

ARTICLE

Focus on the Housewife: The BBC and the Post-war Woman, 1945-1955

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ABSTRACT

Within British women's history, historians have illuminated the complexity of British post-war society and the particular role played by women within it. Studies show that the post-war woman was considered a significant citizen, crucial for the rebuilding of Britain, both as a worker and as a mother. Building on work within women's and radio history, the aim of my research is to explore the relationship between the BBC and women in this period. In this paper, I will argue that, through radio, British women were given a voice, as workers and as housewives. This was, however, not without difficulties. The paper also highlights the complexity of the female radio audience and the struggle that faced broadcasters. The material under discussion reflects the changes and negotiations that were taking place in society at that time, and the paper emphasises the important role played by female listeners and by women's radio in Britain.

KEYWORDS

Women; radio; the BBC; post-war history; archival research.

Introduction

On Friday 23 January 1948, at 7.45 p.m., the BBC Light Programme broadcast another episode of *Focus*, a weekly programme featuring topical issues and subjects. Programmes in the series were heard by a listening panel¹ which, on average, awarded *Focus* an 'appreciation' index figure of 64 (where anything above 70 was considerable excellent). However, that night's episode, which had the title *Focus on the Housewife*, was less than well received. According to the listener research report, members of the listening panel thought the programme disappointing; overall, it scored the lowest figure in the series at 49. The report included the observation that: 'although a small group thought the acting natural, the large majority complained that the dialects were not genuine or that the housewives were unconvincing' (5 February BBC WAC LR48/144 R9/54/7). One member of the panel, a teacher said, 'I do think you tried; but don't think you succeeded in getting the housewife into "focus". I expect they all feel that you only tried to flatter and cajole them into fresh effort' (ibid.).

¹ According to Silvey (1974), after the war, the BBC's Listener Research Department set up six regional listening panels, representing each region with 600 members in each. The members of these panels were recruited through announcements on air or in *Radio Times*. The panels would then be sent questionnaires with regard to their listening. The report concerning *Focus on the Housewife* was based on 721 questionnaires returned by listeners 'who heard all or most of the broadcast' and another 108 questionnaires by panel members who had listened to half or less of the broadcast (5 February BBC WAC LR48/144 R9/54/7).

When one looks closer into the production of the programme, it becomes clear that the making of *Focus on the Housewife* had not been a satisfactory process. The programme was produced by the Features Department and written by Stephen Grenfell, who submitted his script at the last minute. Two producers, Nesta Pain and Marjorie Banks, immediately noticed problems with the script: ‘the general effect was cheap and second-rate. The housewives, in particular, seemed to be presented as whining incompetents, without sense of responsibility or realism. The narrator appeared to hold them in well-justified contempt’ (memo from Pain to Director of Features 29 January 1948 BBC WAC R19/377/4). Nesta Pain noted three inaccuracies at the first reading. To begin with, ‘it was stated that housewives have thirty points to spend in the month. The correct figure is twenty-eight. It is not hard to imagine the outcry there would have been if we had made as elementary a mistake as this’ (ibid.). Then the script suggested that housewives were moaning at the high price of fish, but fish prices were about the same as before the war. And finally, and perhaps most shocking of all, a statement was made that, at a county mental hospital, the number of women seeking treatment had gone up 100 per cent, and this was attributed to the strain of present-day conditions (ibid.). The script had to be completely re-written by the two producers, and was also checked by an expert from *Woman’s Hour*, the daily women’s magazine programme. The final corrections to the script were not done until 6 p.m. on the day of the broadcast. Even the Controller of the Light Programme was distressed ‘that anything as bad as this could be submitted to me by a nearly helpless producer 24 hours before the broadcast really shakes me’ (memo from T.W. Chalmers to Director of Features 23 January 1948 BBC WAC R19/377/4).

The script incident discussed above, concerning the production of *Focus on the Housewife*, is important because it highlights two things. Firstly, that the housewife in the post-war period was an important figure, important enough to have a whole radio programme devoted to her. Secondly, it shows that producing an item on the housewife demanded accuracy and facts, and *respect*; the capabilities and the intelligence of the housewife were not to be underestimated. Building on work by scholars such as Judy Giles (2004) and Claire Langhamer (2005) on women’s history on the home and the post-war woman, and on studies within radio history by Paddy Scannell (1989), Kate Lacey (1996, 2005) and Michele Hilmes (1997), this paper aims to show that the so often criticised housewife actually was a key person in this period, and that through radio, the housewife was given a public voice. As will be shown, however, this was not always completely without complications, posing some specific difficulties for broadcasters.

