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Nostalgia, Radio Listening and Everyday Life

Dr. Jo Tacchi, Research Fellow, Centre for Media Policy and Practice,
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Jo Tacchi is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre (CIRAC) in the Creative Industries Faculty of Queensland University of Technology, Australia. She has researched and published on radio and everyday life, young people and music radio, the radio ratings industry and new radio. Her current research is concerned with internationally comparative studies of the convergence of radio with new media technologies in community-based and development situations. She was co-organiser of the Radiocrac: Radio, democracy and Development conference held in Cape Town in 1999, and is a member of the International Conference Committee for the second Radiocrac conference in Durban, South Africa in September 2001.

Contact address:

Dr Jo Tacchi, CIRAC

School of Media and Journalism
Queensland University of Technology
GPO Box 2434
Brisbane Q 4001
Australia
Tel: +61 (0)7 3864 4479
Email: j.tacchi@qut.edu.au

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NOSTALGIA, RADIO LISTENING AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Jo Tacchi

Abstract

This paper investigates radio consumption and the role of nostalgia as a positive social practice. Examples to illustrate the uses of nostalgia and the role of radio in everyday life are drawn from anthropological fieldwork carried out in Bristol, a city in the south west of England. Radio consumption is shown to be a complex practice which in some cases can be seen to allow listeners to make links with the past and with memories, both real and imagined. Nostalgia as a positive social practice is used in various ways to link the past, both remembered and imagined, with the present and the future. Examples are presented that demonstrate how radio sound is used to enhance everyday lives and a sense of self. Such nostalgic practices, experienced through radio listening, are shown to supplement social life and aid the ongoing project of everyday identity creation.

Introduction

This paper is simultaneously an investigation of the notion of nostalgia and a particular type of radio consumption. The ideas contained herein were generated from a study of radio consumption in Bristol, a city in the south west of England with a population of around 400,000 people. The 'raw data' presented to support these ideas was obtained through in-depth interviews which formed the major part of an anthropological study of the role of radio in everyday life carried out between 1992 and 1996 (Tacchi 1997). Many themes emerged from that research. In this paper I discuss just one of them, that is the way in which radio consumption appears to hold the power to connect across time and memories. I use the term 'nostalgia' to describe how this works in certain instances and hope to demonstrate that whereas 'nostalgia' as a concept holds somewhat negative social values, it can be seen to consist, in experience, of positive social practices.

The paper has a simple structure. The first half consists mainly of examples from my research of what I consider to be nostalgic practices associated with radio consumption. The second half goes on to explore nostalgia as a concept and looks for ways of theoretically contextualising and thus understanding these practices. It draws upon the work of other anthropologists, who explore the practice of nostalgia in very different contexts.

As such this paper attempts, on the one hand, to present material that establishes radio consumption as very much more complex and embedded in everyday life and emotions than it might at first appear. On the other hand it seeks to continue an argument presented elsewhere (Tacchi 2000) that urges radio studies, or, the study of radio, to embrace a variety of disciplinary approaches.

In order to provide some context to the data and respondents presented in this paper a brief comment on the methods used is necessary. The study took an ethnographic approach using in-depth interviews, participant observation, observation at two local commercial radio listener panels, and focus groups. Some respondents completed diaries of their listening practices. A major problem facing an anthropologist interested in carrying out ethnographic research on radio listening is how to carry out participant observation. I sought ways of getting to know my respondents beyond the in-depth interviews from which data is extracted below and which is widely used by 'reception ethnographers' in the fields of media and cultural studies (Moore 1993).

To this end I attended a single parent social club for one year. There I got to know people in a social setting and establish a relationship with them that, whilst always clearly one of 'researcher and researched', often came closer to friends and confidantes. In addition I attended two local radio listener panels over a two-year period enabling a more extended and holistic relationship to develop with those that I went on to interview.

This gave me the confidence to interpret the interview material in the ways that I have, not being dependent upon a single semi structured interview situation, but drawing as well upon previous conversations and observations of people in other social situations. Of the respondents used in this paper (whose names have been altered) I met Jenny and Paul at a local listener panel for a commercial radio station that plays popular music from the past forty years (Classic Gold), Kerri through an introduction from another respondent and Lynne at the single parent social club.

