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The Radio Garden: Private pleasures and public benefits

ABSTRACT

The launch in December 2016 of the Radio Garden, an output of the EU-funded Transnational Radio Encounters (TRE) project, attracted a social media storm and hundreds of millions of page views. Since then, the number of visits has not significantly decreased. It is the ability to access live radio streams from stations across the world that is Radio Garden's attraction, something which, in the years since its launch, the two authors have repeatedly witnessed: people, young and old, are excited by this 'TRE'. With a touch of the screen, Radio Garden offers an escape from the bubble of 'likes' to new musical and linguistic encounters, geographical difference and distance, perhaps even an escape from the bubble of nationality. For older people, the surfing recalls the dial-searching of the first radio age – an adventure, but a safe one. In this article, two co-investigators in the original TRE project discuss what these encounters mean for listeners and its continuing popularity during the 2020–21 pandemic. They demonstrate how the platform has enabled people to participate in radio in new ways and discuss examples of the social and educational benefits and the personal pleasures it affords its users in the United Kingdom and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Radio Garden (http://radio.garden/), an interactive website and a free app, gives access to thousands of live radio streams across the world. Its origin was an academic research project, Transnational Radio Encounters (TRE), in which researchers from six European universities participated,[1] and which ran from 2013 to 2016. TRE was funded by the EU agency Humanities in the European Area (HERA), as part of the HERA Cultural Encounters strand (HERA 2012). Trialled at TRE's final conference at Utrecht University in July 2016, Radio Garden was launched in December of that year, and immediately attracted a social media storm with 7.5 million hits in its first week, as well as hundreds of millions of page views over the next few months. The designer, commissioned and briefed by the project, admirably captured the ideas underpinning the research and its findings: feelings of belonging evoked by radio, the importance of radio in preserving memories of home and the surprise and excitement of crossing borders to experience random radio encounters. In this article, we seek, as two former members of the TRE research team, to explain Radio Garden's popularity, which continues more than five years after its launch, with the additional element of its accessibility in the time of pandemic lockdowns as experienced here in the United Kingdom.

BACKGROUND TO TRE RESEARCH AND RADIO GARDEN DEVELOPMENT

The TRE project involved six linked but independent projects in Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. A partnership of academics from the fields of radio studies, media history, musicology and community media worked with broadcasters and archives, including the European Broadcasting Union, BBC Archives, The British Library National Sound Archive and Deutsche Welle. Several separate areas of research explored and analysed mainstream trans-border radio, the challenges to public service, pre-war co-transmissions across Europe, international broadcasting and the area of concern to the authors of this article, radio produced by social, cultural and ethnic minority communities, predominantly in the 'third' community radio sector. These areas shared three cross cutting themes: aesthetics and territoriality, infrastructures and public spheres and archive and cultural memory.

Across the projects our research gathered evidence of international and transnational radio programming. In the case of community radio, we used Participatory Action Research (PAR) to record participants' experiences of producing and listening to such radio, using questions such as: 'What does "transnational" community radio sound like?'; 'how is language used to cross "linguistic borders?"'; 'what role does music play?' In the area of memory and archives, we were interested to hear about the contribution to cultural memory made by transnational programming, including the role of institutional, station and personal archives. Our data included a rich mix of interviews and programmes, both contemporary and archival.

In February 2016, the TRE team was entering the last stages of the project.[2] Like most academics, members of our HERA project all knew the value of telling the story of our research beyond refereed articles and published reports and books. Our varied interests in the radio medium meant that from an early stage we were excited about what our 'exhibition' would look, and importantly sound like. The participatory research approach combines community media and participatory mapping, such as geo-located digital mapping, which has been experienced in previous projects (see, e.g.