Historical background: the post-war woman at the centre of debate

The post-war period is an era often typified by an image of women as passive, housebound housewives, and as a time assumed to attach no importance to feminism. The American feminist Betty Friedan’s classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was particularly critical to the post-war period and the idealisation of the housewife. Her view came to be replicated in much of the subsequent literature. She believed that mass media, together with psychologists, created this image of women as being fulfilled only by staying at home, but that the reality was millions of deeply un-fulfilled, housebound women². However, a recent revision within

² In the British context, in the 1970s, sociologist and feminist Anne Oakley’s work raised similar debates about women’s relationship to the domestic. Oakley highlighted women’s own feelings toward housework; the dissatisfaction and monotony (Oakley 1974a). Oakley (1974b) further emphasised that women’s domesticity

the historiography is changing this image, and historians have now identified the period as one of conflict and negotiation (Thane, 1994, 2003; Holloway, 2005). By shedding new light on the post-war woman, this work is thus challenging previous assumptions about the housewife.

It has been suggested that in Labour's landslide victory in 1945, 'women provided a higher proportion of the popular vote for Labour than did men' (Thane, 2003, p.277). Historians have therefore identified the women's vote in the post-war period as powerful and important to the major parties. This has particularly been observed by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (1996, 2000) who has studied austerity in post-war Britain. Her work looks at the relationship between gender, consumption, government policy and party politics. She argues that men and women responded differently to austerity culture and life, 'since women in their role as housewives were primarily responsible for implementing the policy on a daily basis' (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000, p.2). She suggests that this frustration with austerity and state control became a very political issue, particularly among women who, fed up with rationing, longed for some purchasing power and freedom of choice. Meat, bacon, butter, sugar, eggs, tea, cheese, milk, sweets, clothes, petrol were all still restricted. In February 1946, new cuts were made on poultry and eggs. During the war, bread had never been rationed. It was, however, in 1946, for two years, to help prevent starvation in Asia and Germany. Bread rationing caused an outcry, particularly from housewives, as post-war historian Peter Hennessy (2006) writes: 'the celebrated British Housewives' League was already becoming a thorn in ministerial flesh' (p.276). It was this fallout, Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues, that led to political change, since many women turned to the Conservative party. Their election victory in 1951 became for many a statement of discontent with Labour. As one woman expressed it, 'the last election was lost mainly in the queue at the butcher's or the grocer's' (cited in Pugh, 2000, p.291).

But women were not only in the crossfire as consumers and voters. Much of the academic literature on post-war women is written in the context of a perceived 'reconstruction' of the relationship between the nation and the family. The inter-war years had seen a falling birth rate and a move towards smaller families. Women were marrying and having children at a younger age and the spacing of children was more concentrated and within a shorter period. This raised worries about the growth of the population and consequently the nation's future. These were serious concerns that continued during the Second World War, and were also reflected in the Beveridge Report in 1942 with its proposals for better housing, the provision of welfare for everyone and the introduction of a family allowance. Although Britain experienced a baby boom in the post-war period, which in itself resolved some of the worries, the war had also brought disruption and anxieties affecting family life. There was a huge rise in divorce and illegitimacy rates, as well as in marriage breakdowns (although some of this was due to a backlog of divorce cases interrupted by the war). Consequently, after the war, there followed an emphasis on the family, and on motherhood in particular, in order to encourage larger families and family stability. With the rise of child psychologists warning about the dangers of maternal deprivation, 'work by psychologists on children deprived of their parents during the war, either by death or as a result of evacuation, helped to bring home to a wider audience the idea that the mother was crucial to the child's normal development' (Lewis, 1992, p.18). Books such as John Bowlby's *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (1953) had a huge impact. The key issue now was to rebuild the nation, and to do so by

was associated with low-status work and that this gendered division upheld women's oppression and therefore the housewife had to be liberated. The label 'housewife' did have a negative connotation which had to be rejected.

rebuilding the family. As Claire Langhamer (2005) argues, the 'home' was 'represented as the symbolic, and actual, centre of post-war reconstruction' (p.342).

