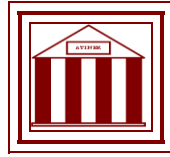


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**Content and Style Changes in BBC Radio  
News Bulletins and the Radio Newsroom**

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## **Evaluating Learning Management System (LMS)-facilitated Delivery of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Postsecondary Education**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a study into the BBC Radio Newsroom in London and analyses some of the changes in content and language of the news bulletins produced there since 1966. In the mid-1960s, the Radio Newsroom was a very hierarchical and sedate place, mainly staffed by male journalists and female typists, and where time was taken over writing the news output for a limited number of bulletins on the BBC Radio networks. More than forty years later, Radio News is part of a larger multimedia newsroom where men and women continuously produce news copy and edit actuality for several news outlets. Forty-three current and former journalists were interviewed about their perceptions of their work and a sample of news bulletins from BBC Radios 1, 2 and 4 was examined from the years 1966, 1976, 1986, 1992 and 2006. The findings suggest that since the 1980s, BBC news bulletins have included a greater range of stories and that in the last decade there appears to be somewhat less foreign news and more celebrity news than in the previous three decades. The most significant change has been the increased use of audio inserts which ‘liven up’ the bulletins. An examination of BBC News Style guides also provides an interesting glimpse of which issues were pertinent to news coverage in different decades; for example, guidance on how to describe Immigrants and suggestions on how and when to use the titles ‘Mr’ and ‘Mrs’ when denoting someone involved in a news story.

**Keywords:** Radio, News, Journalism, BBC, Style

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## Introduction

*In the middle of the afternoon someone would come down from the canteen with a tray with a silver teapot and cups and milk and the editor would have a cup of tea and if the senior duty editor was an established senior duty editor, he would get a cup of tea too, but if he was a duty editor acting up as an SDE he might not get one.....and that was the kind of hierarchy, the structure, which is why people will tell you...that you could go ages, all day, and not write anything except the weather. In those days it was a weird place. (former BBC Radio Journalist 8)*

This anecdote paints a vivid picture of what life was like in the BBC Radio Newsroom at Broadcasting House in the 1960s: a predominantly male preserve where journalists had long time periods to write the news for the bulletins on the BBC Radio Networks, time to have leisurely tea breaks and watch the cricket all day. How different the scene is now: whilst the journalists still drink tea (it is Britain after all), it is not served in a silver teapot and senior and junior editors fetch polystyrene cups for themselves and each other from the canteen. More seriously, the pressure of work is continuous as radio news output is required 24/7. The writers, also known as subeditors, not only write (or dictate to typists as was actually the case forty years ago): they digitally edit audio too. The Radio Newsroom as a separate physical entity no longer exists, but radio news is written and compiled by teams in the BBC multimedia newsroom or the offices of the radio networks.

This paper traces some of the developments in BBC Radio News and the content and style of its news bulletins in the period 1966-2006. Forty-three journalists (31 current and 12 former) were interviewed (in the period 2006-2008) on how they perceive their work. All the interviews with current journalists were face-to-face; those who had retired were interviewed either face-to-face or by telephone, except for two respondents who preferred to answer written questions only. Furthermore, a sample of news bulletins from BBC Radios 1, 2 and 4 was examined from the years 1966-2008, as were BBC Style guides and Policy documents.

## Journalists' roles

In 1967 the BBC created four new radio networks, BBC Radios 1, 2, 3 and 4. Radio 2 replaced the Light Programme, Radio 3 came in the place of the Third Programme and Radio 4 was the new name for the Home programme. The goal of the new Radio 1 was to offer popular music to a younger generation of listeners. The news for all the networks was produced by a small team of journalists in the BBC Radio Newsroom. The 1967 Radio Newsroom News guide listed the six qualities needed by a radio news writer:

*[E]nthusiasm to communicate...within the discipline imposed by radio as a medium; possession of a disciplined mind; ability to write clear, simple and straightforward prose; a delight in the use of words; possession of a wide general knowledge and genuine interest in the world around him (BBC File A/2773: 16-17).*