... what I do, I still love the old music, because it brings me closer to home I think, when I was 18 or 19, because I got married when I was 19, the type of music I listened to then, now if it suddenly comes on air I know certain times they're going to play the old things, like Brunel does, I still love Brunel [Classic Gold], that's another one I like, because they play the music that I used to listen to back home... It just brings back my good old days. I remember, oh!, when I first came to this country 26 years ago, Mary Hopkins was singing *The Wee Wee Da*, you know! [laughter].

But nostalgia and memories do not have to relate to specific and easily explained, or rationalisable, connections. Connections, as they are lived and managed, do not have to be rationalisable, linguistically or otherwise. They are experienced as just one element, or aspect, of everyday life and ongoing identity creation. Here we can look at the notion of the creation of dynamic 'new ethnicities' (Gillespie 1995), using the example of Lynne, a white woman, who draws heavily on Jamaican culture and music to live her life, as a white woman in a white culture. I met Lynne at the single parent social group. She is 30 years old, with a son aged 4 years, whose father is Jamaican. Lynne grew up in a rural area close to Bristol and lived in Bath before moving to Bristol nine years ago. She used to work in insurance, but since Dan's birth has lived on Income Support. Recently, she has begun an art course, and plans to go on to take a degree in fine art. Art has always been a hobby of hers, and she feels lucky to be spending a lot of her time drawing and painting. She lives in a small flat, with only one bed/sitting room, a kitchen and a bathroom. She lives in a street with a Jamaican name.

When Lynne was a child, she remembers her mother listening to Radio 2,

that was the soft music wasn't it, that was particularly aimed at housewives, and they had recipes and they had "what's the recipe today Jim?", and who else, oh yea, Terry Wogan, then it switched to David Hamilton...

Researcher: so did she listen to it a lot?

Lynne: Yea, all the time, then later on, my Dad, he listened to Radio Bristol, and they... but my mum would have the radio on all day that she was in the house ... you know I can remember the radio quite vividly

As a teenager, Lynne remembers it being 'compulsory' to listen to the chart show on the radio on Sundays, and to write down and remember the chart positions. When the charts were announced in the week, someone would always smuggle a radio into school, so that at break times they could find out what was happening. Up until the age of 14, Lynne liked more or less the same music as her friends, but then at 14, her tastes changed,

they played Bob Marley's *I Don't Wanna Get Drunk* and I really liked that. Everyone said "Oh, that's a thoughtless song" but I really liked that, and ever since then, I've really liked reggae, and Stevie Wonder, *Shine Light*, so from listening then I started to move into soul and reggae, before I knew anything you know, because I lived in the countryside, there were no black people, no black, they didn't know anything about it

Researcher: Was this just you, or your friends as well?

Lynne: Just me, just my personal taste. I mean they liked Pink Floyd, Emerson Lake and Palmer, Queen, and Abba...

Nowadays, the TV dominates the media consumption in Lynne's flat, with her son being the 'telly addict', while Lynne prefers to get on with her art, or listen to music. Her son does not like the radio, and as there is only one radio in the flat, in the same room as the TV (bed/sitting room) the radio is not used as often as Lynne would like. She tends to listen mainly when Dan is asleep, or staying with friends. Whenever she gets the chance, the radio will be turned on, and it is tuned to a local pirate station, 'I stumbled across pirate radio stations and they just happened to play the music that I like... they don't just stick to one type of it, they also will play, I've heard them playing Shirley Bassey, gospel, very traditional ... reggae, right up to ragga, to the more commercial soul, they play a lot of soul'. She will listen to the radio at least a couple of times a week, to relax after a busy day, or to help her to get through boring housework,

I often do my ironing to the radio, especially if its reggae because I dance to it while I'm doing the ironing, and housework, you know, boring chores like that... well I enjoy doing boring tasks like ironing if I can listen to the radio... you can enjoy dancing to the music while you're doing something boring like chopping up the onions... it gives you sort of energy you know, do the job faster, you can actually enjoy cooking along to the music... it just makes mundane jobs more bearable.

When Lynne gets the chance, if her son is away with friends, she will switch the radio on and turn up the volume, 'I think, " Oh yea, turn the radio up" and I'm actually dancing around the living room... I'm dancing away in front of the mirror and all sorts',

I think its a sort of moment that you've got to yourself, you know, like Dan's gone and turn the volume up and you're dancing about. And a couple of times I've done it with friends you know, they've come in and put the music on really loud, dancing around. My friend came over from the countryside and walked in here and said "wow, what's this music Lynne?" and it was funk music, which I'm not so much, I like it but it doesn't appeal to me as much as reggae, but she really liked it, and it was up and she was dancing around my living room. I was making the tea or something, she was dancing around.