It becomes clear therefore that the domestic environment played a key part in post-war society. Rationing, austerity and affluence, and public health were all issues that were dealt with by women not only in private but also on a public, political level. As the billing in *Radio Times* for *Focus on the Housewife* acknowledged: 'perhaps more than any other individual today the housewife has been praised, blamed, criticised and exhorted. It is around her that the family life of the nation revolves. This programme examines her achievements, her problems and tries to discover what 1948 holds for her' (BBC WAC R19/377/4). The recovery and reconstruction of Britain was worked out and experienced on a daily basis in the home. The domestic, and the world of work and politics, were becoming intertwined: the boundaries between the public and the private in the post-war period were becoming more complex and porous.

As Judy Giles (2004) puts it, 'the home, far from being simply a haven from the demands of modern life or a stifling place from which to escape, became central to the modernity of British life mid-century' (p.60). Giles further argues against assumptions made by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s that saw domesticity as something negative and as something 'that must be left behind if women were to become "modern", emancipated subjects' (p.142). She makes a final observation showing that contrary to popular belief in the passive housewife, much described and discussed in Friedan's work, that middle-class women did find a voice as housewives: 'the fact that domesticity was such a key issue in the late 1940s and early 1950s enabled many middle-class women to speak "as housewives and mothers"' (p.162).

The domestic and radio

The home, the domestic sphere, has also been considered important in the study of radio history. The development of radio broadcasting in the 1920s and particularly the 1930s had a strong relevance to ideas presented about the home. Paddy Scannell (1989), for instance, in his important work on public service broadcasting, argues that radio brought public life into the private sphere, and in doing so made the outside world accessible to all. Radio provided a link between the private and the public, and he sees radio (and later television) as playing an important part in the democratisation of society and public life in the way it has 'given voices to the voiceless' (p.142).

Radio's relationship to the public and the private has been further investigated by Kate Lacey (1996, 2005), whose work on women and radio sees radio acting as a bridge between public and private. She suggests that 'broadcasting has been intimately involved in the processes of modernisation over the last eight decades. And for the same reason it has been intimately involved in the process of democratisation and the integration of women into the public sphere' (2005, p.153). In her study of German radio from 1923 to 1945, Lacey (1996) gives a detailed account of the development of women's radio in Weimar Germany and later the Third Reich. She discusses the arrival of radio and mass communication in a time of modernity, where also women had gained the right to vote and were thereby entering the public sphere. Lacey argues that different regional stations, which broadcast a variety of radio forms to women, all believed that broadcasting could have an impact, a progression, on women's experience in the changing nature between public and private life (p.85). She notes how radio for and by women - the 'Frauenfunk' - was intensively developed during the

Weimar Republic. It consisted of programmes aimed towards women in the home, with a friendly and 'gossipy' style. But instead of educating women in politics and, by doing so, introducing them into the public arena, the 'Frauenfunk' quickly became 'predominantly a space for women as housewives, consumers and mothers, categories derived from an understanding of women's intransient identity formation within the private sphere' (p.244). Later when the Nazis came to power, she observes that this network of women's programmes provided a route into the home, a system already developed and now ready to be used for propaganda purposes. In this sense, radio failed to introduce women into the public sphere.

Lacey's use of radio as a tool to analyse wider historical issues is particularly useful. She points out that the period in question was 'a period in which the succession of profound political and economic crises provoked a series of challenges to the conventional concept of gender roles and a period in which radio clearly came to play a meaningful and indispensable role in the lives of many women' (p.4). German radio, from the start, saw women as a *distinct audience group*. She further argues that in times of crisis, ideas about the family and security come to the fore, and women as mothers and wives take on a central role. She argues that 'the myth of femininity [is] revived as a symbol of constancy, stability, and permanence' and she further shows how radio in Germany was caught up in this (p.53).