http://www.comapp-online.de). This work, however, sought to understand how marginalized communities establish their own cultural spaces, what barriers to cultural participation they encounter (and their experience of policy-led interventions), and how community stories and experiences are archived. The use of PAR involved 'sharing experience workshops' conducted in Britain, Canada, France and Spain, engaging participants from stations, voluntary associations and communities who listen to and contribute to radio made by/for minority groups. The research gathered stories of transnational radio participation by community radio broadcasters in collaboration with a wide range of social, ethnic and special interest groups, listening to what 'transnational community radio' sounds like and looking at the conditions that support transnational radio production, broadcasts and archives. The latter drew on Mitchell's work (2015) on the role of archives in creating cultural memory, and the importance of archives for transnational community radio networking and recirculation of programming. PAR projects, such as radio programme making about people's TRE and community listening events, explored people's links with homeland and diaspora and explored how radio enabled them to transcend boundaries of national identity.

In recent years, it has become the role of community radio to give voice to more recently arrived communities. The discussion we facilitated mused over how to display these connections, their histories and the huge range of community stations that existed worldwide. One PAR activity, a webcast live from a community festival in Jarrow, north-east England, involved a 'Transnational Radio table' where people could map, record and listen to experiences of students, refugees and mixed-race families. The mapping table was an early step along the road to the Radio Garden.

Together with colleagues and partners at the Netherland's National Institute for Sound and Vision in Hilversum, the project commissioned an online interactive platform from Amsterdam-based designers, Studio Moniker, which would highlight key aspects of transnational radio experiences. Studio Puckey carried out the project design work, creating an innovative listening platform: an interactive globe without national borders, which enables users to surf the global airwaves. Available freely online and on iOS and Android devices, the application can be described as 'a globe peppered with pinpoints linking users to […] stations' streamed broadcasts, thereby providing a single point of entry to the world's radio for millions of people' (Mitchell and Ramsey 2021: 2). Interviews, audio archive fragments and stories gathered in the PAR projects were brought together and fed back via community radio programmes and at workshops held with the community researchers and their radio partners. They were also 'planted' in Radio Garden, adding a rich 'voicing' of participants' transnational radio experiences to the platform.

Before the launch and in the first year of operation, there was an additional task of adding internet live-streaming addresses from databases of community stations to Radio Garden. We contacted many national and international community radio associations, including continental branches of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). Some stations were contacted individually, but once Radio Garden went live, we encouraged stations to add themselves via an online form. It was important for community radio to be represented equally alongside commercial and state radio broadcasters. Although we attempted to highlight community stations by a 'CR' tag this was not taken up consistently by the developer. However, there are hundreds, if not thousands of community stations on Radio Garden, and as people surf the international airwaves they can be identified as green dot

3. Stations are still being
added. As of May 2021,
there are approx. 33,000
stations.

alongside other stations, regardless of status or sector. Jazmine Hughes, writing in the *New York Times* magazine, comments that, by making all equally accessible, Radio Garden 'obliterates all distinction between radio stations' (Hughes 2020: n.pag.). Adding live streams of community stations to the platform alongside interviews, stories, historical fragments and jingles 'meant that community radio is not only represented on Radio Garden but is in its DNA' (Mitchell and Ramsey 2021: 1).

At the time of its launch Radio Garden had four distinct layers or sections: Live, Jingles, History and Stories:

> The Live section allows you to explore a world of radio as it is happening right now. Tune into any place on the globe to explore over 15,000 stations[3] broadcasting live to your desktop or mobile phone. What sounds familiar? What sounds foreign? Where would you like to travel and what sounds like 'home'? Jingles offered a world-wide crash course in station identification. How do stations signal within a fraction of a second what kind of programmes you are likely to hear? History offered clips from radio history, while in the Stories section listeners told how they used radio to make themselves at home in the world and described their radio journeys as they crossed borders and countries.
>
> (Mitchell 2019: n.pag.)

THE IMPACT

'Radio meets Google Earth'; 'I swear this is the most entertaining thing I've ever come across' (HERA 2019: n.pag.).

