

Only half the story: Radio drama, online audio and transmedia storytelling

Lance Dann, University of Brighton

Abstract

Online audio drama creates the potential not just for new forms and patterns of listening (on-demand and audience-controlled) or for revised methods of plot structuring (with series stacking allowing for the use of extended narrative arcs) but of a complete recreation of the listening experience as part of an act of transmedia storytelling – one in which the narrative spins out of the wireless and overlays the ‘lived’ experience of the listener. This article will discuss the opportunities that have been opened up for writers and producers of radio drama through the development of online and downloadable audio. It will discuss the use of both social media tools and diverse media platforms in a construction of story in which the membrane between the real and fictive has become permeable. It will focus on the author’s ongoing work on *The Flickerman*, a piece of applied creative research that began as an attempt to explore the possibilities offered to writers by working outside conventional radio networks, and has developed into a piece of as-live, collaborative, open-source storytelling.

Keywords

radio drama

audio drama

transmedia storytelling

digital media

immersive narrative

Digital technologies have democratized the processes by which radio drama may be produced and distributed. There is now a growing body of participant producers working without formalized studios and reaching its audience directly through podcast and online audio distribution platforms. This has created the potential for a shift in the locus of creative production of radio drama away from traditional large-scale broadcasters, removing the creative constraints applied by their multifarious systems of commissioning and scheduling. The Internet offers writers and producers of radio drama almost limitless creative freedom, the potential for which has yet to be realized. ‘Audio Drama’, ‘Pod-Drama’, ‘Podiobooks’ – the form has yet to settle upon a name and its identity is still defined by the sensibility of the amateur and the tropes of fan fiction. What the online audio offers is the opportunity for creative practitioners to hone their craft and engage with new forms of transmedia storytelling. Online audio drama creates the potential not just for new forms and patterns of listening (on-demand and audience-controlled) or for revised methods of plot structuring (with series stacking allowing for the use of extended narrative arcs) but of a complete recreation of the listening experience as a form of augmented narrative – one in which the story spins out of the fictive realm and overlays the ‘lived’ experience of the listener.

This article will explore the potential offered by this new creative form to writers and producers of radio drama. It is derived from a piece of extended research that I have recently completed for the Society of Authors in the United Kingdom (as part of a Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University) that examined the influences that the last two decades of changes to the commissioning processes at the BBC have had

on the work of radio writers. It also details a research as practice case study, the online audio project *The Flickerman* (2009), that I wrote and produced between 2008 and 2011. I have worked as a radio writer for the BBC since 1996, as well as a Sound Designer at New York theatre company the Wooster Group and as an independent producer of audio and interactive art. *The Flickerman* was developed as a response to my research that began as an attempt to explore the possibilities offered to writers by working outside conventional radio networks, and has developed into a piece of as-live, collaborative, open-source storytelling. It is presented as an explication of this writer's creative process and is set up neither as an exemplar of good practice nor as a model for others to follow.

Part I: Beyond the BBC

Ten years ago the online distribution of radio drama appeared to offer the perfect means for radio writers to reach new audiences directly. In his 1999 book *Radio Drama*, Tim Crook identified Internet distribution as having exciting potential for radio writers: 'Young writers who have experienced the brunt of exclusion and denial of opportunity in BBC licence fuelled radio drama since the late 1980s have been given the opportunity to send and receive communication on a level not seen since the introduction of the telephone' (1999: 41). In Crook's view was a method of distribution that offered an open and democratic platform on which artists and producers can broadcast their work, unrestricted by the 'oligopolies that operate in so many national broadcasting systems' (1999: 43). Previously, producers had to operate within the strictures of the BBC's schedules and systems of commissioning. Now it appeared that they could create work unhindered by such systems, scheduling

considerations, pitches or of any of the labyrinthine processes involved in producing work for a network broadcaster, and in particular for the BBC.

Such is the dominance of the BBC in the production and broadcast of radio drama that for the past 60 years it has held a virtual monopoly over the form's conceptual development.¹ Radio drama is produced and broadcast by other radio networks throughout the English-speaking world. There are weekly drama shows on national networks such as RTE (Ireland), ABC National Radio (Australia), CBC (Canada) and RNZ National (New Zealand). There have been occasions when the fulcrum of creativity in the form has shifted to other countries, for instance America's pre-1945 'Golden Age of Radio' or the German 'Neu Horspiel' movement of the 1970s, but the scale and consistency with which the BBC has been producing and broadcasting plays has channelled and shaped the form. The BBC is by far the most profile drama broadcaster in the world, airing 650 hours of work in 2009, with a total of 200 single plays (Howe 2009). Furthermore, the BBC's output, across Radios 3, 4 and 7, is heard by an average of 6.5 million people per week, with a typical Afternoon Play garnering audiences of 900,000 (Benedictus 2010).