The relationship between the domestic and radio has also been explored in the American context by Michele Hilmes (1997), who has argued that 'women in fact invented and sustained some of broadcasting's most central innovations and served in key decision-making roles, and furthermore participated in the development of entire genres that spoke to them as a specific group about the interests and concerns of women's lives' (p.132). In common with Susan Smulyan (1993), she emphasises that it was housewives who had the purchasing power, and therefore became one of the most important groups for advertisers to reach. 'By the mid 1930s, serial drama dominated US daytime schedules in particular, with over 45 different 15-minute serials on the air daily [...] across all four networks in 1939, and a few more airing in the early evening' (Hilmes, 2007, p.8). Hilmes (1997) shows how gendered the nature of programming was and examines the tensions facing the networks between programmes for profit – which in most cases were daytime, serialised dramas aimed at women – and programmes for public image (in some ways representing a public service duty), which was represented by a more cultured highbrow style, more masculine, in the evening. She argues that 'under the cover of daytime, women addressed the issues confronting them during the conflicted decades of the 1930s and 1940s, especially the tension between the enforced domesticity of the 1930s and women's increased frustration with this limited role' (p.154).

Studies by Scannell, Lacey and Hilmes show that radio has an important place in the domestic and thus has a particular relationship with women. As a public medium situated in the private, radio is perfectly positioned for exploring the changing boundaries between public and private – particularly if we attend to issues such as work versus family, equality between the sexes, and the implications of public policy. This is particularly important in the post-war period, since many of the changes taking place impacted upon women's lives more directly than on those of men.

The BBC and the Voice of the post-war woman

In 1948, three years after the end of the war, a schoolteacher in North London wrote in her diary: 'Dreariness is everywhere. Streets are deserted, lighting is dim, people's clothes are shabby and their tables bare' (cited in Kynaston, 2007, p.298). Three years on and for many the situation was just as bad as during the war. The austerity of the post-war period was for many becoming an issue of unhappiness and frustration. For women, daily life consisted of endless queues, counting points and coupons, and the introduction of 'exotic' food such as whale meat and a strange, tasteless fish from South Africa, 'Snoek', which did not prove popular with the public. The BBC was during this time very much aware of the build up of discontent among the public. It broadcast several programmes on the 'crisis' and the example discussed earlier, *Focus on the Housewife*, clearly shows the importance placed on the housewife at this time. Another series in October 1948 had the self-explanatory title *How Are We Doing?* This was a three-part series on the BBC Home Service, in which each programme consisted of a 'jury' (ten men and two housewives) who were chosen to represent the public. These ordinary people would then get the chance to question public figures about the state of Britain. Perhaps not surprisingly, the audience figures for these broadcasts were very high. The last two programmes both had a higher number than the usual listening figure: the final programme in the series had an audience figure of 20 per cent, compared to the normal Thursday evening audience of 10 per cent (BBC WAC R9/68/14). The reason for its success may have been that the public figure under fire that evening was Sir Stafford Cripps, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. During years of financial decline and crisis he was naturally a well-known figure. The series was popular and consequently generated a lot of press. The *Daily Mirror* wrote:

'B.B.C. Steps Out!' At last the B.B.C. breaks away from the tepid technique of prepared scripts, censored speeches, and opinions so nicely balanced that they can be guaranteed to offend no one. A new series called "How Are We Doing?" deals with matters of national interest on the basis of free speech[...] It is a bold and imaginative conception and gives us live broadcasting (27 October, BBC WAC Press Cuttings Talks 1947-1948 P310 3B).

And the *Daily Mail*:

'Cripps enjoys 30-min. Quiz'. Hands on hips, enjoying every minute of the broadcast, Sir Stafford Cripps, Chancellor of the Exchequer, last night answered questions fired by 10 men and two women on the last of the "How are we Doing?" series. For more than half an hour he faced his questioners. [then cites one person] "When is Purchase Tax coming off household goods?" asked Mrs. May, *housewife* (29 October, *ibid* – my emphasis).

This example shows that, as housewives, women were represented on a very topical, political programme in a public medium and were allowed to question politicians and other public figures about the state of Britain. In this example, the voice of the housewife mattered. It is of course notable that only as a housewife could a woman be represented in a public forum like this, anything else would not have been acceptable, and I will come back to this issue later. Nevertheless, as housewives, women were given a voice on the radio, something that was particularly acknowledged in another programme.

In October 1946, *Woman's Hour* started. Mainly aimed towards the female audience and particularly the housewife, the programme was broadcast between 2 and 3 p.m. every

Monday to Friday. It soon became very popular, just a few weeks after its first broadcast it was reported that the programme received more than a thousand letters per week (memo from Norman Collins to Director General 30 October 1946 BBC WAC R51/640/1). *Woman's Hour* was broadcast on the Light Programme, which had two-thirds of the listeners, the majority of which came from a working-class background.