Today's radio news writers still need to possess those qualities, but in addition they need to be computer literate, adept at digital editing, immune to high levels of stress as they deal with the continuous news cycle, and willing and able to work long shifts. When John Simpson, now one of the BBC's best-known correspondents, joined the BBC Radio Newsroom in 1966, he felt it was a very strange place: 'a preponderance of grey hair and cardigans and a distinct scarcity of women....They were good people. It was a job that needed doing. But the newsroom was an island away from the world, not in it' (Hendy 2007: 22). The first signs of change happened in the early 1970s. In the 1967 Newsroom guide, the subeditors (subs) had been directed to dictate their stories to the newsroom typists, as writing it themselves would be 'time-wasting...and [would] bind [them] to literary language' rather than language that more closely resembled the spoken word (BBC File A/2773: 20). That advice was no longer included in the 1972 Newsroom guide as the subs were now told to either dictate or type the text themselves. Slowly the typists were phased out. However, the most profound change to the newscasts and the job of the writers was the introduction of actuality (correspondents' reports).

*On bulletins I watched the cricket on the telly...and I wrote one[story] at six and one at ten. The pace of the place was quite remarkable compared with what happened later....[Peter Woon – Head Radio Newsroom] suddenly brought in actuality...When this revolution happened they started having just one voice in the Radio 2 midnight and then ..I'd actually heard this on commercial [radio] – several voices in a short bulletin – and I thought yeah that really works, so we started doing that at midnight and that became more or less the norm. (Former 6)*

The driving force behind the implementation of the inclusion of more inserts in radio news was the new Head of the Radio Newsroom, Peter Woon, who wrote that the increased use of reporters' voices was aimed at 'enabling radio, by reporting with greater expertise and authority to explain and interpret more in an increasingly complex world' (BBC File R78/1 203/1). For the subs in the newsroom, the new presentational style meant a drastic change in their jobs as writers:

*I remember the shock one day – must have been early 1970s, when the edict came out from the new editor... 'I want a minimum of four voice pieces, in every news bulletin', which actually reduced your job to writing cues. ....that caused a great deal of job dissatisfaction. (Former 9)*

There were many complaints from listeners – including the BBC board of governors - about the technical quality of the inserts. The BBC's Director-General, Sir Hugh Greene, favoured the use of the reporter as the man to tell the story, but at the same time urged 'much more stringent tests of audibility.' (BBC File R78/1 203/1). The 1972 News guide insisted that there was no 'quota' for the number of inserts: 'our only standards are journalistic and broadcasting ones. Ask yourself: is this the best way to tell this story?' (21) For a long while after the introduction of actuality, its use was limited to the *Bulletins* (the longer newscasts, particularly on Radio 4, as opposed to *Summaries*, which are short 2-3 minute hourly roundups of news). The 1983 Radio

News guide mentions how the demands made on Radio News had risen steadily with bulletins and summaries carrying increasing numbers of voice pieces. By 1990 audio clips (including the voices of the newsmakers: politicians, 'experts', witnesses) on all networks had 'become more common and there was scope for a lighter touch on Radio 2' (Former BBC Radio Journalist 4). The sample of summaries from Radio 2 in 1992 included in this paper shows frequent use of actuality or voice pieces. There was some tension between the current affairs programmes and the Radio Newsroom and within the Newsroom the Bulletins Desk was afforded more prominence than the Summaries desk, something which did not really change until the introduction of the fifth BBC Radio network, 5-Live in the 1990s.

*Radio 2 summaries [in the 1970s]...weren't valued or rated, not even by the network – it was just a public service thing to do...all that mattered was what happened on Radio 4....The introduction of 5-live ...that's what changed the minds of journalists and correspondents. So instead of walking through and leaving someone at the summaries desk to pick up the scraps, because it's only a few minutes. Because of the fuss about 5-live, they suddenly had to start to take hourly summaries seriously....and the Radio 4 bulletins desk which was in the middle of the newsroom and the summaries desk, which was down in the corner...– eventually they turned it round and put the summaries desk in the middle. (Former 1)*

In 1997, the Newsbeat team in Yalding House took over the responsibility of writing the hourly summaries for Radio 1, which had until then been produced in the Radio Newsroom. Not that the Radio Newsroom now had little to do; the number of bulletins and summaries on the other networks (including the GNS or General News Service for BBC Local Radio stations) had continued to increase and the new 5-Live also needed news. In more recent years, news for 6-Music and Mobile Minute have been added to the duties.

