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# Hyperlocal Radio

# Reclaiming Conversation through Social Broadcasting

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## Introduction

Recent developments have contributed to a transformation in broadcasting: a shift to mainstream podcasting as large corporations now begin to dominate this space, the homogenization of local broadcasting and a reinforced polarization through personalized programming and newsfeeds. These changes have created a demand for what I am calling 'social broadcasting'; an authentic interactive means of social engagement dedicated to micro-communities, a new category of broadcasting with its own set of devices. In this chapter, I demonstrate how social broadcasting enables a reclaiming of conversation at source in micro-communities, providing a counterpoint where these communities can control their narrative.

I will show how social broadcasting takes community radio-making into a hyperlocal context based on case studies drawn from my own work in London over a decade. Each case study illustrates social engagement in micro-settings that present different challenges, but also reveals the multi-faceted potential of social broadcasting:

- Kings Cross connections (Interaction with strangers);
- Chrisp Street on air (Mobile micro-radio);
- Beyond the babble (A public recording booth at Tate Modern).

The hyperlocal radio format that underpins these case studies provides a recognized framework for communication between active participants, a safe platform where a process of co-creation activates and strengthens a collective imagination. This framework responds to participants' aspirations. It allows and promotes a space for interactive communication amongst people, including those who believe they do not have a voice.

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David Hendy predicted that the introduction of digital technologies would democratize the airwaves enabling marginalized voices to access the airwaves as 'microbroadcasters' (Hendy 2000: 218) which we have seen happen twenty years after that article was written with the proliferation of podcast creators. Ironically, the very technologies and changes in society that enable and democratize audio broadcasts also create the need for them as a means of human connectivity, with people becoming more isolated and searching for human-to-human ways of communicating. As Kate Lacey suggests:

> This is because the proliferation of voices and sounds is not in and of itself a sign of a well-functioning democratic public space, for not only does proliferation not equate straightforwardly to plurality, but it might also erode any sense of a collective public forum.
>
> (2013: 17)

# Situating social broadcasting in the audio media landscape

The objective of social broadcasting is to document and present real everyday experiences and conversations in relation to specific spaces, inviting reflexivity both from participants in real-time and listeners in the future. Rather than recording interviews to tell a pre-determined story for a prescribed audience, these conversations are themselves as much the purpose of the social broadcast as the final audio output.

Since coining my practice as social broadcasting in 2015 and laying the foundations for an emergent genre, there has been a visible shift towards community micro-broadcasting. Local organizations, arts institutions and charities for marginalized people have understood the benefits and relatively low cost of creating podcasts, audio dramas and sound works specifically for and about the communities they are connected to. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 have engendered a surge of this type of audio output currently under the podcast label. Technically they are podcasts (as these are generally downloadable speech-based audio formats), but as I demonstrate in this chapter, this hyperlocal radio-making would benefit from having a distinguishable label and its own set of conventions. The year 2021 also saw the rise and fall of the audio social networking app *Clubhouse*, which at its peak in 2021 became a community broadcasting space where in theory anyone (invited members of the app), could join a live discussion (Dixon 2021). Like many, I wondered if this was where radio broadcasting was heading, but it seems that this was a pandemic-inspired flash in the pan. It has, however, motivated Amazon, LinkedIn and Twitter to add audio tools to their social networking gambit (Pardes 2020). Something that shouldn't be overlooked as these platforms compete to be key players in audio broadcasting in the future.

Social broadcasting has emerged from an amalgam of contemporary radio making, community engagement and participatory art practice, setting it apart from community

radio, oral history recording and podcasting, although it does draw from these formats. To understand what differentiates social broadcasting from existing radio/audio production and broadcast formats, some of the similarities, differences and overlaps are outlined below.