Although the programme was heavily focused on domestic issues, it did also contain talks of a more serious nature. In 1948, it started to experiment with 'educational' current affairs talks (September to November 1948 BBC WAC R15/94). As it was expressed in 1951, 'Miss Benzie will hold a watching brief for us so that our responsibility to keep *Woman's Hour* listeners informed on *public* questions is safeguarded' (Editor *Woman's Hour* to Chief Assistant Talks 2 October 1951 BBC WAC R51/640/10 – my emphasis). The programme also covered various women's conferences, on topics such as social welfare, fuel rationing and household economy. Many items featured *ordinary* housewives from all over Britain and the regional flavour was important. For instance, in 1948 the editor of *Woman's Hour*, Eileen Molony, planned a series on 'the Budget.' In a memo to the producers she wrote, 'will you please note that in Week 10, Monday March 1st to Monday, March 8th inclusive, we are holding a regional budget week. This means that eight minutes each day will be occupied by a regional housewife describing how she spends her income' (memo from Molony to Gordon, Derville, Wilson and Benzie 20 January BBC WAC R51/640/4). It was later reported to the Editor that the series of programmes on budgets had had a good response and that a new series would be planned, but this time with a focus on older people, widows with children and possibly larger families (8 April 1948 BBC WAC R51/640/4).

The producers of *Woman's Hour* continuously listened to the listener's ideas and requests, and listeners were often asked to come to the microphone. In 1952, a discussion was broadcast between four married women on 'happy marriage.' This discussion openly talked about marriage and how to sustain a happy one. But intimate problems such as the sexual relationship between husband and wife, and sex education, was soon brought up and the women spoke freely about their experiences (20 November 1952 BBC WAC WH script); so freely that it was reported in the *Daily Mirror*: 'four wives yesterday took part in one of the frankest talks ever broadcast by the BBC' (BBC WAC Press Cuttings WH Book 3(1) P162/1).

The success of the programme and the importance of the female radio listenership are also evident in the archive material. In 1947, the Editor, Eileen Molony and the Director of Talks, were invited to lunch at the Conservative Radio Liaison Office with three members of the Conservative and Unionist Central Office – Miss Sturgess-Jones, the women's Press Officer, Brigadier Hinchcliffe, and Mr John Profumo. In a memo to the Controller of Talks, Molony says:

we were expecting them to raise the point that they thought an undue proportion of Left-wing speakers and journalists were used in *Woman's Hour*. In fact the lunch passed off very cordially and the point was not raised. They did mention they would like to supply us with a list of names of possible speakers' (memo from Molony to Controller of Talks, 30 October BBC WAC R51/640/3).

She continues that they accepted the proposal of a list but immediately explained to them that the party of speakers in *Woman's Hour* was not of concern; speakers and scripts were

accepted on merit and suitability. But the meeting seems to have reminded her about the importance of political balance:

I do think, however, we ought to be especially careful to see we do include in *Woman's Hour* a report on the Conservative and Liberal Women's Conferences when they occur next year. As you know we did in fact broadcast on the 1st October, the report of the Labour Women's Conference at Southport, and Miss Sturges-Jones [the women's press officer] registered a protest at the time that we did not report the Conservative Women's Conference earlier this year' (Ibid.).

Interestingly, later that same year, it was agreed at a meeting in the Talks Department that all party conferences should be covered in *Woman's Hour*, 'when subjects arise which are in a general sense of special interest to women' (minutes of meeting Light Programme 11 November BBC WAC R51/299/1). The programme was clearly of significance to politicians, not because it was a political programme, but simply because women radio listeners mattered.