Just as other professions have seen an increase in the number of female employees, so too has the BBC. The BBC Radio Newsroom Staff list for June 1966 lists two female 'writers' (one Duty Editor and one Sub Editor) out of a total of 54 journalists; in addition, there are two female production assistants. The Staff list of October 1976 has no women listed at all. By 1992 eighteen women had made it into the journalist ranks of the total of 68 workers; figures for recent years are not available, but on visits to the Radio Newsroom in 2006 and 2008 the ratio of men to women was 13 to 5 on the day shift whilst the ratio at the BBC Radio 1 *Newsbeat* offices was 2 men to 5 women journalists.

The continuous cycle of news output of the modern 24/7 BBC Radio News arguably fits in with Nick Davies' (2009) idea of 'churnalism' (see also Lewis et al, 2008). Among the respondents, there is no consensus of opinion about the production regimes in radio news. Some feel they are constantly producing output without much regard to quality or ability to reflect or crafting language: 'summaries are all stripped out, you don't have chance to refresh...and update' (Current RJ 2008/6), whereas others enjoy the fast pace. What many do feel is that the types of stories that BBC Radio News covers are relatively consistent.



## Content

Andrew Marr (2007) argues that for the majority of British people the 1960s felt like a continuation of the 1950s (233); despite many changes this was still the decade where minorities did not receive equal treatment, where employers could legally pay women less than men for doing the same job and where having children out of wedlock was seen as shameful (266). Yet, the 1960s was also the start of a period of increased social mobility because of the creation of comprehensive schools and polytechnics and so-called 'red brick' universities (Clarke 1996: 284). It was the decade that society became more tolerant: the death sentence was repealed in 1965, homosexuality and abortion were decriminalised in 1967 and the Divorce Reform Act of 1969 made divorce less cumbersome. In addition, musical tastes changed and pop and rock could be diffused and listened to by a 'conspicuous and noisy youth culture' (Clarke 1996: 291) partly thanks to radio. As Black says: a time that saw the 'rise of new cultural forms [...] a new agenda moulded by shifts in the understanding of gender, youth, class, place and race' (2004: 55). Although it is the 1990s which are often associated with the idea of a 'cult of a celebrity', Marr argues such obsessions actually began in the 1960s: 'The origins of 'Big Brother' television exhibitionism are buried in game shows and agony aunt columns half a century old. The raising of footballers and musicians from being tradesmen servants of the public to misbehaving gods began then too' (2004: 275).

In 1966 Britain appeared in the grip of industrial unrest, by 2006 the economy was doing well (only to be hit hard again in 2008). Politics took up a substantial slice of the coverage in the 1960s and continues to do so today, although more so on Radio 4 than on Radio 2 and Radio 1. Throughout the years BBC News has reported on wars, civil unrest, natural disasters, accidents and unusual crime stories, which would fit perfectly well with the idea of news factors or news values that shape journalistic output (Galtung and Ruge 1965, Wu 2000) In some instances the subjects have occupied bulletins for several decades, as in the case of the Northern Ireland conflict or the tensions in the Middle East.

A sample of 141 newscasts was analysed from 1966, 1976, 1986, 1992 and 2006, in ten year intervals using newscasts of each 4<sup>th</sup> day of the week for 4 weeks starting at a random point in September (24<sup>th</sup> September). For each date the R4 (or Home Service) 1800 bulletin was reviewed. Several summaries (usually the 1900) from R1 and 2 (or Light Programme) were also included, as were the 0800 R4 bulletin on 14<sup>th</sup> February of each of the years and ad-hoc news output from other years within the time span. Table 1 shows the main types of stories covered in each time period, overall number of stories in each newscast and the number of audio inserts (voice pieces and clips of actuality) per broadcast.