# Isn't this community radio?

The emergence and popularization of community radio has democratized radio making and broadcasting, enabling non-media professionals to become involved participants. It remains a vital part of the radio landscape, galvanising linguistic and cultural minorities and recognized as a means of promoting their values of democratic empowerment and societal development (UNESCO).[1] However, as Josephine Coleman observes (2021: 30–2) community radio in the UK, despite the ease of entry provided by digital technologies, has become formatted to studio-based-presenter-led programmes with community participation often limited to 'experts' or (local) celebrities interviewed in the studio, or public participation via the phone-in. When community members are recorded in the field, there is often a meta-narrative guiding the production with a presenter using these recordings as voiced illustrations of a topic. This has been my personal experience of volunteering at community radio stations and in her analysis of four community radio stations, Coleman (2021) also notes very little location recording, with an emphasis on studio presenting for music shows, internet news gathering and some in-studio interviews in both the training side for volunteers and staff and the broadcasts.

Even though conversations are guided, social broadcasting involves a co-creation process to facilitate open-ended conversations rather than what is traditionally described as an interview. Rather than inviting community members into the studio, radio is taken out of the studio into spaces of encounter, levelling out the hierarchy that inevitably happens even in a community radio context.

# Sounds like oral history …

Social broadcasting overlaps with oral history methodology by recording voiced memories, experiences and opinions. However, interviews recorded as oral history are often based on personal interpretations, they are recorded as factual rather than exploratory documents. There is little space for conversation and no room for affect: 'The final objective is not to interpret, but to record factual evidence and, thereby, to create primary documents from which historians can reconstruct the past.'[2]

Social broadcasting gains from not needing to adhere to established conventions for creating historical documents. Oral history interviews are usually created as closed documents to be archived with minimal editing, as this would be tampering with a

historical document. Their unedited 'pure' nature means that the listener has to filter through long non-curated interviews. Social Broadcasting does borrow from this method of direct line of inquiry, but leaves interpretation open to create authentic recordings that can then become part of an evolving living archive. Examples of this methodology can be observed in *StoryCorps* (now the largest collection of human voice recordings archived at the US Library of Congress with a selection of these recordings edited and made available to a general audience as an NPR radio show and podcast)[3] and an online archive with themed compilations made available for public listening. *The Listening Project* (The BBC's version of this format inspired by *StoryCorps*), delivers edited and compiled versions of recorded conversations on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Sounds and the unedited recordings are archived at the British Library (BBC 2012).

My social broadcasting practice takes this further by collating these recordings into montages more akin to radio feature making, which according to John Biewen (2010), creates something *true* by synthesizing chaotic material into a cohesive idea, allowing something closer to the real to come through. The montage of diverse voices around a theme inspires more open interpretation. Multiple perspectives and testimonies instil a deeper understanding of narratives in their social and historical context.

# Just call it podcasting

Since Ben Hammersley introduced the portmanteau word *podcast* in 2004, referring to downloadable speech-based audio content, this term has since become more synonymous with particular formats; expert/celebrity conversational interviews and chatty-style social commentary between presenters. The ease of access and low-cost nature of production means that the majority of podcasts produced by non-broadcast professionals have become a substitute or companion to the blog, sitting comfortably alongside other social media propagation. There has been a distinct shift away from the amateur podcasters seemingly motivated to build communities through 'altruistic affective labour' (Sullivan 2019), towards a professionalization of the medium. Mainstream media interest in podcasting has resulted in expert *or* celebrity interviews and *chat*, neatly labelled by Martin Spinelli as 'chatcasts' (2019: 1–17), now dominating the space.[4]

However, the advancement and accessibility of high-quality, low-cost and light digital portable recording equipment, easily accessible editing software and the accessibility of digital platforms, have also generated adoption by micro-communities underrepresented by news outlets as they delocalize. The participation from community members and this hyperlocal storytelling outweighs concerns about output distribution around audience numbers. A US-wide example has been initiated by the Public Radio Exchange – PRX Gateways Cities Audio Project launched in 2020, inviting local residents to podcasting workshops in ten underrepresented cities across the USA. According to Kerri Hoffman

(CEO at PRX) 'Podcasts can be successful even if they don't have a massive audience. They can just reach the right audience' (Scire 2021).

