

# Woman's Hour

– BBC Radio 4



Image from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007qlvb>

## AS Component 1: Investigating the Media

### A level Component 1: Media products, industries and audiences

#### Focus areas:

- **Media industries**
- **Audiences**
- **Media contexts**

#### PRODUCT CONTEXT

- *Woman's Hour* is a long-running BBC Radio 4 daily **magazine programme**. The first edition was broadcast in October 1946 on the BBC's Light Programme. This was a station which broadcast entertainment programmes and music from 1945 to 1967 and was originally presented by a man, Alan Ivimey. Early episodes were thought by some women to be patronising,

focusing on the role of the housewife with features including 'mother's midday meal' and 'how to hang your husband's suit'. The programme has evolved to cover hard-hitting topics including abortion, domestic violence and equal pay, alongside lighter elements including why there is no body hair on *Bridgeton* and changing trends in maternity fashion. Notable recent guests have included Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey and Hilary Clinton.

- *Woman's Hour* has had many changes of presenters over the years but has continued to track the changes and report on the issues that have affected women since the Second World War. There was a significant change of presenters in 2020 when long-running presenters Jenni Murray (33 years) and Jane Garvey (13 years) left to be replaced by Emma Barnett and subsequently Anita Rani.

- *Woman's Hour* is the cornerstone of the BBC Radio 4 weekly schedule, with new episodes being broadcast every day at 10am for an hour. There is also an omnibus edition broadcast on a Saturday afternoon at 4pm.
- All episodes of the programme are also available as podcasts on BBC Sounds.

## PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media industries

### Historical Contexts:

*Woman's Hour* was first broadcast in the 1940s, so it's worth considering the **historical and social shifts** that have occurred since the show's inception. The original show could be said to reflect **tokenism** (a show set aside for women might imply all other radio content was oriented towards men). However, this format has continued and has developed into an important part of Radio 4's schedule.

### Consider the specialised and institutionalised nature of media production and the significance of economic factors to media industries and their products:

- The BBC is the most-used brand in the UK for media. 'It is used by 90% of UK adults and 80% of young adults on average per week. Used by an average of five million adults every single minute of the day and night, across TV, radio and online, and by a total of 45 million people across all ages over 24 hours.'  
(<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/annualreport/2020-21.pdf>)
- The BBC is a **public service broadcaster (PSB)** and has a remit to **inform, educate and entertain**. Consider whether *Woman's Hour* is typical of products created for BBC Radio along with what makes a programme distinctively a Radio 4 broadcast.
- It is significant and of continued debate that the BBC is funded by the **licence fee**, a very different funding model from commercial radio that relies on advertising and sponsorship. In 2022, the debate about the licence fee was heightened when Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries announced that the licence fee would be frozen for the next two years,

effectively forcing the BBC to make cuts to their programming. There is a demand in some quarters of government for the licence fee model to be reviewed. Others stress the importance of maintaining an independent, impartial broadcaster that is not under pressure to appeal to advertisers. The BBC is considered by many to be a pillar of British life – a reliable and trustworthy source, particularly in the days of 'fake news', whose high-quality products are exported globally.

- Programmes like *Woman's Hour* may be deemed too 'niche' and specifically targeted for commercial radio. The broadcast has largely female contributors, is predominantly made up of unadorned dialogue (without music, sound effects etc.) and the topics are explored using intellectual and specialised vocabulary. Consider why commercial institutions would be less likely to produce similar products.

### Consider recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent media platforms:

- The programme and its **podcasts** offer a number of ways to explore recent changes to the radio industry in relation to digital technology, such as the profound changes that have been brought about by switching from **analogue FM** radio to **digital audio** broadcasting (DAB), and the boom in downloading and streaming.
- A significant recent change that has impacted the radio industry is podcasting and listening to broadcasts on **digitally convergent** platforms such as computers and smartphones. In November 2018, the BBC launched BBC Sounds, a **walled garden** streaming service featuring live broadcasting, audio-on-demand and podcasts. This a good example of **technological convergence** as Sounds is available on PCs, laptops, tablets and phones. The slogan 'Listen without Limits' reflects the fact that the way in which the BBC distributes its content has changed in order to address developments in technology and audience consumption of content.