Mostly though, the radio will be listened to when Lynne is alone, as many of her friends have a different taste in music. She will listen to blues music on tape if she is very tired but can't sleep, 'they're very relaxing, and they're very moody and depressed so if I'm in that sort of mood I listen to them, their problems are always worse. Whereas reggae's a more happier mood music'. She has reggae music on tape, but her collection is limited, and the radio will play more variety. She explains that she likes the pirate stations, not simply because of the music they play, but also because it is a way for her to maintain a connection with a world that she is not fully a part of,

Nostalgia

Seremetakis (1994) tells the story of the disappearance of a fruit in Greece. The fruit was like a peach and was referred to as 'the breast of Aphrodite' because of its texture, appearance, taste and smell. This fruit was gradually replaced by imported and hybrid peaches, conforming to EEC standards. Seremetakis, on visits to Greece, would inquire if anyone had come across Aphrodite's peach. The reaction of friends and relatives at first, was that it was still around, they just hadn't come across it recently. Gradually the realisation dawned that it had gone - it now only existed in memory. The memory of the peach, Seremetakis says, is nostalgic. There is a difference between the American and the Greek uses of nostalgia, which points to 'different cultural experiences of the senses and memory' (ibid.). She sees the American definition of nostalgia as implying 'trivializing romantic sentimentality', whilst the Greek definition of *al/a* 'is the desire or longing with burning pain to journey. It evokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement; it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experiences of spiritual and somatic exile to the notion of maturation and ripening' (ibid.).

Seremetakis chooses Greece as a site to examine senses and memory, because she sees it as on the margins of modernity. And it is from the margins that one can get a better view of the centre. Modernity threatens the viability and standing of sensory memory;

The particular effacement of sensory memory in modernity, is mainly a consequence of an extreme division of labor, perceptual specialization and rationalization. The senses, in modernity, are detached from each other, re-functioned and externalized as utilitarian instruments, and as media and objects of commodification. The carving out and partitioning of separate domains of perceptual acquisition also authorizes the sheer literality of sensory experience.

The literal is a symbolic logic produced by the scientific rationalization of the senses and/or by a culture of specialized consumption.

Seremetakis 1994:9-10

Classen (1993) looks at the Western historical construction of the five senses and their values, demonstrating how they are culturally constructed. She shows how sight, as 'the sense of science' provides us with 'most of our models of the universe, from maps and charts to diagrams' (Classen 1993:6). The quality of sight that gives it its 'objective' character and separates the viewer from the viewed makes the scientific rationale possible. At the same time, 'This "objectivity", nonetheless, by its very visual basis, is grounded in a very peculiar "view" of the world, and, bird's eye view though it may be, this view is still limited

and conditioned by the characteristics of vision' (ibid.). This is just one of the ways in which we know and make sense of the world.

Classen demonstrates how one could equate vision with surface perception, scientific understanding and linearity, whilst sound might be more easily equated with depth perception, interior understanding and dynamism. We could say that an emphasis on visual, objective reality threatens the creativity of sound, so that elements of culture that reside in this mode have been devalued. However, given the emphasis on the visual, sound may also have freedom to work in creative ways and through the consumption of radio sound the power of nostalgia may have real affective depth.

For a term such as nostalgia, reducing it to 'trivializing romantic sentimentality' serves to confine the past and remove it 'from any transactional and material relation to the present', isolating, and making the past consumable, as a 'unit of time' (Seremetakis 1994:4). In the American sense, nostalgia 'freezes the past in such a manner as to preclude it from any capacity for social transformation in the present, preventing the present from establishing a dynamic perceptual relationship to its history. Whereas the Greek etymology evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience' (ibid.). In Greek, the etymology of the senses is closely associated with the etymology of emotion and feeling. There are no 'clear cut boundaries between the senses and emotions, the mind and body, pleasure and pain, the voluntary and the involuntary, and affective and aesthetic experience' (ibid.:5). The memory of Aphrodite's peach produces a memory of the peach which evokes a taste, felt in the body, with both pleasure in remembering, and pain in its loss, so that every other peach which tries to take its place is tasteless in comparison. More than just this fruit, Seremetakis argues that a whole epoch can become 'tasteless' when a sensorial culture, made up of a 'dynamic interaction between perception, memory and a landscape of artefacts', is dissolved into disconnected pieces. In Greece, the 'characterisation a (tasteless) ... deals with the cultural incapacity to codify past, present, and anticipatory experiences at the level of sensory existence' (ibid.:8). Tastelessness is brought about by modernity and its 'scientific rationalization of the senses'. The consumption and use of radio sound demonstrates that sound as a sense is still used to great effect, in everyday life. It does appear to be entwined with everyday life and emotions, perhaps counteracting our experience of the 'tasteless' public sphere by providing us with personal and private flavours.