There is no compulsion for the BBC to broadcast radio drama, it is not a requirement of its continued operation that it maintain this esoteric and comparatively expensive art form.² The corporation is supported by a licence fee, the existence of which is justified in part through the maintenance of audience share for all its broadcast network. Radio drama has to fulfil a defined role within the schedules of the BBC's radio stations, and the corporation has to ensure that it serves a purpose and it serves an audience. This it does through a very tight set of controls and monitors on its

output. This is an environment in which producers do not develop ideas from which broadcasters may construct a schedule. Rather, the broadcaster creates a schedule in response to the patterns of their audience's listening, and then programming is produced to fit into it. The more pragmatic of independent producers see their role as being not to sell programme ideas to the BBC but to sell the network controllers 'scheduling solutions' (Starkay 2000: 305).

The BBC issues writers and producers with commissioning guidelines that detail the time, audience and expected content of a particular programming slot. Writers are encouraged to incorporate this scree of demographic data into their creative process, allowing for little scope for experimentation or diversity in the works that they create. This predictability of output is part of the nature of contemporary, highly scheduled radio listening. Each and every project has to be the subject of a 'hard-sell' and most writers' reputation or track record counts for little. When every commission is a fresh start it is hard for a writer to build on previous successes and to have the confidence to try out different or potentially risky ideas (Wyatt 2009). Giving creative practitioners the freedom to try out ideas is essential to the development of both the writer's personal practice and to the development of the form. The American sociologist Richard Sennett observed that workers' productivity increased when they had the opportunity to make mistakes repeatedly, and so learn from them. Writers also need to be able to take risks, try out ideas, experiment with approaches and most of all they need to fail. This is not something that the radio writer has been able to do, because in radio drama there has been no Fringe, no off-off-Broadway where they can develop their craft or new stylistic approaches.³ Until the emergence of online audio distribution in the past ten years, there had been nowhere else of note for radio writers

to produce work with access to sizeable audiences and the potential for fiscal support.⁴

Part II: Beyond radio

The development of online applications such as iTunes, iLike or Soundcloud offers producers and writers the opportunity to upload audio, with few restrictions, that can then be downloaded by users who pay either a minimal charge or nothing ('freecasting'). Theoretically, the producers of this form of user-generated downloadable audio have access to global audiences. In *The Long Tail* (2006), Chris Anderson describes how, although a particular artistic product may be niche in its interests, the global reach offered by the Internet means that there will always be an audience for it:

This is not just a quantitative change, but a qualitative one, too. Bringing niches within reach reveals latent demand for non-commercial content. Then, as demand shifts towards the niches, the economics of providing them improve further, and so on, creating a positive feedback loop that will transform entire industries – and the culture – for decades to come. (Anderson 2006: 26)

Fred Greenhalgh runs radiodramarevival.com, an US-based review site that is one of the focal points for the international audio drama scene, and he describes an emergent form with a great deal of 'guts' but not a lot of 'polish'. Dominated by amateur producers and micro-production companies producing genre works, the scene is characterized by a proliferation of fan-fiction derived from popular television or film

franchises. The size of audiences tends to be comparable with those of community radio, with successful producers of podiobooks (audiobooks distributed for free in a podcast format) reaching approximately 15,000 (Greenhalgh 2009). In the past twelve months, there have been cases of series gaining an audience beyond the confines of the 'audio drama' scene, and appealing to the fan-base of a particular genre of work. The post-apocalyptic zombie survival epic *We're Alive* (2010) has had over 4.5 million downloads (but, tellingly, has had to sign to a conventional audiobook publisher, Blackstone Audiobooks, to fund further iterations of the series). There are few professional producers and those that do exist have gained their reputation by producing works in other media and forms.

At this point it does not appear possible for online audio drama to be financially self-sustaining.

The problem is that, comparatively speaking, audio drama is expensive to produce, there's little dollar payout from premium production and historically the audience has been lost. This is the whole 'long tail' concept of the web. Radio drama is long tail. It is a niche. It can grow as a niche, but it's never going to be for your average mainstream net-user. (Greenhalgh 2009)

Writers and producers can operate with total freedom, and they can have access to a global audience, but the caveat to this is that this it is not an audience that will pay for their product. Independent radio producer and writer Dirk Maggs has spent four years trying to set up an Internet model of distribution of radio drama for his production

company 'Perfectly Normal'. He has yet to find any investment for such a project because

as soon as you put a writer and actors in the equation, people do not want to invest in radio...it's just too expensive... Between 2004 to 2007, we were in numerous Dragon's Den' situations, saying, 'Listen, we can make wonderful sounding drama, put it on the net and people will buy it and we can show you figures that would ensure that in five years we get into profit', and they say, 'Well, how much do you want to us to invest? 250,000 pounds? Forget it. Where's our return on our investment?'. (Maggs 2009)

One problem is the sheer quantity of material that is being released onto the Internet. One of the most important tasks an online producer has to undertake is that of marketing and signposting their output so that any potential audience can find it in the increasing mass of productions that are available. Dirk Maggs highlights the BBC's expansion into the Internet as having considerably undermined the potential for independent or commercial production companies to source funding for online projects.