Following its formal launch, the site received approximately half a million visitors in its first day, and by the end of January over 18 million visitors. To date it has had more than 900 million page views, used by 10 million listeners per month (RadioKing Blog 2020). It has won major awards, including a Webby for designer and site developer, Jonathan Puckey, and has been picked up by newspapers, journalists, news websites, social media platforms and broadcasters all over the world. More staff were taken on to keep up with the addition of new stations, and consideration was given to the management of the Live layer that was the most used. Data from a private communication with the National Institute for Sound and Vision indicated that in 2018 there was 98.4 per cent use of the Live layer and around 0.5 per cent per layer for history, jingles and stories. Puckey needed more and more finance to support this activity, and subsequently decided to concentrate on sustaining the popular Live layer, dropping the additional layers.

After the launch thousands of tweets tagged #radiogarden came in on a daily, sometimes hourly basis, from every corner of the world. The tweets were overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic, in many ways defining the impact of the research. They heralded Radio Garden as new way of listening to radio, free to use and liberated from commercial categorization of stations: 'This is an amazing site that will change the way you listen to the world!' (Twitter, #radio.garden n.d.); '[m]y first reaction to radio.garden was excitement – it is so accessible – radio at my fingertips!' (Twitter, #radio.garden n.d.). Educational use was also praised:

> The best website ever to practise your language! Also, you can listen to the world radio at the same time. Follow the green dot to identify your selected location and tune in. You can learn a lot from listening to the radio.
>
> (@TrueLightLearn 2018)

For people who used radio to escape some of the limitations brought about by disability or illness we heard about the platform's use in this tweet (complete with use of social media terms):

> Meet John, my 85 yrs young neighbour who has @ParkinsonsUK. He can now use http://radio.garden on his #iPad to find #radio stations in #Greece to listen to in his home language. #digitalskills helps John with developing his #motorskills @getonlineweek #inspiration #try1thing.
>
> (HERA 2019: n.pag.)

National and international recognition came from HERA, funders of the research, who rated it as 'one of the most successful humanities public engagement activities ever carried out' (HERA 2019: n.pag.). Since 2017, promotion on social media around World Radio Day, held annually by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, meant that more people discovered Radio Garden. The pandemic of 2020–21 also saw a significant 750 per cent surge in use (Marsh 2021), the impact of which is discussed below.

WITNESSING RADIO GARDEN IN USE

In the years since Radio Garden's launch, we have carried out small scale impact workshops with a range of people and organizations to introduce them to the platform. This included working with senior citizens in community settings, Black, Asian and ethnic minority audiences, refugee organizations and youth projects. At the University of Sunderland impact statements were collected from users[4] and these, along with articles and comments drawn from social media and journalism, have formed the basis for this discussion.

Between 2018 and 2020, 320 teenagers from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds attended BBC STEM Ambassador workshops, intended to excite their interest in a range of possible futures in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects). At the invitation of the programme's project manager, we ran workshops introducing the Radio Garden at four of these events, two in Bristol, in Cardiff and in London. The BBC was keen to use the Radio Garden as an attractive example of STEM occupations in broadcasting. The BBC STEM project manager has said that demonstrating Radio Garden means that:

> [It] allowed us to broaden young people's thinking about careers in the BBC beyond the UK. We can better engage with the young people participating. We work with a diverse range of people, for many of whom English is not their first language. We typically struggle to fully engage these participants. The global nature of Radio Garden meant that the young people could find stations that broadcast in their language, from their community, or in areas where they have family ties. The workshops immediately became more inclusive, because Radio Garden offered something for everyone there […] For some young people this must have been a life changing experience.
>
> (Mitchell and Ramsey 2021: 3)

The feedback from the teachers in attendance was extremely positive. In one workshop, we witnessed the expression on the face of a teenage 'radio gardener'. We saw the thrill and wonder at being able to connect to her

family's homeland via a station from her grandmother's hometown in Cyprus, where she heard her family's language and music. In another encounter, at a workshop run for Radio 3 listeners at the BBC Free Thinking Festival (Sage Gateshead, UK March 9th, 2017), there were tears as an older woman found the station in Italy that her son, who emigrated there, listens to; she was excited to be able to listen at the same time as him. This same person declared that she would set up 'radio garden parties' with her friends and neighbours so they could all make similar connections with family and friends through their beloved radios.