This community podcasting adopts and uses the tools and platforms of podcasting to disseminate and share audio works and productions, moving beyond the conventions that have developed around podcasts over the last decade, experimenting with both form and content. It could not exist without these new technologies. These enable active participation in a familiar space (taking radio out of the studio) and allow for a co-creation process where participants can play an active role in recording and production. This adheres to my definition of social broadcasting.

# Why *social* broadcasting?

Social broadcasting follows social interactions at source, where they happen. This implies reflexive social elements, which invariably shed a light on the gaps and the margins in society. The social is made up of everyday encounters with all their complexities and contradictions enabling the representation of social exclusion in its lived reality as a social phenomenon. The social that I am considering here points to a more authentic version of a shared lived experience than what is represented through social media, for example.

Any space of social encounter is a nexus of relationships that can potentially expose social paradoxes and trends through lived experiences. Conversations in these spaces not only reveal present opinions and attitudes but can also hint at strategies of coping and adaptation to the social context, therefore acting as potential novel conduits for conviviality. Seemingly mundane or everyday conversations implicitly provide insights into wider society. As theorized by Erving Goffman in his study of encounters as social arrangements, these involve 'A mutual and preferential openness to verbal communication' (1961: 10).

Some of the devices that I have developed or adapted for recording in social spaces of encounter to encourage and record these types of conversations are as follows; recording in a predefined space as a place of interaction (such as a train station, a church or a bus stop, a mall, and these encounters are random and I encourage this even though research has been done beforehand about the place), creating a dedicated place for conversations as an installation or mobile radio studio, establishing the space as a set (a social stage where people will interact, there is still an element of randomness but they are invited to enter this constructed space and providing participants with the tools and training to record each other in private).[5]

Whether accessing a defined space of interaction or creating a 'stage' for a space of interaction, taking the recording process out of the conventional radio studio invariably shifts the power dynamic. This shift gives ownership and agency to participants, having a profound impact on what is said and how it is said.

# Case study: King's Cross connections

## Accessing a space

This montage piece is comprised of conversations recorded over a day at King's Cross Station, London (Scazzocchio 2018). The train station as the space of encounter offers a live example of a spatial nexus. Here I interacted with people's involvement with the space as they were waiting (for a train or a person), using the station as a stage with a predefined set of props (seats, signs, ticket barriers, etc.) creating a catalyst for connection by encouraging conversations between strangers that inevitably established points of connection.

> Woman 1: 'So where are you travelling to today?'
> Woman 2: 'I'm going to Leeds.'
> Woman 1: 'Is it the 1 o'clock to Leeds?'
> Woman 2: 'It's 12.35.'
> Woman 1: 'Ah so that'll be t'one before me, so I could tell that you were kind of from that way.'
> Woman 2: 'Really?'
> Woman 1: 'Yeah.'
> Woman 2: 'I'm amazed actually.'
> Woman 1: 'I don't know I just kind of had a feeling because I thought, she's sat here waiting and I thought she would be going that way towards Leeds, do you know what I mean? I don't know.'
> Woman 2: 'Yeah well I'm only Yorkshire 'til I was 8, I mean I was born there.'
> Woman 1: 'I've been in Yorkshire all my life so …'

In this case, the microphone held by me as the facilitator initiates a conversation that may not have happened spontaneously. There is implicit reflexivity about social connection between two women sitting side-by-side in the waiting area. This is the beginning of their realization of shared experiences in their Yorkshire lives far from London. By introducing themes in conversation around serendipity, luck and chance, connections between participators were made both directly and indirectly. It is important to note that this method of 'in the field' recording, where participants have not agreed to be interviewed or recorded in advance, needs careful consideration with regards to consent and use of recordings. Typically, with pre-arranged interviews for oral history recording and audio (podcast and radio) broadcast, participants will have time in advance to consider their options, will be asked to sign a consent form after the interview and will have the possibility to revise this consent in the future. This consent will clearly state how the recordings are being used and waive any rights to compensation in the future.