(The BBC) have been producing work and then streaming it for a week after broadcast, and there is more and more podcast material appearing on iTunes from the BBC. I would think that probably in five years the BBC would be coming to the Society of Authors and Writers Guilds looking for the writer to actually let material out on an iTunes, as a download for nominal money.⁵ There's not much point in independent companies trying to compete. I'm not

the world's greatest businessman, but it just seems to me that the market is pretty flooded with quality products. The BBC soaks up the oxygen and it's very tricky. I'm not criticising the BBC. It's doing the job it's been told to do, and it's doing it really well. (Maggs 2009)

Despite Maggs' assertions, the BBC itself seems to be reluctant to embrace the full-potential of downloadable audio drama: 'The licence fee model for the BBC may or may not last, but while it is there it's going to be interesting to see how the BBC could fund radio drama activity which was purely for non-commercial download' (Mortimer 2008).⁶ For all the success of the BBC's iPlayer, which allows programming to be streamed on-demand for a week after broadcast, and the cross-platform iPlayer, the corporation is committed to a traditional model of scheduled broadcasting for the foreseeable future. Commissioning will continue to be dictated by the requirements of the schedule and the needs and expectations of an audience that engages with a broadcast at a particular time of day. Some works may be made available for download (and have been) dependent on the negotiation of the applicable rights, but online distribution will not automatically become the de facto platform for the broadcast of radio drama. 'We'll still have scheduled programmes for another quarter of a century, because of the demographic, because radio is a personal pleasure and because, though you can shift time, your capacity to listen is finite. Radio is built into your life' (Reynolds 2008).

What few people have identified is the fact that downloadable audio drama provides the potential for a different way of listening and, in turn, a different way of telling stories. The audience for downloadable audio is able to choose when to listen, and

how it listens, thus creating the possibility for the generation of entirely new forms of *audio* drama.

Both audio drama and radio drama are realized in sound but for radio what really matters is not sound, it is the act of *broadcast*. Gregory Whitehead describes radiophony as the ‘autonomous, electrified play of bodies unknown to each other’ (1992: 262), a precise and direct communication with a listener at a particular moment in time. This is why ‘live’ radio is so appealing, because you as ‘listener’, know that there is someone out there talking to you at that precise moment, what Neumark describes as ‘a whole affective or emotional microclimate and locus of encounter where listeners feel themselves to be part of a listening community’ (2006: 213). Online audio is narrow casting and private, an intimate and controlled experience. By working in this form the producer loses the sense of dynamic openness that exists in broadcasting, but the listener gains a sense of control that is realized through their relationship to the finished product.

The audience to a downloaded audio piece has the freedom to choose when and where to listen. It still cannot be assumed that they will be focusing on the work in a manner that the writer may wish – listening may still be a secondary activity – but they will be able to control their sonic environment. If the phone rings, a nappy needs changing or the boss enters their office, they need only take a temporarily break from the narrative, the pause button can be pushed and the story resumed at a more convenient moment. This should allow for more intricate plotting; it can certainly allow for longer-form drama and sequentially developing serials: ‘It’s an interesting thing that

the younger, online audience expects something that is more adventurous, which is more fragmented, where actually storytelling is more complicated'. (Canny 2008)

The received wisdom of how best to generate content for the Web is to assume that your audience has no attention span, and that you must work in as short a form as possible:

I still think there is the opportunity for audio to find a niche on the web, audio drama in short form, but nobody has quite done it yet. I might be wrong, the generation that watch YouTube daily might not get the notion of something that doesn't have pictures... it's something which we have got to work on. (Mortimer 2008)

The listener to audio drama does not necessarily have to be seated in front of a computer; they can take their audio and listen to it wherever they choose. If they are listening to a series they may return to collect further episodes as and when they wish. The popularity of audiobooks and of long-run TV series that feature extended narrative arcs demonstrates that there is a willingness for audiences to engage with a narrative experience over large periods of time. HBO's *The Wire* (2002) and *Deadwood* (2004), NBC's *The West Wing* (1999) and AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008) all feature intricately plotted story lines that are developed over an entire series (or in the case of *The Wire*, five series). The success of this form of narrative has been associated with a growth in the sale of DVD series box sets and on-demand broadcasting that allows the audience to choose the pattern and timing of their viewing.