As the autumn is the traditional time for the UK political parties to hold their party conferences, it is understandable that there is so much political coverage, but in the case of R4 (/Home), political news is also abundant at other times of the year. In the mid-1960s both the R4/Home Service and the R1&2/Light Programme included a great deal of foreign coverage; not surprising as this was the time when Rhodesia was trying to become independent from Britain. The sample of news output from 1986 shows a much greater range of stories. While social, health, crime and science stories were occasionally evident in the mid-60s and mid-70s sample, in the mid-80s they

had achieved a more prominent status. The sample of bulletins examined is too small to draw hard conclusions, but there is some suggestion from the 2006 output that foreign news, while still included in the output, is afforded less prominence than in previous decades. An exception is formed by news relating to the presence of British soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, which does feature several times. This could be categorised as foreign news or simply have been selected by the news producer for its relevancy to a British audience. BBC bulletins and summaries have not become substantially longer since the 1980s and if a greater range of topics have to be covered in the same amount of time available, with increasing numbers of inserts also taking up airtime, then it is understandable from a practical point of view that other stories, such as international news, have had to be left out. Furthermore, while again being aware of the sample size, it could be suggested from the 2006 output that there *are* also more stories about celebrities. Celebrities have always been interesting: Elizabeth Taylor's many marriages were covered over the years as were court cases involving singers, but as UK society (and other Western societies) seems to increasingly be moving towards a society in which celebrity status is promoted and sought after, encouraged by reality TV programmes and talent contests, news too has inevitably started to include this type of story more frequently. Indeed, Harcup (2009) lists 'celebrity' as one of the updated news values.

### Style Changes

The style of writing adopted in 1966 (and 1967) is less conversational than in later years. Although the average word per sentence (approximately 22) is similar to now (at least on BBC Radio 4), the lack of audio inserts in the news bulletins of the 1960s give them a more laboured feel. Sometimes very long sentences are used in the bulletins, as in the following example; a sentence of 52 words, taking up four and a half lines on the original typed copy:

*The Minister makes it clear in a letter to the employers and the union that the reason why the Government considers the agreement to fall outside its freeze policy is that many of the men concerned had received more money before July the 20<sup>th</sup> – when the prices and incomes standstill was announced. (20.9.1966 SHIPBUILDERS for 6.00 and 8.30 PM Home Service)*

The choice of lexis by writers is not much different today than in the 1960s and 70s. News items in R4 bulletins from 1976 could - with factual amendments – easily be included in a bulletin three decades later. Take the following announcement of a collision:

*Within the past half-hour, we've been getting news of a collision between two British warships off the Dutch coast. The vessels – the MERMAID and the CURZON (formerly called the FITTLETON) were taking part in a NATO exercise.*

*First reports say there are no casualties. With the details so far, here's Julia Somerville:*

*Somerville Live*

*In: The two ships*

*Out: .. 3827*

*DUR: 55"*

One story spotted on R1 and 2 in 1967, however, is unlikely to make it into today's news broadcasts as now it would be deemed politically incorrect:

### *SUPER*

*TODAY'S CONFERENCE QUOTE: A company director told a trade conference at Paignton that housewives who shopped at supermarkets came out with 25 per cent more than they intended to buy. (R1/2 10.10.1967)*

This is the only example of sexist language found in the sample analysed, but one of the journalists interviewed for this study commented that stories applicable to 'housewives' were common when he joined in the late 1980s: 'The language used to be so sexist, for example "housewives paying more for milk". In fact we were fixated with milk and bread prices' (Current RJ 2008/2).

The first BBC (Radio) News Guide or Style Guide was printed in 1967. The Corporation has published an updated Style Guide every few years since. From the beginning the guides have included sections on news values and style. The guides are a useful resource to determine how language use and the guidance thereon have changed over the years. Often the issues concentrated on in these documents are ones that are important in society at the time. For example, the BBC News Guide 1975 (S494/1/1) has a separate section on Immigrants in Britain.

