The Women Diarists of Early Radio

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The research that I discuss here provided the foundations for a translation and anthologising project on early radio, which was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship (September 2021-May 2022), and by a British Academy Small Grant (2019-2020). The results of this work include *Early Radio: An Anthology of European Texts and Translations*, with translations by Marielle Sutherland, Nicoletta Asciuto and myself, forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press.[[1]](#endnote-1) The anthology gathers texts by long-forgotten or little-known writers, journalists, sound engineers, producers, actors and radio enthusiasts, and its purpose is to provide access to a new range of primary materials from a time in radio’s history that is less often discussed, and to support a reflection on radio as an inherently transnational medium. The journalism and essays featuring in the book are representative of British, French, German and Italian radio cultures; authors from other countries including Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Ireland and Austria are also included. This research led me to texts on radio by women who were interested in aesthetic or social questions, had an interest in journalism and the essay form, and sometimes also designed or delivered radio programmes, or worked for broadcasting organisations in other capacities.

What enabled the project to come into being was not the lack or disappearance of sources that scholars of early radio have often had to confront in the archive, but the overabundance of writing about radio throughout this early period. Indeed, if the radio archives often seem to lack memory, the radio press of the interwar period does not. Kate Lacey has long established its significance, notably for women’s programmes such as the Weimar-era *Frauenfunk* in Germany.[[2]](#endnote-2) Radio ushered an often hypermnesic type of journalism, which sought to record listening impressions and frequently attempted to replace, in discursive form, that which could not yet be recorded as sound; sometimes, this journalism even endeavoured to advance ideas about broadcasting that were diffusely present within the broadcasts themselves, by speculating about, and theorising, a sense of what radio could or should be. The reviews, chronicles, columns and essays published in specialised radio magazines, in mainstream newspapers, in the handbooks of broadcasting organisations and in literary and arts magazines (to mention but a few sources) are a precious and often unrivalled source of information, whose value is becoming clearer as the pace of digitisation accelerates and large databases become available. Together, these sources constitute a staggering mass of commentaries which account for radio’s formidable artistic influence. One of the most significant facets of early radio journalism is how it enabled the dissemination of ideas, often as part of unpredictable transnational patterns: indeed, if radio has always crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries, this is also true of ideas about radio aesthetics. In the vast world of debating, theorizing and reviewing that nourished radio work and listening, women were often placed in the odd position of being both marginalized and key voices in the proceedings – as was mostly the case within broadcasting organisations.

The more we move from practice to theorisation, the more the number of women seems to dwindle; much evidence suggests that this pattern was replicated across British, French, German and Italian interwar radio cultures, then the most influential radio cultures in Europe.[[3]](#endnote-3) The number of women who made radio programmes or spoke regularly on the airwaves was small compared to their male counterparts; the number of women who wrote radio journalism was smaller; the number of women who wrote essays about aesthetics and theorised radio broadcasting was even smaller. The essay or review discussing questions of aesthetic principle was a genre dominated by men. I became interested in this difference, and in tracking down the women who did write radio journalism. The records remain diffuse – as is always the case with this period, and particularly when attempting comparative transnational work. What I did find suggests that the women who made a mark on the radio journalism of the period worked mostly in two genres: they either wrote occasional articles chronicling their personal experiences of radio broadcasting (as performers before the microphone, or as employees working behind the scenes), or they styled themselves as listening diarists. The women who honed the latter genre specialised in anecdotal chronicles situated in the moment of listening, but rarely ventured into broader arguments about aesthetics and politics; Hilda Matheson, the BBC pioneer, was the exception in this regard, and if there are comments, theories or proposals elsewhere they tend to remain disguised, or buried, within a discursive listening diary situated in the instant of listening, hence advertising its incidental nature. The prevalence of the listening diary in the form of short columns is such that it led me to wonder whether there are any female authors of books on radio prior to 1939, beyond Matheson. The oft-forgotten authors whose work I traced often chronicled small transformations in everyday broadcasting, sometimes over long periods of time, and forged columns or essays staging their listening practice as a way of embedding other reflections on aesthetics denoting their experience and knowledge. Some of these texts are feminist in their intentions (often idiosyncratically so, to contemporary ears), and advocate for better offerings for women; others reverberate the misogyny that shaped so much of the day-to-day running of radio stations, and struggle with the concept of a plural audience in which women’s opinions and tastes matter equally.