The single drama is a necessity of radio broadcasting because of the unpredictability of the audience's listening patterns. Radio programming is used as the background accompaniment to daily activities and has to fit in around them rather than vice versa. The BBC stipulates that series should be episodic or stand-alone: 'Groups of single plays on a theme, or in response to an event or anniversary, will be placed, but the essential criterion is that each play will be free-standing' (BBC Radio 4 Commissioning Guidelines 1999: 35). Radio Drama Commissioning Editor Jeremy Howe is aware of how limiting this can be and of the benefits of what he terms 'series stacking':⁷

I've spent so long trying to get series stacking. We wanted to get series stacking up for Smiley but it's quite difficult, we've got 20 hours of programming there and though it's not totally narrative-driven you do want to hear it from the first one. If you hear number 3 of *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* and you've enjoyed it, you want to hear episodes 1 and 2. (Howe 2009)

Without a schedule considerations about which slot a piece fits into can also be dispensed with. If a piece is no longer associated with a particular time of day then there are no listening patterns for the producer or writer to consider. Audiences should be able to find the work they want and listen to it when they want. The challenge that faces the network providers, the suppliers or aggregators (as broadcast institutions and online suppliers are termed by Chris Anderson) is to make the right work visible to the right people in a manner that makes the opportunity to listen an attractive one. A

particular demographic will be inevitably drawn to Internet listening, but the writer does not *have* to write for this or any prescribed audience. Furthermore, it must be recognized that this audience may not feel any particular allegiance to radio or audio drama as a form. They will be receiving work via multiflex devices and the distinctions between media, and between the status of producer and audience, will be blurred. This presents the writer, the artist and the constructor of narrative with an enticing set of creative possibilities. This is the possibility of extending narrative beyond the expectations of predetermined forms, the creation of a transmedial form of storytelling. Furthermore there is a clear and explicit invitation to break the *Fourth Wall* and to begin to tell stories that seamlessly mesh with the audience's empirical experience of the world.

Part III: The case of *The Flickerman*

The Flickerman was developed as a practice-led research project that was to take the form of a multi-part radio drama series. During the course of developing the piece it expanded to incorporate a range of media, formats and creative approaches that included film, live writing, social media manipulation, online writing and literary prose. *The Flickerman* grew from being simply a radio series into a piece of transmedia storytelling, a form that was espoused by MIT media studies professor Henry Jenkins in the 2006 book *Convergence Culture*. A transmedia story is distinct from a conventional cross-platform media franchise because it possesses a pervasive quality that is intended to permeate the audience's daily lives. The interchange and switching of narrative between media is constant and fluid, and the story will unpack across a range of forms. In the case of *The Flickerman* this would include films on

Vimeo, a blog at Blogger.com, a series of Facebook updates, press interviews with the author and broadcasts on terrestrial radio.

Creatively *The Flickerman* was to be a return to my roots, to the very first play I had commissioned by the BBC, *Ho! Ho! The Clown is Dead* (1995). Both pieces were written by collaging found materials and arranging them to create a story. This was a production technique that was unpredictable, involved risk and chance, and that I found exciting. At their inception both projects lacked a defined structure and consisted of a group of characters to whom a particular writing technique would be applied. As such they were not suited to being expressed as a single-sided pitch, but in 1995 *Ho! Ho! The Clown is Dead* was commissioned because producers still held on to the last vestiges of direct commissioning power, and they were able to invest time and resources in a young writer because of their intuition that he would produce innovative and original work. The post-Producer Choice, post-Birt, post-Boyle environment at the BBC at the point at which *The Flickerman* was conceived was very different. There was little chance of the project being commissioned because for a long time it did not have that most important thing that commissioning editors would look for in a pitch, a definable ‘story’, preferably in a form that fell into three acts.

As a writer I needed to develop my work, to hear it produced and to progress my understanding of the form by engaging with all stages of the production and creative process. That was the only way I could learn and develop my craft – by actually trying out ideas and seeing some fail, but also catching and developing the successful ones. The decision was taken to conceive of *The Flickerman* as a study of my creative

process outside the BBC and of all its associated concerns for commissioning systems, proposals, pitches and programming slots. It would be a personal realization of the ethos I had learnt during my time at The Wooster Group, that I should produce work that I found satisfying, that entertained me, that excited me – and that I hoped would find an audience of similarly minded people. I was also highly conscious that the BBC would not be allowed to broadcast the project in its rawest form because of legal issues relating to the techniques I was using.

Laura MS: Hey Cornelius you can crash at mine if you need a place.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: You do know I've got a girlfriend?

Laura MS: Of course I've heard all three episodes.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: Well then, I don't think I should take up your offer.

Laura MS: Get over her, Cornelius I mean she as good as tried to kill you.

Cornelius Zane-Grey: She did nothing of the sort.

