lawley (1996), BBC Radio 4, UK, 8 March, 09.05 a.m.

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Notes

1. The BBC Forces Programme was a BBC radio station. It ran from 7 January 1940 until 26 February 1944.
2. BBC WAC, R51-406 Talks, Files 1&2, Talks Policy Techniques of Talk Production, 1942–54.
3. Taken from BBC WAC: Files S133/18/9 116-127.
4. Vic Oliver, castaway on Thursday 29 January 1942.
5. BBC WAC, S133/18/3, Scripts 24–44.
6. BBC WAC, S133/18/8, Scripts 103–15.

7. With castaway Clemence Dane, 30 October 1951.

8. BBC WAC, S133/18/6, Script for Petulia Clarke as the castaway.

9. Bernard Miles took part in the last scripted interview on Friday, 25 September 1953. Actor Mary Ellis was the first guest a year later, to appear without a script on Friday, 17 September 1954. No official reasons have been given to answer why the programme took this break. There had been other gaps between episodes and series – there was a seventeen-month gap between the end of the third series in March 1944 and August 1945. Initially after 67 episodes in January 1946, the programme appeared to have finished. It aired again five years later, this time on the Home Service on 3 January 1951.