The women whose writings I encountered, and whose stories I tried to tell in my biographical sketches, had different relations to radio: some wrote about radio often; others rarely so. Some had a steady activity as journalists or writers; others were primarily involved in making or delivering radio programmes. Hilda Matheson’s writing stayed with me all the way through, particularly her description of broadcasting as ‘a means of enlarging the frontiers of human interest and consciousness, of widening personal experience, of shrinking the earth’s surface.’[[4]](#endnote-4) Matheson was not merely an important figure in the history of the BBC, but a brilliant theorist and historian of early radio aesthetics. Beyond her detailed, pioneering study *Broadcasting*, published in 1933, Matheson wrote regularly about radio, including a thought-provoking column for *The Observer* after her resignation from the BBC. Guided by Kate Murphy, I turned to other voices, no less experienced than Matheson but seemingly less comfortable in theorising their views publicly, and I became interested in the perspectives offered by Mabel Constanduros, Sheila Borrett, Florence Milnes (the BBC librarian), Ella Fitzgerald, Olive Shapley and Barbara Burnham in their all-too-scant journalism for magazines such as the *Radio Times* and *Radio Pictorial*, where they occasionally shared insights into their practical experiences. Guided by Birgit Van Puymbroeck, I became interested in Camilla, a columnist for *Vox, The Radio Critic & Broadcast Review* who wanted to improve what was on offer from the BBC, and act as a spokesperson for all female listeners. ‘If you are anxious to listen, to know what you want for the programmes, and to express your will, I hope that in these columns I may be your voice,’ Camilla writes in her opening salvo.[[5]](#endnote-5)

My research also led me towards atypical French authors such as Madeleine Montvoisin, an obscure radio dramatist who published only one essay on radio drama, but whose ideas were disseminated through foreign publications including the Italian radio magazine *Radiocorriere* and the Brazilian radio magazine *Carioca*;[[6]](#endnote-6) France Darget, who believed that radio could reinvigorate verse drama; Alida Calel, who authored an ill-fated essay on radio aesthetics with her brother. Louder, more confident voices included those of Grace Wyndham Goldie, one of the most prolific radio drama critics of the period, who developed original theories of radio drama in her witty columns for the BBC magazine *The Listener* prior to her career in television; Annette Kolb, a writer with attachments to both Germany and France, who had a keen interest in radio broadcasting and published a pithy critique styled as a list of ‘radio pains and radio pleasures’ shortly before the Nazis’ accession to power; Suzanne Cilly, who advocated for better-quality women’s programmes on French radio stations. Cilly did not mince her words in her opening column for *Radio-Liberté*, where she complained about having to pub up with ‘mountains of gossip, advice and recommendations’: ‘Is there anyone out there who truly believes that women who enjoy listening to radio, and young women generally, have no other preoccupations? That serious topics are of no interest to them?’[[7]](#endnote-7)

Where can we find more authors like Cilly? This is a question I have no clear answer for, given the sheer mass of periodicals, magazines of newspapers, the unevenness of archival holdings and the uneven pace of digitisation. The outcomes probably boil down to a mixture of time, funding, persistence and luck. Anthologies make for peculiar research projects, because they are shaped by considerations that do not apply to other types of books, involving ethics, balance, representativity and copyright restrictions (fair use or fair dealing, which underpins the writing of monographs, does not apply to anthologies – or to translations). Dealing with copyright permissions is feasible when authors are ‘known’, but what is to be done for authors who have fallen into oblivion, yet are still in copyright? The procedures can be unclear and publishers can, understandably, be nervous. Finding information about siblings or descendance can be haphazard, and in this particular case it involved collating and cross-referencing information from sources that are not standard research fare (such as obituaries, genealogy sites, acknowledgements in PhD theses, telephone books, online forums, LinkedIn and Facebook). Many possibilities had to be discarded; many routes led nowhere. The correspondence that arose from this alerted me to the significant role that children and sometimes grandchildren play as custodians, which I had not considered from the same angle before. There are uncomfortable questions to be reckoned with when it comes to copyright: we can neither simply nor easily recover a sense of the significance and variety of women’s writings in some circumstances, but may unwittingly find ourselves tied to old failures to value and preserve women’s work. It is well established that wherever women seem absent in histories of radio broadcasting, their absences never involve absence as such, but disappearance, oblivion, concealment or erasure;[[8]](#endnote-8) to the challenges posed by the course of institutional memory and the laws of the archive, we can also add the vagaries of copyright.

Notes

1. Emilie Morin, ed., *Early Radio: An Anthology of European Texts and Translations*, with translations by Emilie Morin, Marielle Sutherland and Nicoletta Asciuto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming May 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kate Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923-1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, notably, Rebecca P. Scales, *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 139; Pierre Miquel, *Histoire de la radio et de la télévision* (Paris: Editions Richelieu, 1973). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hilda Matheson, *Broadcasting* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1933), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Vox Angelica: The Woman Listener,’ *Vox, The Radio Critic & Broadcast Review*, 9 November 1929, 23. Much suggests that Camilla was one of the pen names used by the British author Faith Compton Mackenzie (1878-1960). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. G. M., untitled article, *Radiocorriere*, 29 August-4 September 1937, 4; ‘Uma vitoria do “broadcasting” brasileiro!,’ *Carioca*, 6 August 1938, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. My translation. Suzanne Cilly, ‘Les femmes et la radio,’ *Radio-**Liberté*, June-July 1936, 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See, notably, Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)