Nostalgia is seen here as both a mode of consumption and a mode of production – it is consumed through radio and music and at the same time it is practiced, it is a mode of production. In Britain, things like records and films, from the past, or evocative of the past, are said to be nostalgic. Often there is a romantic sentimentality attached, and there is a sense of the past as a separate unit of time. Nevertheless, when we consider how this nostalgia is experienced - it is bodily, through the senses, emotions and memories. To say that one 'sensed' something in Britain, is to say that, through intuition, or some other, non-rationalisable means, one 'knows' something. This, then, constitutes a way of knowing that is not privileged, but nevertheless is experienced bodily. Nostalgia, and memories, can thus be experienced, or 'tasted', in a way that is non-linear and does not lend itself easily to linguistic translation. And in practice, the use of radio sound as nostalgia can be much more than romantic sentimentality. Paul demonstrates this.

Paul is 29 years old, works as a teacher, and lives alone in Bristol in a rented flat. He listens to Classic Gold which 'reminds' him of the 1960s, which his parents tell him he would have loved. The sociality of the 1960s is experienced by Paul, imaginatively, through the tales of his parents, and materially through his listening to Classic Gold radio. Just as the memory of the taste of the peach is remembered both by those who tasted it, and by those who heard the memories of those who tasted it, memories of a past can be materially evoked and lived by Paul, whose memories are based on those of his parents, in their stories of a 'lovely time'.

Paul's nostalgic memories are more than romantic sentimentality. They are a way of life for him. Remembering in the way that he does adds to his sense of himself as a social person – it is a social activity in that it contributes to his sociality (Tacchi 1998). The close knit family, the 'cheery get togethers', that he sees as resonant of the 1960s, are a part of his life, which are in some ways emphasised by the way in which he lives. For example, Paul 'lives' at his parents home, in Wales. He works in Bristol, and has rented a flat, where he stays from Monday until Friday. But at weekends and holidays, he is to be found 'back home'. His tiresome train journeys to and from Bristol, emphasise his inclusion in, and his temporary separation from, his family, who, for him, epitomise the ideal family of the past. His belonging to his family, and their ideal characteristics, are thus clarified and felt by him. If his life were different and he lived at 'home' all of the time, this aspect of his family life, which he prizes so highly, might not be so apparent.

In his Bristol flat, he uses Classic Gold as an almost constant accompaniment, because it 'generates a nice atmosphere';

Its nice to hear that music again, you know, I sort of grew up with that music when I was younger

Researcher: Some of them are from before you were born

Paul: Exactly yes, um, because my mother and father says, they said to me a few years back, its a shame you weren't around in the sixties because it would have suited you down to the ground, you really are, you like that era, I said yes, I probably would have, you know, the spirit of togetherness, because I love the family holidays, the Butlins and my mother and father, we used to love Butlins, we used to go there every year with my elder brother and sister who are a bit older than I am, and you know I used to join in all the games...

Paul demonstrates that Anderson's 'imagined community' (1983) can be thought of in a temporal as well as a spatial sense. He makes sense of the present, through nostalgic practices, experienced positively.

Battaglia (1995) challenges the definition, by some scholars, of nostalgia as a negative notion. Rather, it should be considered in different contexts, *contextually*. She questions the 'assumption that nostalgia has a *causal* negative social value for indigenous actors' (ibid.:77). On the contrary, Battaglia finds that nostalgia 'may in fact be a vehicle for knowledge, rather than only a yearning for something lost' (ibid.). Her study looks at migrant urban Trobrianders in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, and the first yam festival to be held there in 1985. These festivals are linked nostalgically with the yam competitions of their former Trobriand Islands home. Battaglia suggests that these nostalgic practices give the Trobriand Islanders now living in an urban context an 'attachment of appropriate feelings toward their own histories, products, and capabilities' (ibid.). That is to say that, Tw(negative s

Nostalgia, in her observation of it, is 'embodied; it is the practice of yam growing for urban Trobrianders who talk about the gardens of "Home" ... as distinct from their "house" they have returned to each day for twenty years after working "for cash" in Port Moresby' (ibid.). Battaglia thinks of this as a 'practical or active nostalgia' that is 'transformative action with a connective purpose' (ibid.:78). Thus it is that practical nostalgia may involve connections with a past object, which nevertheless contribute to future relationships;

Indeed, nostalgia for a sense of future - for an experience, however imaginary, of possessing the means of controlling the future - may function as a powerful force for social reconnection. In permitting creative lapses from dominant realities, it is such a nostalgia that enables or recalls to practice more meaningful patterns of relationship and self-action. The capacity of nostalgia to engender its own ironies is hence a central consideration here, and bears directly on how local and national cultural identities are argued and contested.