At an individual level we have witnessed how the platform has transformed the way listeners from around the world can engage with radio in this de-territorialized form. Its spinning globe reintroduces curiosity and serendipity to engagement with radio, so that the listener journeys around the world and through time. A writer from *Vice Magazine* 'travels' from Mexico, to Alaska, to Japan. A National Public Radio (NPR) writer recalls early memories of twisting the radio dial to drop into unknown stations. *The Guardian* says the joy 'is in the spinning of the globe and landing who knows where' (Sawyer 2020: n.pag.).

Journalists, media workers and broadcasters have been in particular thrall to Radio Garden understanding it for personal and professional reasons. A trainer of journalists and broadcasters for BBC World Service has used Radio Garden as part multimedia training in the United Kingdom and Africa. She said it enables members to go beyond their home country and gain a rich insight into radio across the globe. 'I have trained around a thousand people using Radio Garden, from countries including the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Senegal, Ghana, Nigerian, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Cameroon, Indonesia, India, Mauritius and Rwanda' (Mitchell and Ramsay 2021: n.pag.).

According to the United Kingdom's Community Media Association, Radio Garden has made a noticeable impact: the platform transforms the visibility and accessibility of community radio stations whose reach is usually limited to the members of the immediate community that it serves.

> Radio Garden gives community stations additional credibility and legitimacy. This is significant because community radio can sometimes be seen as inferior when compared to BBC and commercial radio. The platform's interface, which encourages wandering and exploring, provides a new and fun way to pick a station to listen to. Stations are extremely keen to be included on Radio Garden […] and this is significant […] because listeners are the lifeblood of the station. Listeners validate the importance of the station, and the credibility and quality of the staff.
>
> (Mitchell and Ramsay 2021: 3)

A major focus of findings of our original research (see Mitchell and Lewis 2018) was how radio reconnects community radio producers and listeners with their homelands and diasporas. Radio Garden enables migrants to maintain connections with their host or home community. Singh wrote for an NPR blog '[b]ack in India, when I was little, I used radio to connect with faraway places. Now living in the U.S., I was using Radio Garden to go home again' (Singh 2016: n.pag.). A Cornish community station says: '[It] can be very important for people who have left their local area. In Cornwall, we have a large diaspora of people working in the mining industry around the world and often get people tuning in from these areas' (Mitchell and Ramsay 2021: 3).

The *New York Times* notes the platform's power for revealing 'the peculiarities of foreign cultures', saying 'the window it opens onto other places is both exceptionally vivid and exceptionally limited, like looking through a keyhole, so that you're compelled to start filling in the rest of the picture yourself' (Lyster 2019: n.pag.). Fushijama says '[s]uch openness to unfamiliar cultures that Radio Garden encourages […] is crucial during a time when some of our political leaders are hellbent on emphasizing cultural divides, encouraging xenophobia under the guise of nationalism and protectionism' (Fushijama 2020: n.pag.). *The Guardian* echoes the sentiment: 'With global tensions high, anger at the political establishment and fake-news dominating social media discussions, it feels like there has never been a better time to enable people to reflect on human communication on an international level' (Coldwell 2016: n.pag.). COVID-19 lockdowns have highlighted the platform's value in enabling cultural connections and exploration.

RADIO IN PANDEMIC

'This lockdown liberation tool' (Anon. 2021: n.pag.).

'Radio Garden continuing to come into its own while travelling feels like a pipe dream' (Scrimshire 2020: n. pag.).