### *IMMIGRANTS IN BRITAIN*

*We try to avoid giving needless offence, not least over matters of race. In certain circumstances it is wrong to identify a man as, say, West Indian or a Pakistani when to do so may needlessly foster prejudice. Obviously, race or colour is the essence of some news stories.....we should always bear in mind that good and evil are a common heritage and should ask ourselves whether it is fair to add a race tag.....the following notes may help:*

- (a) Never use "coloured" when a country of origin can be given – West Indian, Pakistani etc.*
- (b) Never use "coloured" or give a country of origin when to do so might needlessly stir up racial hatred.*

Note the use of the word 'coloured'. Four years on, in 1979, the guide still refers to 'coloured'. By 1983 the separate section on "Immigrants" is no longer included and 'coloured' by then has become a contentious word:

*Coloured should never be used to describe people in Britain, it's regarded as deeply offensive. 'Black' or 'Asian' should be used instead... However, 'Coloured' is used to describe people of mixed race in South Africa. (12)*

In 1992 the guidance on this issue is under a longer heading on RACISM, which together with SEXISM, DISABILITIES and LIBRARY PICTURES forms a chapter entitled SENSITIVITY. This chapter acknowledges that 'some words which were generally acceptable a decade ago are not acceptable now.' The 2003 guide devotes just two short sentences to race and colour, saying 'the advice on race and colour has not changed. Colour or ethnic origin should be mentioned only if relevant to the story.' It might be concluded therefore, that by the end of the 1990s the issue on how to denote race or colour was not contentious anymore and that just as 'the disabled' or 'the handicapped' had been replaced by 'disabled people', so society and BBC journalists agreed on terminology with respect to race.

Another illustrative example of how style guides reflect issues pertinent to news coverage at particular times is the inclusion of many phrases relating to the war in the Balkans in the 2000 guide, such as BIHAC POCKET or ENCLAVE; BOSNIA; BOSNIAN GOVERNMENT; SERBS, CROATS AND MUSLIMS; ETHNIC CLEANSING. On the latter it says: 'We decided early on in this war that useful though this phrase is as a piece of shorthand, it does tend to sanitise the real horrors of what is going on...Please therefore return to the practice of using this phrase only when it can be attributed to someone or accompanied by some sort of explanation and/or qualification.'

In the 1960s in society there were moves towards less formality, moves which were reflected in the increased banter of DJs on BBC Radio 1 and more real actuality in Radio 4 programmes. Hendy (2007) says that the goal of the controller of the Home Service (later Radio 4), Gerald Mansell, was 'the great diversification of opinion [...] the breakdown of deference' (44). One striking phenomenon in news output that mirrors the move to less formality is the abandonment of the title "Mr" or "Mrs" coupled with full names in news bulletins. In 1966 the following type of style was common:

**20.9.66 Rhodesia for 6 & 8.30 pm**

*Mr Ian Smith went to Government House in Salisbury this afternoon and spent two hours with the Commonwealth Secretary, Mr Bowden, and the Attorney-General, Sir Elwyn Jones. With Mr Smith were Mr Lardner Burke – who's responsible for law and order in the illegal regime...*

Politicians, public figures and ordinary people (except children) were given their title as well as their full name. Sporting personalities and criminal suspects formed an exception. In the same bulletin as above, a news story about the world boxing title fight omits the prefix 'Mr' to denote Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammed Ali) and his opponent Karl Mildener, just giving their first and second names instead. In the story about the trial of the Great Train Robber Ronald "Buster Edwards", the robber is given his full name on first mention and simply called Edwards on second mention, omitting 'Mr' in both instances. The Style Guide of 1983 advises writers not to use Mr and Mrs on R1, but to include it on the other networks for politicians and other public figures. So, the trade union leaders who were refused visas to visit South Africa as reported in the 1900 R2 summary of 10 October 1986 were referred to as 'Miss Brenda Dean of the printing union SOGAT, and Mr Harry Conroy of the National Union of Journalists.'