Laura MS: Well that's the way a lot of people see it. (Facebook Instant Messenger – 15 February 2010)

A sci-fi conspiracy thriller, *The Flickerman* concerns Cornelius Zane-Grey and the trials and adventures he faces after learning that his life is being monitored, recorded and posted onto the Internet. As I told Cornelius' story and it became apparent that it was not suited to the confines of terrestrial broadcasting, the possibilities and freedoms offered by online distribution became enticing, and, as I came to realize, a necessity. I wrote *The Flickerman* by appropriating, referencing and recontextualizing materials that have been uploaded to the Internet by the public, via Web 2.0

technologies, and in the first episodes of the series to the website Flickr. Contributors to Flickr, who number in their millions, upload private photographs and ‘tag’ them with words or phrases so that they can be found and viewed by any Internet user. I developed a writing methodology of using these tags to gather a series of random images that I would then incorporate into a narrative. This story and the associated images would be part of a multi-episode story-arc, the details of which I had plotted in advance. My intention was to write in a fashion that did not demand that the audience be online and viewing the photographs as they listened; descriptions would serve to recontextualize the pictures for those viewing them and to realize and describe them for those who were not.

This technique allowed me a huge amount of creative freedom. I knew what was going to happen to my characters on a macro-level, but had no idea of what events would take them from one plot-point to another, until I had found the next set of images for each episode. I could shuffle the order of the pictures, drop some out, find new ones where necessary, but a picture would always have to be there, and they would guide the narrative and determine the events, mood and pace of each episode. A problem with the project as far as the BBC was concerned was my referencing of imagery without asking the owner’s consent. Legally this is an area of some uncertainty because the photographs are not appropriated, they are not lifted from Flickr and used elsewhere, I simply directed the audience to look at them, and told them how to interpret their content. I did not believe that the BBC would be willing to engage with the subtleties of the debate concerning the legal status of this process.⁸

I decided to produce and record the series at my own expense and use my own initiative to find routes to broadcast the series. A combination of Internet distribution, via download, and transmission on community radio emerged as the most appropriate (and achievable) methodology for delivering *The Flickerman* to an audience. What working on these platforms presents the author with is access to the most precious commodity in broadcasting: time. When writing *The Flickerman*, I was no longer governed by the strictures of a schedule or of a network's perception of what its audience's listening span would be. I could play with time, I could divide it up as I wished, I could use repetition as a device, I could cut scenes quickly or slowly, I could even waste time. As long as the listener was drawn in, as long as they wanted to listen to my narrator, I could write to any tempo that I chose. I developed the story across nine episodes, each of 45 minutes, with the intention that they would be produced in three series. All episodes would be made permanently available, allowing the listener to pick up the story from the very beginning at any juncture.

It was my intention to draw the audience gradually into the story of Cornelius Zane-Grey. I did not wish to be directly explicit about what was happening to him from the outset. The first twenty minutes of the piece would give little indication of the drama that would follow or of which genre the piece fell into. Tim Crook advises the radio writer that 'the key to beginning well in drama is to create a dramatic moment of arrival... drop your listener into a high moment of significant drama... give your listeners a rush at the beginning and whoosh them through the rapids' (1999: 158). With reflection, a mildly hallucinating drunk wandering home from a party worrying about his girlfriend was perhaps not the 'rush' and 'whoosh' that is required to draw an audience in. An online audience has a great deal of control over how they choose

to experience audio drama; they can choose when to listen, where to listen and of course they can choose not to listen. Feedback from early listeners suggested that while they were intrigued, few completed the first 45-minute episode. With reflection, this was a basic structural error and exactly the sort of thing that would have been revealed and addressed if I had had a close working relationship with a producer.⁹

During this period of early development I had made a series of enquiries about locating funding for the project from public bodies (including the Arts Council, Artangel and the Performing Rights Society) but there was little desire on their part to support a radio drama. Partly as a response to this situation, I began to expand the narrative so that it was no longer entirely based on audio. The project website became the hub for an array of links to web applications through which Cornelius' story would be told. I wrote a prequel blog that detailed the events that led up to the first three episodes (back dating the entries across two years), I used Google Maps to highlight locations featured in those episodes and created Facebook identities that would allow the audience to interact with the major characters. I sowed clues as to what was happening to Cornelius, created subplots and hinted at forthcoming events and characters. I generated this material in order to augment the listening experience, extend it beyond the end of each 45-minute episode, but it was not made an essential part of the story. Requiring that the audience access this material would exclude huge numbers of potential listeners who have neither the time nor the inclination to trawl the Internet in order to assemble the component parts of an oblique narrative. The audio episodes and the unfolding of the story were kept at the centre of the project.