Throughout this period, the programme continued to voice the worries and concerns of the audience. *Woman's Hour* often featured items based on listener's letters, which were always meticulously analysed and frequently reported. In 1947, one of the producers, Isa Benzie, who was an experienced talks producer wrote to the editor, Eileen Molony, with a list of suggestions for items. Many touched on issues such as health and childbirth, and issues of a sexual nature, and one item suggested had the title, 'how can I get over domestic unhappiness' (memo from Benzie to Molony 14 August 1947 BBC WAC R51/640/3). Benzie further makes the point that she believed there was a general need to talk about these issues, the issue of full-time domesticity seems to have been brought up more than once. In 1951 the programme ran a series on listeners' letters: 'I am at the present broadcasting in *Woman's Hour* a series of programmes based on letters send in by listeners and put out under the title "Reading Your Letters"' (17 January BBC WAC R51/640/9). In a memo from the deputy editor, Johanna Scott-Moncrieff, it is clear many letters are commenting on the issue of the working wife:

I enclose a new batch of R.Y.L. [Reading Your Letters] correspondence and some letters commenting on the "Wives Working" argument. At yesterday's meeting we agreed unanimously that we were tired of the subject of whether women like housework or feel they must combine it with careers [...] However, a quick glance through the "Wives Working" batch of letters suggests there may be variations on that theme worth continuing in R.Y.L. (Memo from Scott-Moncrieff to Robert Goodyear 4 March 1952 BBC WAC R51/640/11).

As Gerry Holloway (2005) has observed, 'this need for women's labour during the war threw up some difficult contradictions for a society wedded to the belief that a woman's place was in the home' (p.13). The debate clearly continued in the post-war period where particularly the issue of working married women was heavily debated. According to Joanna Bourke (1994), between 1931 and 1951 the proportion of married women in employment rose dramatically from 16 per cent to 40 per cent and continued to rise (p.100). Between 1947 and 1949, the government actually campaigned to encourage women to come back to paid

employment. Even though the campaigns mainly focused on older women, they did however also approach women that were married.

The changing nature of women in the post-war period also posed difficulties for the BBC. Although the programme was aimed predominantly towards the housewife, *Woman's Hour* did represent working women. For example in 1949 they began to work on a series entitled, 'Women in Local Industries', and this idea came from an unsolicited script from a woman worker in the silverware industry (5 July 1949 BBC WAC R51/640/6B). And from the early days of the programme, there were pressures from working and professional women to broadcast a repeat of the programme in the evening or at the weekend. In 1951, the editor Janet Quigley wrote to the Controller of Light Programme and Controller of Talks Department that the programme was 'under fairly constant attack from business and professional women for broadcasting *Woman's Hour* at a time of day when they can never listen to it' (memo from Quigley to Controller of Light Programme 2 July BBC WAC R51/640/10). She further points out that this pressure is not only from individual women but also from organisations like the National Council of Women, the Business and Professional Women's Clubs and others. In the memo Quigley continues, 'they argue that *Woman's Hour* is not restricted to items of purely domestic interest and that even if it were there is no longer a rigid line of demarcation between women with home interests and women with careers' (ibid.). After years of internal debate and outside pressure, the programme was eventually repeated on Sundays – an important acknowledgment of the working woman.

However, these tensions between home and work were not only felt in *Woman's Hour*. The series I mentioned earlier on the state of Britain, *How Are We Doing?*, received a fierce complaint from the General Secretary of the National Federation of Women's Institutes: 'you, with us, may have noticed a tendency on the part of the official male to assume the existence of a mythical character described as "a typical housewife", and to confine their recognition of our sex very largely to this category' (letter from Frances Farrer to Barbara Ward BBC WAC R41/123). The letter clearly states the writer's disappointment that no working woman had been represented in the 'jury', and concludes, 'may we beg your Board to maintain their enlightened attitude to women, who, at this stage in the 20th century, may surely claim to be treated as human beings, citizens, people with professional and business careers – and not exclusively as housewives' (ibid.).

A programme such as *Woman's Hour* fulfilled an important function because it allowed all kinds of women – workers and housewives – to be represented and heard on the air. However, catering for such a wide-ranging audience posed its own difficulties. In March 1949, a letter from the Birmingham Association of Women's Clubs sent to the Controller of the Midland Region suggests that addressing the audience was a very complex issue:

In response to the Questionnaire, members expressed some dissatisfaction with this programme. Too often it was the week's news all over again and simplified as if the planners underrated the intelligence of the housewife. Other complained that many of the subjects were not practical and realistic enough for the ordinary working woman, and dealt with luxuries and abstractions, often beyond the reach of the average purse. (memo from Controller, Midland Region to Controller Light Programme 9 March 1949 BBC WAC R51/640/6A).