Since its launch, the number of visits to Radio Garden has not decreased overall. From time to time, for whatever reason, there have been spikes and dips in popularity, but the interest during the COVID pandemic has been exceptional. In February 2021, a mention of the app on the BBC World Service led to more Twitter activity, including a discussion on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, and *The Guardian*'s editorial (24 March 2021) which judged that 'the miraculous quality of Radio Garden […] richly deserves its growing cult status' (Anon. 2021: n.pag.). This echoes Rudolf Arnheim who, writing in the early days of the medium, talked of: 'The great miracle of wireless. The omnipresence of what people are singing or saying anywhere, the overleaping of frontiers, the conquest of spatial isolation, the importation of culture on the waves of the ether' (Arnheim 1936: 14). A few days before the editorial, *The Guardian* had interviewed Jonathan Puckey (Marsh 2021) who confirmed that in the previous 30 days, at a time when the pandemic was forcing lockdowns across the world, he had recorded 15 million users, a 750 per cent increase on the visitors they normally get in a month. He went on to make two points that we have noticed in our workshops: the enjoyment of random encounters – '[p]eople should be able to get lost and use their ears to paint the picture of the location'; and the escape from the bubble of likes which haunts digital choices – '[o]ur hope is to provide an alternative to the fibreless fare currently provided to us by technology giants. I see young people questioning the ease and emptiness of algorithmic playlists and taking back control over their listening' (Marsh 2021: n.pag.).

But why, particularly in lockdown, has Radio Garden been so popular? Moya Sarner, writing in *The Guardian*'s Long Read, describes the 'brain fog […] a dulled, useless state of mind' many people have experienced during lockdown. Her interviews with neuroscientists point to this being the result of diminished social interaction. 'The blending of one day into the next with no commute, no change of scene, no change of cast, could also have an important impact on the way the brain processes memories […] the fact that everything is so samey'. One of Sarner's respondents described it as 'the cognitive equivalent of feeling emotionally distressed' (Sarner 2021: n.pag.).

'Stuckness' is the word used in some studies of the experience of incarceration, which show very similar mental and emotional reactions to isolation in a situation that has no definite prospect of ending. An introduction to a Special Issue of *Ethnos* discusses:

> the interrelations of space and time in sites of confinement by exploring the relationships between ghettos, camps, places of detention, prisons and the like with a focus on those people who are confined, encamped, imprisoned, detained, stuck, or forcibly removed and who are doing their utmost to cope or escape […] We reserve the term confinement for the frameworks – both spatial and temporal – that structure life in camps, ghettos, prisons and so on; and we propose the term stuckness to refer to the way confinement is experienced, sensed and lived […] To be existentially and socially stuck is not just a question of being stuck in place but equally about being stuck in time. It is the sense of not making progress, of not seeing a future, which leads to a sense of stuckness that may linger.
>
> (Jefferson et al. 2019: 2–3)

Emma Russell and Maria Rae report on two Australian projects that captured for broadcast radio and podcasts, the reactions of asylum seekers and Aboriginal prisoners to 'indefinite stuckness' (Russell and Rae 2020). *The Messenger* is a 24-episode podcast that was produced in 2017 and features secret exchanges between a journalist and a detained refugee using a smuggled mobile phone. *Beyond the Bars* is a series of live prison broadcasts on 3CR Melbourne, in which a team of Aboriginal broadcasters make radio with Aboriginal prisoners. For 'incarcerated asylum seekers, indefinite stuckness manifests in the absence of a set release date, whereas for Aboriginal prisoners, it is a cycle of criminalisation and re-incarceration in the colony' (Russell and Rae 2020: n.pag.). A psychologist, in the second episode of *The Messenger* comments on the indefinite detention of the refugee:

> If they knew they were going to be released within 12 months, two years, three years, I think they would feel much better, because there's something to work towards. I guess that [the indefinite detention] just adds to the torment that they experience which then becomes torture.
>
> (Russell and Rae 2020: n.pag.)