The Flickerman website was launched in February 2009, and the series was broadcast on Resonance 104.4FM in London on the 15, 16 and 17 April 2009. The radio broadcasts were reviewed in *The Guardian* newspaper on the 22 April 2009, with the reviewer Zoe Williams describing the project in the following terms:

Last week (Resonance FM) did something ‘radical and groundbreaking’ (their words) or ‘new and amazing’ (mine). Maybe this kind of thing happens on experimental art radio all the time; it never happens on Radio 4. Flickerman was a classic drama serial. The acting was good and bad, the writing sometimes brilliant, never awful. It had a quality of fashionable compulsiveness... in which the author knows that ‘plot’ and ‘whodunit’ and ‘pace’ are very old-fashioned, but puts them in ironically; because they are so self-aware, there is no pressure on these devices to succeed and, for that reason, I think, they are bizarrely successful... It spins texture into what would otherwise be a standard paranoia-conceit... it all makes you feel involved. This is what people hope to create when they say ‘interactive’ but I’ve never seen it work. It is a strange and exhilarating project. (Williams 2009)

A positive review in a national newspaper represented an enormous act of affirmation by a recognized arbiter of taste. At a time of transition, what new media work needs to succeed is the acceptance and recognition of the old media, particularly where the power brokers and curators of the creative industries are concerned. In the weeks that followed, I was called in to the BBC to discuss developing further projects for the corporation, and the series was run on WFMU (New York), Radio Reverb (Brighton),

Chicago Public Radio and KPFA (Berkeley, California). In July 2009 ABC National in Australia commissioned a fourth episode of *The Flickerman*, with the entire series to be broadcast on their weekly Sunday drama slot, 'Airplay' throughout January 2010. There was no formalized process by which an offer was made, and to do so would not have been possible because the form and content of the new episode would not be apparent until six weeks prior to transmission.¹⁰

Sarah: Dude, you really ought to change your passwords.

Cornelius Z-G: That's slightly ominous... what do you mean by that?

Sarah: Listen, I don't want to get involved in all this, but I don't want to see you get hurt either. Someone is hacking your fb and e-mail, or at least was while you were gone.

Cornelius Z-G: I'm not sure I should trust you... I'll ask Travis what to do...

Sarah: For fuck's sake Cornelius, who do you think is messing with your accounts?!? Listen, all I know is I thought I was IMing you a couple weeks ago, but it was actually Travis logged into your account... he said he was 'poking around' in your files.

Cornelius: I find this hard to credit... he's a friend.

Sarah: Oh grow up will you! (Cornelius Zane-Grey Facebook Wall, 20 September 2009)

The characters in *The Flickerman* know that their lives are being dramatized, they know that the traumatic and terrifying experiences they are undergoing are being packaged and produced, and reduced to a piece of entertainment. When ABC

National Radio funded the fourth episode of the radio series they asked the audience to submit photographic evidence that would help Cornelius locate his estranged partner Lucinda Lamb. This appeal to the listening public garnered a huge response in terms of images, film clips and a wide range of stories, sightings and observations. These narrative shards could have been incorporated into the final story, but unfortunately Cornelius 'became aware' of this process and became convinced that it was another part of the conspiracy against him. He rejected the audience's claims, accusing each and every member of his audience of lying to him. The audience cannot contribute to the telling of his story because as far as he is concerned it is not a story, it is really happening.¹¹ It is his life and if you want proof then you can contact him, or the people who have taken pictures of him or look at the news stories he has been involved in. You are not directly invited to contact him, he may not even be in the mood to respond and not everything you say will directly affect the events that surround his life. *The Flickerman* is an interactive narrative where the characters, just like real people, don't always want to interact, and when they do they can be moody, charming, manipulative, bitter, scheming or flirtatious. They are never predictable and their realm of correspondence is not limited to a particular application or forum, it extends across the Internet. The immediacy of online writing allows macro-level issues and events to be woven into the unfolding of Cornelius' story; if it snows in the 'real world', if the stock market collapses or a new technology becomes available then the same things happen in *The Flickerman* and will have an impact. Local stories and more trivial incidents are amalgamated into the very fabric of the drama and seamlessly become part of the flow of the narrative.¹²

The Flickerman fluidly blends the real and the imagined; it is played out in the edgelands of Internet and aims to create confusion about its intentions and identity. Audiences to the series appear to know, at an instinctive level, that they are engaging with a work of fiction, but the invasive quality of the work has proved disturbing and disorientating. Theories have grown online about what *The Flickerman* really is, not concerned with the in-world plot but the source and production of the project itself. There are claims that it is a piece of corporate sponsorship, that it is Apple-funded viral marketing, an elaborate recruitment campaign for the Australian secret services or that it is an extended piece of applied creative research developed to explore the possibilities of creating a fiction in the realm where real life and virtual space meet. Cornelius Zane-Grey, of course, would deny all these theories.

(Dreadcentral is a horror fan-site and on this thread the members are discussing the sharing of T-Shirt designs and fan art. Hooklam and Dudley are characters who have been searching for Cornelius since January 2010).

arandomthought: Any chance on a shirt spawn in your style?

YouGetNoArt4FreeFanBoys: Yeah right and can I also get a design of Dudley Moore spitting the work 'Spam' at Spike from the Goons with that asswipe skill for the i_phone Apps who wrote the lines for Cornelius Flickerman standing in the BG rubbing his hands in glee?