This issue runs like a thread through much of the material. Later the same year, a report was undertaken on current affairs in *Woman's Hour*. It was reported that the purpose of the series was:

to present to an audience of women of *many different interests*, aptitudes and *levels of intelligence and ability*, a short analysis of one or two current important national or international events, and to show how they affect the listener, avoiding expressions of opinion, but making such impartial comment as may be helpful' (Memo from Paul Leach to Evelyn Gibbs 7 July 1949 BBC WAC R51/640/6B – my emphases).

The report went on to make the point that the range and diversity of listeners, makes the production process more difficult, 'the attempt to reach as wide an audience as possible involves over-simplification and a tendency to "talk down" – in thought if not in word; it also means that some questions of importance cannot be touched as they are too difficult and this in practice often leads to a "safe" (but minor) topic being chosen' (ibid.). It is further concluded that to improve current affairs talks in *Woman's Hour*, 'over-simplification and talking-down should be avoided. Contact should be maintained with representative bodies [Women's Institutes and other women's social groups] to assess reactions' (ibid.).

The above illustrates the complexity of the audience, factors such as class and education, played an important part. There was not only a struggle to find and *define* women's interests in terms of domesticity or work, there was also a struggle in finding the right *voice*, or tone. The examples above demonstrate that the programme tried to learn more about the needs of the audience and the more appropriate ways of communicating with listeners. Throughout the correspondence, there is a strong feeling of public service responsibility, not just the need to represent a diversity of women, but also to educate and inform, to engage the listener in public matters.

Conclusion

There are several important aspects that can be drawn from this paper. First of all, as housewives women were given a voice on a public medium, in programmes like *Woman's Hour* or in public discussions such as *How are We Doing?*, this did enable women as housewives to speak out. This very much confirms Giles's (2004) argument that women in this period were not necessarily as passive as previously assumed. Women could speak *politically* as housewives. Furthermore, a programme like *Woman's Hour* clearly had political impact although it was not necessarily a political programme as such. The programme's aim to keep its listeners informed and 'up-to-date' with public matters was also attractive to the political parties. Discussing current affairs, social welfare and the daily drudgery of austerity and rationing made it important as a 'gateway' to the home. This has further implications for our understanding of the nature of women's experience in post-war Britain. In America, the female radio audience was crucial as consumers, but in post-war Britain, the female audience was important as citizens and voters. In contrast to the women's magazines of that period, the BBC had an involvement, a responsibility to nurture the citizen, rather than a purely domestic or consumerist identity. Women on air, or women's radio clearly played an important part in delivering this objective.

However, it is not just an issue of mere representation. What the material also tells us is that representing the post-war woman was a *struggle*. Different groups of women demanded

different things and it was difficult for broadcasters to get it 'right'. The BBC in this period was thus capturing the tensions and ambiguities of a changing society. It was a transitional time. More women were working, and therefore questions of what a women's programme should be about and how to represent women were surfacing. Representing women as housewives was not enough. The working woman was also, rightly, demanding a voice.

These debates were taking place within a programme like *Woman's Hour*. The attempt to please everyone – the regional woman, the working woman, the housewife – did pose its own problems. There was a sensitivity in thinking about the audience, a need to define, or perhaps *re-define*, women's interests, which obviously was becoming a more complex task. Sue Harper (1992) has said about cinema in this period that 'the depiction of women in the 1940s, reveals, in feature film, the uncertainties of a society moving toward a more liberal, feminist perspective, but unsure how this was to be encompassed within a world of conservative constraints' (p.228). This is also an appropriate observation of the BBC at this time.

Women producers such as Nesta Pain or Marjorie Banks evidently understood the importance of not undermining the housewife. Undoubtedly, *Woman's Hour* clearly had a very close and personal relationship with its audience. It strived continuously to meet the demands and needs of its diverse listeners. As a programme, it put an enormous effort into broadening women's horizons, but as has been shown, this was not always easy. It is evident that issues such as class, education and accents each played an important part, and it also cut across gender. Nevertheless, *Woman's Hour* developed an expertise and understanding of what broadcasting meant to its listeners and it saw the potential of radio as a bridge between the public and the private. Such complexity thus helped broadcasters in the British context further advance programming style, and the significance of the female audience or women's programming should therefore not be underestimated.

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