Battaglia 1995:78

The nostalgia that Battaglia observed, in the urban Trobriand case, does not replace authentic engagement with culture, 'it is not for Trobriand subjects merely a yearning for some real or authentic thing. Rather, it generates a sense of productive engagement which is at once more personal and larger than any product it might find as its object' (Battaglia 1995:93). The textured soundscapes that are created with the help of radio sound, in the homes of listeners, is, similarly, personal, and it extends beyond the sound that their radio sets emit, it is a 'productive engagement' with wider society, yet it can be contained in the domestic sphere. That is not to suggest that 'nostalgic listening' is confined to the domestic sphere which the research discussed here concentrates upon - it surely happens also in cars and workplaces.

Conclusion

Nostalgic practice, as cultural practice, 'abides in a convergence of mimesis and poesis - in acts of replicating the social conditions of and for feeling', and through such actions the 'experience of social life is supplemented and qualitatively altered' (Battaglia 1995:93). The key notion here is that nostalgic practices supplement social life, and qualitatively alter it. For example, Jenny was able, through the use of radio sound, to enhance her life and self, add to her domestic experience, and feel better about her everyday life and her self within it. She could make connections with memories evoked by the sound, and with imaginary others, who make and consume the same sound, although her case is particular and specific to her own life and experiences. It helped her, she feels, in her grieving process - it may be that it alleviated it, by substituting another activity, or she may have been denying it. In any case, it gave her a sense of not being alone and isolated with that grief caused by the loss of her mother. As Battaglia suggests, this nostalgic practice, as social action, enabled her to break from the situation she found herself in and to connect with other sources of meaning and feeling; it 'opens subjects to creative reconfiguration: nostalgic practice invites self-problematization' (ibid.). For Jenny and others, they can work on self and sociality in a safe environment, created in and via a soundscape that is not, and need not be, as fixed or recognised officially, or even expressible linguistically, as other aspects of their social and personal lives. It operates alongside the more visible aspects of life, having its own depths, being bodily felt through affect, yet always working in conjunction with, rather than at odds with, everyday domestic and public social selves. It may be that the affective aspects of nostalgic practices, connected and managed by, amongst other things, radio sound, constitutes the very core of the thing we call 'everyday life'.

Battaglia further suggests that 'it follows that any notion of an integral, coherent self - any vehicle universally applied to such - must be seriously reconsidered, together with any notion that an aesthetic of self-wholeness or completeness extends in practice across cultures and times' (Battaglia 1995:93). My research suggests that everyday domestic life in Bristol is often geared towards the creation and recreation of the idea of a coherent self, and that this is an ongoing enterprise, and sometimes a struggle. It is variously undertaken and is experienced in different sensory modalities. It is not just a question of establishing a role, or a role in a relationship, but is an ongoing attempt to maintain a sense of self in that role and relationship. The fact that one is a wife and mother, or a single parent on Income Support, is not, in itself enough. This is not the end of the enterprise. Such roles establish a

'state', but not a 'state of mind'. As a state, they may provide a fixed point from which, and with which, one may develop links, relationships, feelings and meanings, but in practice it is an ongoing journey, which changes, sometimes subtly, sometimes more dramatically.

Nostalgia suggests looking back. It can be demonstrated that through nostalgic practices, the

Such a research approach allows me to state that nostalgia has a link with the past, with memories, experienced first hand, or in tales told by others. The verification of memories is not what nostalgia, as discussed in this paper, is about. It is an embodied feeling that can, I suggest, be evoked through the use of radio sound, or created by it, as it does not have to pre-exist the experience. As such, radio sound can be seen to have a connecting power with (actual or imagined) pasts. Radio sound and nostalgia, also hold this connecting power in terms of the present, and the future.

By looking in detail at a medium that is as unassuming and 'naturalised' as radio in the home,

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Andy C Pratt

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