I have developed a simple strategy to manage consent and privacy for placed-based impromptu interactions, where time restrictions like needing to catch a train are part of the challenge. I do not turn on the recording equipment until I have given a full explanation of what the project is, where it will be broadcast and clearly stating that it will be available

online (if this is the case). After our conversation or interaction, I will ask them on tape if they are happy for this recording to be used, to give me the name they wish to use or if they prefer to remain anonymous and then ask them to sign a very simple consent form with these points outlined clearly. I also leave a business card for them to contact me if they change their mind. Unless it is important within the context of the project, I take out names and identifying information in edited work.

# Case study: Chrisp Street on air

## Micro-radio making

In this example the *set* was a mobile radio station built to resemble a market stall to engage communities and enable discussion around the future of Chrisp Street Market (Poplar, East London), an area struggling in the face of rapid urban regeneration (Scazzocchio 2014). The installation in the market square was central to a series of events encouraging unity and engagement amongst local businesses and residents with local councillors, politicians and property developers. The radio stall generated a space for candid and open discussion, providing insights rarely attainable through more linear formats such as public forums and meetings.

The parameters created by this prop – as a functioning radio studio without walls – were conducive to enabling nuanced and sophisticated group discussion between community members who perhaps otherwise wouldn't engage in respectful and thoughtful conversation. Creating a radio-studio environment can initiate and facilitate local conversations, benefitting from the understood social conventions of radio. This enables a 'live' broadcast through localized speakers broadcasting to the near environment. The audience are passers-by or an invited audience, with the possibility of broadcast to a wider audience online. It is these conscious and unconscious rules and conventions of the radio-studio environment taken out of context and placed into another setting that encourage contributors to listen deeply to one another and feel listened to when they express themselves. The use of headphones and microphones locks and connects the contributors into an intimate space even if they are in a public setting. The prop-like feel of the mobile radio station (it looks like radio but isn't as daunting), alleviates anxiety; the use of a microphone creates a sense of empowerment. The rules of radio and the role of the conversation facilitator (rather than presenter/host) establish fluid conversation where contributors are compelled to listen and respond.

There is also an element of spectacle, creating a show. Yet unlike the traditional radio roadshow elevated on a stage with studio equipment hidden from view, the stage in this context is the radio-studio itself. The ephemeral nature of this type of mobile radio is more accessible to those who might be intimidated by a formal radio studio and who would possibly never consider speaking publicly on local or community radio. Here they feel open and relaxed enough to participate.

The social context of the space also plays a part in generating the radio form. Two elements influencing the form of the broadcast are the environmental soundscape and the timeframe, both of which create their own methodological challenges. If the space is an actant, the soundscape is part of the space; the soundscape defines and draws in participants, either at the time of recording or the time listening, contextualizing the conversation. In King's Cross Connections, the station soundscape with speaker announcements, becomes another character in the piece. The space also defines the timeframe, for example there is a limited timeframe at a railway station where participants are engaged in conversation whist they are waiting. The timeframe can be open-ended or determined in advance (radio *set* or created space). When it is predetermined, the time of interaction itself becomes a feature of the social nexus influencing the conversation. As a nexus captured in a lived present moment that potentially becomes a contemporary archive, the *social* of social broadcasting is by definition open-ended. Understandings, interpretation and affective reactions are deferred to the listener.

# Case study: Beyond the Babble (Tate Modern, London)

## Social broadcasting as a dialectic space for social participation and transformation

Techniques used in social broadcasting draw on conventional radio practices, yet can also cross into the realm of participatory art practice, as the recording equipment and setting become a stage to both initiate and record interactions. This offers scope for reaching multi-layered audiences in-situ or through further broadcasts.

The participatory sound installation Beyond the Babble (Scazzocchio and Alevizou 2017) was devised as three separate experiences: participatory self-reflection through the act of conversation via the constructed *audio booth*; an onsite sound installation to encourage audiences to tune-in to each narrative through the babble of noise created by the surrounding exhibition space; finally, taking the audio out of the exhibition space into the public realm through the sending of 'audio postcards' via Twitter (audio tweets).[6]

The recording booth represents another type of mobile radio studio, designed to initiate private one-to-one conversation rather than open group discussion. Built to be mobile and soundproofed to some degree (in that it creates a separate space from the public space), it can be used for multiple participatory interventions to record personal narratives and voiced expressions around a given theme within the context of an immersive public experience. These broadcasts imply the use of *Active Listening*, developed as a therapeutic practice to convey a mutual understanding between speaker and listener (Rogers and Farson 1957). This is a central concept in both the creation of the broadcast as a creative

process and the dissemination to involved and non-involved audiences. The open-ended character of the social broadcasting contrasts with the guided narrative and interpretive style that is dominant in radio and podcast feature or documentary making.