HooklamandDudley: CZG? What do you know anything about where to find that filthy wasteral... you know something about Mr Cornelius Zane-G don't you? Go on... out with it boy... where is he?

YouGetNoArt4FreeFanBoys: ... you want to know where he is? Simple. Like all co-funding and apps sponsored PUTAS, he's waiting for his check to be signed by the FlickrTwats and their co-pimps in the 'cross-platform' R&D depts. that have conned Mr. Jobs and the various 'I dealerships' into thinking it was all a good idea. (www.dreadcentral.com – forums – topic: 'Drawing blood', 6 February 2010)

Online distribution and the Internet's 'long tail' open up possible avenues for writers who wish to explore other approaches to radio drama. Initially the case of *The Flickerman* appears to present new and exciting modes for the dissemination of radio drama, but the reality is that this is not a sustainable model of production. At the moment online audio drama will remain a niche form, away from public consciousness and from sources of funding. What it can offer is a forum for writers to develop their craft; to trial ideas, experiment and make mistakes without fear of their reputation being damaged. This new generation of online audio drama writers and producers has yet to present itself or be recognized by the BBC, which remains the only realistic source of funding for UK radio drama. For the radio dramatist, all roads eventually lead to the BBC; there is no other choice, but the Internet and its associated digital and mobile technologies offer so many other creative opportunities that there is no need to feel that any particular project should be locked into one form.

It is not possible to predict what paradigms of production and distribution for Internet and digital media producers will emerge in the next decade. It is a mistake to attempt to do so.

The creative industries are in a state of flux, and may continue to be so as a culture of contingency becomes the norm. Change has been the subject of philosophical meditation throughout human history. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed, ‘No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man’. The BBC offers creative practitioners a shelter from the ever flowing tides of change, but only if they are allowed access and only if they are willing to practice in accordance with a stringent set of rules. For those who are not willing or able to do so, the only realistic choice is to embrace change and to see what unexpected shores its waters carry them to.

References

Anderson, C. (2006), *The Long Tail*, London: Random House.

BBC (1999), *BBC Radio 4 Commissioning Guidelines 1999*, London: BBC.

____ (2009a), *Annual Report and Accounts, 2008–2009*, London: BBC.

____ (2009b), *Programme Policy 2008/9*, London: BBC.

BBC Trust (2007) BBC Trust approves BBC’s on-demand proposals <online> Available at http://bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/30_4-2007.html <accessed 24th August 2009>.

Benedictus, L. (2010), 'Don't touch that dial: the threat to radio drama', *The Guardian*. 20th June, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2010/jun/20/radio-drama>. Accessed 5th August 2015.

Canny, Steven (2008), in-person interview, London, 15 April.

Crook, T. (1999), *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge.

Greenhalgh, Fred (2009), interview, online correspondence, 11 August 2009, www.radiodramarevival.com.

Hendy, D. (2007) *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Howe, Jeremy (2009), in-person interview, London, 11 July.

____ (2010), telephone interview, London, 1 April.

Hunter, David (2010), in-person interview, London, 23 November.

Jenkins, H. (2006), *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press.

Lewis, P. (2004), 'Opening doors and closing doors: Radio drama and the BBC', *The Radio Journal*, 1:3, pp. 161-176

Lichtig, T. (2007), 'The podcast's the thing to revive radio drama', *The Guardian*, 24th April,
<http://www.guardian.c.uk/stage/theatreblog/2007/apr/24/thepodcaststhethingtorevi>.
Accessed 24 August 2009.

Maggs, Dirk (2009), telephone interview, London, 13 February.

Mailing, Andrew (2009), in-person interview, Brighton, 7 May.

May, S. (1998), 'Whither BBC Radio?', *The Author*, 109:1., pp.27-32.

Mortimer, Jeremy (2008), in-person interview, London, 19 September.

____ (2010), telephone interview, London, 15 December.

Neumark, N. (2006), 'Different place different times: Exploring the possibilities of cross platform radio', *Convergence: The International Journal of New Media Technologies*, 12:02, pp. 213–24.

Reynolds, Gillian (2008), in-person interview, London, 1 August.

Rowland, Kate (2009), in-person interview, London, January

Starkay, K., Barnett, C. and Tempest, S. (2000), 'Beyond networks and hierarchies: Latent organisations in the UK television industry', *Organisation Science*, 11:3, pp. 299–305.

Williams, Z. (2009), 'Radio head: Flickerman', *The Guardian*, 22nd April, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/apr/22/radio-head-williams>. Accessed 24 August 2009.

Whitehead, G. (1992), 'Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art'. In: Kahn, D. and Whitehead, G. (eds) (1992), *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde*, London: The MIT Press.

Wyatt, Stephen (2009), telephone interview, London, 23rd December.