By 1990 R2 no longer needed to use titles on first mention either. Besides, all radio journalists were told to 'never refer to defendants by the surname alone' as they were innocent until proven guilty, so calling the alleged train robber, Buster Edwards, simply Edwards, as had been done two decades earlier, was not acceptable. The general rule, the 1992 Style Guide said, was to 'give the first name and surname in news stories (Jeffrey Archer) and follow it, in any later mention with style and surname (Mr Archer).' However, R4 continued the practice of using Mr or Mrs on first mention for politicians and other public figures except sports personalities and artists. For example, the author Salman Rushdie in the 0800 bulletin of 14 February 1992 was referred to by his first name and surname on first mention and then just by "Rushdie" on second mention; in the same bulletin the Liberal Democrat's Home Affairs spokesman was called Mr Robert Maclennan). The 2000 Style A-Z advises: 'MR, MRS, MS, MISS – we no longer use such titles at first mention. From the 2006 bulletins and summaries it is clear that R4 had indeed abandoned the title for politicians too. ('Tony Blair has said he wants this week's Labour conference to.....'- R4 1900 24.9.06). This apparent decrease in formality confirms what Black (2004) observes in his work *Britain since the Seventies*: 'the decline [...] in all its respects was a major one that was more important and far-reaching than is generally appreciated. Informality in means of address and conversation became far more pronounced' (49).

## Conclusion

Journalism has gone through profound changes since the late 1960 as a result of opportunities afforded by technological advances, increased competition, globalisation and changing demands put on the profession by owners, governments and audiences. The BBC has been fortunate that its funding as a public broadcaster, whilst often under threat, has remained forthcoming and enabled the corporation's journalists to produce an unrivalled service, valued for its scope, depth and commitment to impartiality. The journalists in the BBC Radio Newsroom and BBC Radio One have had to contend with the changing mediascape which requires more output at more times for more networks (and in the last decade having to do so with fewer staff). This paper has tried to show some of the differences between the more sedate, but hierarchical style of the 1960s compared to the multi-tasking, highly pressured environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It has also provided a glimpse of changes in content: arguably less foreign news and more human interest stories and reports on celebrities, but essentially not that many changes. Looking at the language of the newscasts, here too there do not appear to be radical alterations, although Radio 1 has developed a 'snappier' style (shorter sentences, very short audio inserts, more personal addressing of the listener). The most significant change on Radio 4 and Radio 2 since the 1970s has been the increased use of audio inserts to 'liven up' the bulletins. Furthermore, a general loosening of style and move to less formality, mirroring changes in society, for example the dropping of titles in front of names, is noticeable.

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**Table 1. Main types of stories covered in each time period, overall number of stories in each newscast and the number of audio inserts (voicers and clips of actuality) per bulletin.**

*NB: HS is Home Service, LP is Light Programme*

Year	Major categories	Number of stories (weekdays)	Number of inserts	Comments
mid-60s	Foreign (on HS approx 1/3 of all stories), political and economic/industrial	<i>HS 6pm:</i> 12-13  <i>LP 7pm:</i> 4-6 <i>R1/2</i> 7.30pm: 12	<i>HS:</i> 0  <i>LP:</i> 0	Mainly compound and complex sentences. Use of direct quote rather than reported speech No inserts – straight read
mid-70s	Foreign, political and industrial, Terrorism (IRA/Northern Ireland)	R4 6pm: 13-16 R1/2 7 pm: 6-7	R4: 5-7 R1/2: 0	
mid-80s	Foreign, political, crime, health and social issues	R4 6pm: 17-22 R2 7 pm: 5-6 R1: 3-5	R4: 10-13 R2: 0-1 R1: 1-2	Increasing number of inserts
Early 90s	Foreign, Political (incl. European Community) , IRA	R4 6pm: 18-23 R2: 3-5 R1: 4-6	R4: 13-16 R2: 1-2 R1: 1-3	
mid 00s	Politics, Crime, Terrorism and Muslim extremism, Social issues, Foreign	R4 6pm: 22-24 R2: 5-7 R1: 5-7	R4: 14-16 (R4 summaries usually have 1 insert now)  R2: 2-3 R1: 2-3	