- In 2020/21, there were close to 1.3 billion UK plays of radio, music and podcasts on BBC Sounds. In the six months up to March 2021, 900,000 more accounts were used by those aged between 16-34 to stream BBC Sounds for the first time (BBC annual report).

### Consider how media producers maintain varieties of audiences:

- The current presenters are Emma Barnett and Anita Rani. Emma is a journalist and broadcaster who previously presented the BBC Radio 5 Live late morning show and BBC Newsnight. She has also written the ‘Tough Love’ ‘Agony Aunt’ advice column in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, where she explored extremes of peoples’ personal lives. Her style is therefore light-hearted yet unafraid to explore emotionally sensitive and controversial issues: ‘her iron confidence is reassuring for the listeners ... Barnett gave every impression of effortlessly owning the programme’ (www.theguardian.co.uk Jan 2021). This suits the *Woman’s Hour* format.
- Anita is an established and popular presenter on television. She is one of the lead presenters on BBC One’s *Countryfile* and has become a familiar face on British television, presenting a range of explorative documentaries for the BBC including *Bollywood: The World’s Biggest Film Industry* and *My Family, Partition and Me: India 1947*. The choice of Anita Rani addresses one of the key purposes in the creative remit of the BBC – ‘To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions’ (BBC annual report 2021/22).
- The topics discussed on *Woman’s Hour* are not strictly based around female experiences. Although subjects like IVF, mastectomy and women’s safety are female-centric, other discussions about grief, adult literacy and disaster planning offer a **female perspective** on issues that would also interest male listeners.

### Consider theoretical approaches: Power and media industries – Curran and ‘Seaton

- It could be argued that *Woman’s Hour* challenges

the idea that the media is controlled by a small number of companies driven by the logic of profit and power.

- Whilst the BBC is inarguably a large, significant company, the nature of PSB (discussed above) and the content of the broadcast seem to be at odds with the ‘logic of profit and power’. Consider the funding of the BBC in comparison with commercial organisations. The significance of the licence fee is that it frees BBC producers from the pressure to generate profit which in turn impacts the content of their broadcasts.
- The *Woman’s Hour* podcast format may also be used to support Curran and Seaton’s idea that **socially diverse patterns of ownership** help create conditions for varied and adventurous productions. The fact that this programme continues to be an important part of the channel’s schedule illustrates the broadcaster’s willingness to produce a programme targeting a specific social group.
- Consider the proliferation of podcasts across a wide range of topics and genres in recent years and whether the relative **low production costs** of this medium and the inexpensive hosting/**digital distribution** costs offer producers (and often **prosumers**) opportunities to take risks and develop adventurous content that still manages to reach diverse international audiences.

### Regulation – Livingston and Lunt (A level)

The BBC is regulated by Ofcom as established in the Communication Act of 2003. The role of Ofcom includes ensuring that services such as radio are of high quality and appeal to a wide audience and to protect audiences from offensive or harmful material. Anyone can complain to Ofcom about a programme.

The BBC operates both a **consumer-based** regulatory model offering choice for audiences and a **citizen-based** one, taking responsibility to self-regulate its content. As a PSB, the BBC has strict **guidelines** about what content can be broadcast or published. BBC1 for instance rarely features sex, nudity or swearing, and all the broadcast channels (TV and radio) follow the ‘watershed’.

The developments in technology with content distributed across different digital platforms has made regulation more complex. However, the BBC's role as a self-regulator seemingly challenges Livingston and Lunt's assumption that 'new media' is harder to regulate. The BBC has considered the access of potential audiences and regulated within the institution. For example, in February 2021, the BBC received 564 complaints regarding a *Woman's Hour* interview with Zara Mohammed, the first female leader of the Muslim Council of Great Britain. The main issue was an accusation of bias and the hostile questioning style of presenter Emma Barnett. The BBC subsequently removed the clip of the interview from digital platforms.

## PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

The RAJAR figures for radio for 2021 showed that 34.51 million people tuned in each week across all radio stations. There were 257 million downloads of BBC podcasts and on-demand radio programmes on third-party platforms globally. Radio 4 had 10.48 million listeners each week. 'These figures show the important role that BBC Radio plays in people's lives, with 34.5m tuning in to listen live each week to our much loved stations. We also continue to see on-demand listening grow for both our radio programmes and podcasts, as audiences come to BBC Sounds to discover content to listen to whenever they want to'. – Charlotte Moore, BBC Chief Content Officer

(<https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2022/live-listening-figures-revealed-with-34m-tuning-in-to-bbc-radio-each-week>)

### Consider how audiences interpret the media, including how and why audiences may interpret the same media in different ways:

- Consider, for example, a **male response** to the content of the show. Think about how many other media texts are composed of only female members (*Loose Women*, for instance, has male guests) and how this might be unsettling or alienating for male listeners. Compare this to a **female audience** and consider whether or not this same gender composition might be appealing to some female audiences who feel their concerns are underrepresented.
- *Woman's Hour* encourages an interactive relationship with their listeners. Audiences can respond to *Woman's Hour* on Twitter, through the website and on other **social media platforms**. The broadcast has been designed to invite audience members to enter the discussion through social media platforms. Audience's often offer very different viewpoints in their responses, which are read out at the end of sections of the programme during the live broadcast and at the end of the Saturday omnibus edition. This creates additional discussion and debate around topics which may continue on social media platforms.

### Consider how media organisations reflect the different needs of mass and specialised audiences, including through targeting:

- As a **PSB**, the BBC has a **remit** to produce content for all audience **demographics**. Consider whether *Woman's Hour* has been designed to explicitly appeal to a **specialised** female audience as part of the remit of the organisation itself. An extension of this discussion might consider whether there are any other media products that appeal to this specific target audience on the radio (BBC or otherwise).
- Specialised audiences contribute to the diversity of the BBC and enhance the profile of Radio 4 as a station that caters for a broader demographic. In the case of *Woman's Hour*, it is through the choice of presenters, guests and topics selected.
- The programme airs a range of serious and more light-hearted stories to appeal to the demographic. In one week in March 2022, content included the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Radcliffe, body hair in history, growing up in poverty, domestic abuse and the first black Superwoman.
- Advances in technology have enabled radio audiences to access content across a range of digital platforms to suit their needs. Some audiences will loyally listen to the daily programme whilst others will 'catch-up', selecting the episodes that match their interest and concerns. Audiences can subscribe to the podcast '*Woman's Hour Daily*' to catchup on episodes and be notified when new ones are released.

## Consider theoretical approaches:

### Reception theory – Stuart Hall

- The choice of presenters, guests, topics and scheduling time encodes messages about the ethos of the BBC and its commitment to provide content for a range of audiences. Some audiences will welcome a programme dedicated to pertinent issues relevant to women today, while others may question the need for such a specialised product.
- Consider possible different readings of the broadcast. What is the **intended** meaning and the **preferred reading**? What might be a **negotiated** meaning (e.g. from a male audience member)? What might be an **oppositional** response (e.g. from a sexist male listener)?

### Feminist theory – Van Zoonen (A level)

Consider to what extent *Woman's Hour* achieves Van Zoonen's assertion that **gender stereotypes** in the media can only change if more women produce and appear in the media?

### Feminist theory – bell hooks

Radio 4's audience is often pigeonholed as being white and middle class. bell hooks has written about how women of lower class or different ethnicity are even more oppressed by **patriarchy**. Consider how *Woman's Hour* challenges this by featuring guests and issues that reflect **diversity** in the female audience.

## CONTEXTS

### Social and cultural:

Consider the role of the programme in reflecting the changing roles of women in the UK over the past 70 years. *Woman's Hour* was originally broadcast in the 1940s, so it is relevant to consider how different life in the UK is for women now (possibly focusing on shifts from the 1950s housewife towards the independence of young women in the 1960s and comparing this with the present day.) Also consider the changes to a male's role in society and their representation in the media. Think about the way that audience responses to, and interpretations of, media products reflect social and cultural circumstances.

There has been a raised awareness about inequality between males and females in the media, and the BBC has made efforts to address gender imbalance. With a range of female presenters across its radio channels, some people have questioned the relevance of a show just dedicated to women. The impact of the #MeToo campaign, along with other social media campaigns highlighting sexism, and the popularity of women's podcasts show there is a diverse and engaged audience for 'women's media'. The continued production of *Woman's Hour* and the change in presenters sends a positive message to listeners about how the BBC is actively considering the way in which women are represented by the institution.

### Economic

Consider how a programme like *Woman's Hour* reflects the ethos of the BBC as a public service broadcaster. Think about how the BBC's not-for-profit, licence fee-funded model influences how its products are produced, distributed and consumed by audiences.