This recording-booth structure was designed to explore notions of public and private space, self-reflection and what we choose to reveal about our identity and private self. Participants were drawn into a private conversation in what appeared to be a private space, yet the experience was public and visible. The conversations couldn't be overheard as they were recorded but became available for public listening afterwards. Once inside the structure, the participant facing a mirror and me as the facilitator were not visible to each other and had no eye contact. The focus was entirely on the speech transmitted through microphones and listened to through headphones, again locking both participant and facilitator into the interaction. Participants were guided into a private, self-reflective conversation about notions of identity: 'Who am I?' whilst hearing their own voice through headphones and seeing themselves in a mirror, resulting in a slightly uncomfortable, yet on the whole revelatory experience. Many entered into a stream-of-consciousness monologue.

> Who I am is a very fleeting notion … what's mostly surprised me of who I am, is that I've decided who I've become, what I am just exists in my own perception … and not of solid notions of identity … I find it much easier to flit through existence.
>
> (Felix, participant)

As the participants were taken through this guided conversation, they were asked to reflect on notions of home, belonging, citizenship, their contribution to society and finally to reflect who they are at this moment in time.

> It's the first time I defined citizenship in terms of emotions. I haven't thought about citizenship like that before; I have thought about it before in terms of metaphors.
>
> (Eugenia, participant)

Edited versions of these conversations were then broadcast in three different ways; edited recordings were added to a sound installation throughout the week as a growing babble of noise, transmitted through directional speakers around the exhibition space. Here a wider exhibition audience could tune in to each participant's self-reflective monologue. A series of 24-second audio postcards or 'audio tweets' were posted throughout the week as a live representation and synthesis of the piece to reach an audience beyond the walls of Tate Modern. The final manifestation of Beyond the Babble was the recreation of the sound installation in digital form, emulating the act of being able to tune in and out of the noise and listen to edited versions of each participant's reflections synthesizing what they had revealed in the 'booth' (Alevizou 2017).

This reached multiple audiences, ranging from the direct participants engaged in personal reflection within the recording booth, visitors to the exhibition experiencing the onsite audio installation and audiences engaging with the audio postcards via Twitter during the week of the exhibition, to wider ongoing audiences via the digital archive on the dedicated website. The concluding impact can be defined both by the personal and the

collective, at a moment in time as part of current debates and social transformations. As a social broadcast, Beyond the Babble created a multi-layered dialectic space of participation and transformation.

# Social broadcasting: creating spaces where the power of authentic conversation can be claimed

Both radio broadcasting and podcasting (chatcasts) are dominated by the interview format rather than providing a space for conversation. It is important to understand the difference and why creating a genuine space for conversation is increasingly relevant in the audio broadcast space. Philosopher Theodore Zeldin defines conversation as 'a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, engage them in new trains of thought' (1998: 14). In the rare moments when a radio presenter or podcast host relinquishes control and allows the chat or interview to move beyond banter or an exchange of facts into a more authentic and vulnerable space of conversation, this is applauded, yet it remains unusual. Imagine what would happen if the narrative wasn't controlled and conversations could be claimed or indeed reclaimed?

Multiple voices, narratives and points of view inevitably arise through spaces of encounters, whether they are random or engineered. A unique feature of Social Broadcasting is its ability to multiply participants and audiences through layered methods of engagement. Yet this multiplicity also echoes the emphasis on authentic social engagement in micro-communities, empowering them to control their narratives, whether the audience is localized or networked.