Lockdown is a kind of imprisonment. What many have missed are the unexpected visits of friends, the randomness of encounters in shops and pubs, the overheard conversations, often in foreign languages (if you live in a city), in the streets and on public transport.

What Radio Garden offers, therefore, is a number of pleasures. At a basic, tactile level, though perhaps not always consciously registered, Radio Garden offers the ability to 'travel' the globe as achieved by a touch of the screen. Gazi and Bonini, in an article on 'haptically mediated' radio listening, speculate that:

> [F]rom a cognitive standpoint, the utilization of touch may reduce cognitive load due to the fact that parallel processing of stimuli perceived through different sensory modalities proves less demanding (in terms of cognitive resources) compared to processing a multitude of stimuli all perceived through the same sensory organ.
>
> (Gazi and Bonini 2018: 112)

There is no mention of Radio Garden in an article that is mainly concerned with a development in listening, afforded by the commodification of touch in the use of mobile phones. There is no doubt, however, that much of the feedback we have received or witnessed provides evidence of the pleasure in the ease with which a listener can control the journey across Radio Garden's globe.

That journey can be a choice to find a specific place, as the British Cypriot student found, or it can be a wander to see what can be heard from this city, or that continent, never visited before. The pleasures can be of music, or of a mother tongue, which nowadays is increasingly neglected by a younger generation. To roam across a globe on which no national boundaries are marked changes our perception of radio as bounded by national borders. To descend on the green dot of a city and choose a station there to listen to, for older people recalls the dial-searching of the first radio age, an adventure, but a safe one. For younger generations, whose musical tastes are reinforced by systems like Spotify or YouTube, the Radio Garden offers an escape from the bubble of 'likes' to new musical encounters, which confront them with difference and distance, perhaps even an escape from the bubble of nationality. In the same interview, Puckey recalled the pleasure of the random encounter, the situationists' *dérive* (literally 'drifting'), described by Guy Debord, one of the movement's leaders, as:

> A technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behaviour […] quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.
>
> (Debord 1958: 1)

CONCLUSION

What, then, are we to make of Radio Garden's extraordinary impact? Its designer said:

> We had the idea to make a modern version of the old-world receiver radio sets […] We hoped to recreate this magical feeling of travelling across the globe blindly, relying on the sense of hearing and the knowledge of location to bring these live radio stations to life.
>
> (Marsh 2021: n.pag.)

Older generations certainly recognized this experience as did one of this article's authors:

> The hours I spent [as a teenager] sweeping the dial […] brought me inevitably, directly – and magically – into a realm of linguistic otherness. To hear that there *are* other languages, to begin to recognize them as different, one from another, and to enjoy the music and emotion of language without necessarily understanding it – this was and still is part of the European radio listening experience […] but mostly what I was searching for was music, at first classical […] and later jazz, when the only weekly jazz programme within reach was Hugues Panassié's *Jazz Panorama* from Paris.
>
> (Lewis 1999: 210)

Radio Garden also offers a field for searches with a particular goal. Both authors of this article discovered that, after President Trump's inaugural speech and unknown to each other, they had used Radio Garden to surf across US stations to check liberal comment on his performance, especially among community radio and Pacifica stations.

The liveness of the experience is novel for many of the younger generations accustomed to accessing with a click a playlist they have already compiled. Of course, for them, part of the apparatus of listening is the close-fitting earphone; the intimate immersion of sound in their heads is not a new experience, but the serendipitous drop-in to live broadcasting adds a special tang, almost a feeling of eavesdropping at an event you can quit without effort or blame. Radio Garden therefore offers an experience that is both private and public, and is midway between the personal customization of cultural taste afforded by Spotify (if you like this/that you will like this) and a listening world entirely shaped by broadcast schedulers. A hybrid that is at once personal and social. We have seen, too, how during the incarceration of pandemic lockdowns Radio Garden offers an escape from the boredom of inescapable routine. And the appeal of the *dérive*, a slightly crazy, daring adventure, taps into a deeply held need.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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