Media

Breaking Bad (2008, USA, AMC)

Deadwood (2004, USA, HBO)

Ho! Ho! The Clown is Dead (1995, UK, BBC Radio 3)

The Flickerman (2009, UK, Resonance 104.4FM).

The Wire (2002, USA, HBO)

We're Alive (2010, USA, Podcast series).

West Wing (1999, USA, NBC)

Contributor details

Lance Dann is a senior lecturer in Digital and Audio Media at the University of Brighton. His academic work is focused upon how sonic forms are developing and responding in a postdigital media environment. He has worked as a writer, radio producer and sound designer for 25 years, during which time he has won two Sony awards, a Prix Marulic and a range of theatrical design awards. He was an associate member of the acclaimed New York theatre company The Wooster, worked as Commissioning Editor for the London radio station Resonance 104.4FM and was founder of the experimental radio collective Noiseless Blackboard Eraser. In autumn 2014 his cross-media horror *The Hungry Earth* was nominated for a radio academy

production award. He is currently producing the eclectic spoken word podcast series *The Odditorium*, writing and producing the Wellcome Trust funded transmedia series *Bleeding Edge* and developing the academic research project *podcastingpodcasting* with Dr Martin Spinelli of University of Sussex.

Contact:

University of Brighton, Priory Square, Priory St, Hastings, East Sussex TN34
1EA, United Kingdom.

E-mail: drldann@gmail.com

Notes

¹ David Hendy describes the small team of producers who work in the BBC Radio Drama Department as ‘the only pool of practitioners of their craft in Britain and the largest concentration in the English-speaking world’ (2007: 174).

² The typical cost of a radio drama is £24,000 per hour which is 24 times greater than the average cost of an hour of music broadcasting on BBC Radio 1 (BBC 2009a).

³ Commissioning editor Jeremy Howe characterizes the output of BBC Radio 4 as intended for a mass, mainstream audience:

this isn’t a fringe theatre where you can put on anything you like. This is a broadcast network... where we are playing to an audience of, in The Friday Play, which is our smallest slot, a mere 350,000 people to the Woman’s Hour drama, where you’re playing to way in excess of a million people. (Howe 2009)

⁴ The UK's community radio network offers writers access to broadcast audiences but little or no logistical or financial support. A lack of funding for programming is common throughout the community sector. Andrew Mailing is manager of the Brighton-based station Radio Reverb 87.7FM:

We're very open to receiving drama material, but the fact is we are offered very little. I think the main problem is the cost and difficulty of producing radio drama, it is not something that can be done well without access to resources, skills and money. In my experience the routes to gaining funding for projects are very very limited. (2009)

⁵ In spring 2011, the BBC and The Writers Guild began to draw up an agreement that would allow the work of radio drama writers that has been produced by the BBC to be available via download. At the time of writing the specific details of this agreement have yet to be announced (Hunter 2010).

⁶ Since 2007, the BBC has run 'Audiotheque' (www.audiotheque.com), a project dedicated to 'creative audio', which it defines as 'innovative, original audio with some kind of narrative' (Mortimer 2008). This may combine elements of fiction, documentary or may be entirely free of dialogue. 'As long as it's fresh and different from standard radio drama. It also needs to be under three minutes long' (Lichtig 2007).

⁷ Making available multiple episodes of a series at one time, instituted for TV series defined as being 'those with a distinct run, with a beginning and end and a narrative arc and those which are landmark series with exceptionally high impact' (BBC Trust 2007).

⁸ Early in its development, the project was discussed with a BBC producer. He was initially interested, he asked: ‘Oh so you put the images up on the Internet yourself?’ they asked. ‘No’ I replied. ‘Ah, so you ask people’s permission’. ‘No’ ‘So you just use them without telling them what you’re doing’. ‘Yes’. ‘Oh goodness, well the BBC could never do that’.

⁹ Time and budgetary demands did not allow the opening scenes to be rewritten and recorded. Instead I shot a short ‘guerrilla’ style film and uploaded it to the project website, to serve as a condensed introduction for the online audience.

¹⁰ It was decided that the new episode would use imagery and material supplied by members of the public that had been submitted to ABC specifically for that purpose, thus circumventing the legal concerns raised by my use of materials found on Flickr.

¹¹ This facade extends to interviews with the press I have carried out. For instance when I stated in *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne that Cornelius was my creation he responded with a tirade of abuse posted on his website.

¹² Cornelius’ prequel blog details his fraught working relationship with a Dutch artist and their attempt to create installation piece that involves floating a three-metre plastic Lego Man across the English channel. Their scheme ends in failure, with the figurine washing up on a local beach the next day, an incident detailed on the BBC’s website and various other online media sources. The blog was written after the event and the entries backdated to give the impression that they were created in the days leading to the news story. This has caused debate in *The Flickerman* community about who exactly was responsible for the incident and its meaning.