In summary, the intersecting layers of audiences are as follows:

1. Directly involved participants who listen to themselves as well as to other participants.
2. The on-site audience listening to the conversations as they happen (as is the case of the mobile radio station).
3. A localized audience listening to an edited synthesized version in the form of an audio installation.
4. Shared listening experiences in-situ (where possible) of the finished audio output for participants as facilitated by the Social Broadcaster. Here people affected and included can commonly participate, leading to further conversation.
5. Networked audience listening via a digital or terrestrial radio platform broadening the scope yet limited to the audience of this platform.
6. Wider audience, potentially global via podcast formats or online archives.

The case studies I have presented in this chapter are London-based, but I have worked with communities across the UK to create social broadcasts, which become even more relevant

in areas with very little media coverage or interest (Micro-broadcasts in underrepresented areas of Stoke on Trent, The Wirral – Merseyside, Peterborough and North Yorkshire were particularly well received).

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have brought about the democratization of the airwaves through digital technologies that Hendy announced in 2000 (2000: 218). The proliferation of podcast creators, however, has simultaneously created a greater demand for reclaiming conversation at source. The need for marginalized groups and under-represented communities to be heard and to be able to tell their own stories has been acknowledged in the *Digital Radio and Audio Review* (Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport 2021) as something that merits investment and support. The BBC has also reacted to this by launching the *Indie Development Fund* as a way to motivate and train smaller independent production companies to help them reach their diversity targets. Whether this will create any audible change in BBC Radio broadcasting remains to be seen.[7]

The activation of true human connectivity requires more socially reflective forms of broadcasting to allow interactive communication amongst, rather than just with, people in hyperlocal contexts. What I have described as social broadcasting has the potential to develop as a logical response to commonplace misrepresentations of marginalized voices in mainstream radio and the solipsistic conversations that have come to dominate podcasting. Futures are not linear, and neither are their narratives. Co-creative frameworks, both hyperlocal and delocalized, allow new experiments with both form and content beyond current podcasting and radio broadcasting conventions. In the space of conversation and interaction that social broadcasting cultivates, narratives can be non-linear because of the deliberate shift in the power dynamic that gives participants the ownership and agency they need to engage their personal reflexivity. This not only creates a living archive of the many ways in which people imagine, integrate and explain their experiences but also defers interpretation to listeners in multi-layered audiences in space and time. This open-ended format is perfectly suited to the more flexible and cross-platform audio/radio broadcasting of the future where multiple narratives and perspectives can share the same space.

# Notes

1    UNESCO created World Radio Day in 2011 as a recognition of radio as a low-cost and popular medium which can reach the remotest areas and the most marginalized people.
2    Oral History Society UK Guidelines: https://www.ohs.org.uk (accessed 2 November 2021).
3    See: https://www.storycorps.org; https://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps; and NPR podcast StoryCorps.
4    Chartable Apple Podcast charts top five are all 'chatcasts': 1. Kermode & Mayo's Take; 2. That Peter Crouch Podcast; 3. Rob Beckett and Josh Widdicombes' Parenting Hell; 4. The Diary of a CEO with Steve Bartlett; 5. Sh**ged Married Annoyed: https://chartable.com/charts/itunes/gb-all-podcasts[1]podcasts (accessed 4 April 2022).

5    An example of this co-creation process is 'Radio Diaries' founded by Joe Richman (1996) where participants are given recording equipment encouraged to tell their story in the form of an audio diary, edited to create personal audio portraits: http://www.radiodiaries.org (accessed 7 October 2019).

6    In 2017 an app called Clammr (no longer available) enabled audio recordings to be turned into a video format and shared on Twitter: https://twitter.com/SOCIALBRDCSTS/status/841989664563204096 posted 15 March 2017 (accessed 22 April 2022). These are now called 'audiograms' and a number of apps offer this, such as Headliner or Wavve. Twitter integrated 'audio Tweets' in 2021 but these are voice recordings and memos straight to Twitter rather than pre-recorded material.

7    'The BBC Radio Indie Development Fund will see £250,000 annually allocated to back talented independent production companies, specifically supporting the BBC's strategic priorities, with a current focus on its Across the UK plans and ambitious diversity targets', (16 November 2021): https://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/radio/indie-development-fund

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