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‘In Search of the Radio Audience’

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Introduction

This discussion draws on an in-depth qualitative case-study of an Irish talk radio show, The Gerry Ryan Show. From the outset of this study I was struck by the paucity of empirical research available on radio audiences in general, and Irish radio audiences in particular. No research had been done that looked at the qualitative listening experiences of the Irish radio audience. It is this gap in existing knowledge that inspired this study. I shall begin this discussion with a brief overview and critique of previous studies of talk radio, all of which have ignored all but a small segment of the talk radio audience, the callers. My suggestion is that there are both theoretical and methodological reasons for this omission. I will argue that despite the difficulties inherent in researching the audience it is essential to include the audience in any in-depth study of talk radio (for a discussion of callers to the show see O’Sullivan, 1997). Previous studies of talk radio present the audience as having found a genre that meets either their informational or interpersonal ‘needs’. Studies of talk on talk radio also offer few clues as to why audiences might listen to a show like The Gerry Ryan Show. What is missing here is any sense of the meaning of talk radio for the audience, or the pleasures involved in listening to talk radio shows. The piece concludes with an overview of some of the pleasures of listening to The Gerry Ryan Show.

At an early stage it became clear that this project was best suited to qualitative research methods. Previous studies of the genre were unsatisfactory, and there were no hypotheses ‘out there’ for me to test. Qualitative research methods are usual when there is little known about a phenomenon, to gain new insights into an area, or to interpret culturally significant phenomena (Ragin, 1994). All of these criteria applied here. This study involved a brief period of non-participant observation of the production of the show, interviews with members of the production team, interviews with callers to the show, a survey of listeners to the show, interviews with listeners to
the show, and a discourse analysis of two weeks of the show. The most challenging part of the study was definitely the audience research component. Accessing the audience was more difficult than my reading of studies of the television audience had led me to expect. A reflexive account of the research process will allow me to illustrate some of the difficulties of doing audience research. This is in contrast to the sanitised methodological notes that accompany many audience studies.

**Studies of the Talk Radio Audience**

Although talk radio has been around since the 1930s, studies of talk radio were relatively thin on the ground until recent years, when there was a small surge of studies inspired by increased listenership in the US, and ‘the Limbaugh effect’ (Knight and Barker, 1996).\(^1\) Turrow (1974) introduced the idea that talk radio is a form of interpersonal communication, and that calling a talk radio show is a substitute for the interpersonal contact that is missing in people's lives (see also Bierig and Dimmick, 1979; Tramer and Jeffres, 1983; Armstrong and Rubin, 1989). Studies have also examined the motivation for, and the effects of calling a radio advice show with a problem (Monaghan et al, 1978; Bouhoutsos et al, 1986; Bouhoutsos, 1990; Raviv et al, 1991). The consensus here is that talk radio has positive functions for this audience group. Other writers take a less benign view of the interpersonal ‘needs’ met by calling a talk radio show (see for example Horton and Wohl, 1956; Goffman, 1981). Beniger (1987) is very critical of the growth of ‘pseudo-communication’ and the superficial personal relationships it generates.\(^2\) Broadcasters use ‘informality, familiarity, homeliness, accessibility… [to achieve] the credibility and persuasiveness usually achieved through interpersonal communication within a community of values (1987: 66).

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\(^1\) The Rush Limbaugh Show attracts over 20 million people a week, and is carried by more than 660 stations in the US (Knight and Barker, 1996: 2). This is the largest audience for any radio talk show since the advent of television (Seib, 1993: 34). The Rush Limbaugh Show is considered by many commentators to be the show that revived the medium, and saved AM radio (Lewis, 1995: 60). Seib (1993) argues that the show is important, not just in terms of audience size, but also politically; for example the Clinton Administration is said to monitor the show daily, and prepare responses. ‘The [Rush] Limbaugh effect’ refers to the role many believe Limbaugh played in the 1994 Congressional elections, where the Republicans secured a large majority over their Democratic opponents.

\(^2\) Here he draws on the work of Merton (1946); ‘pseudo-community’ is defined as ‘the feigning of personal concern with the other fellow in order to manipulate him the better’ (cited in Beniger, 1987: 56). It is interesting to note that these concerns about the mass media have been around since the 1940s.
Talk radio has also been analyzed in relation to its democratic functions. Writers here place great emphasis on the significance of the opportunity provided for audiences to participate in mass mediated debate and discussion. Researchers have focused on the role talk radio plays in keeping listeners up-to-date with political issues, and how talk radio shows provide a forum where these issues can be discussed by ordinary citizens (see Crittenden, 1971; Levin, 1987; Hofstetter et al, 1994; Verwey, 1990). Again the consensus here is that this participation has positive functions, both for the individual callers and for the democratic system.

A serious limitation of these studies of talk radio is that they tend to overlook the fact that the majority of radio stations are commercial broadcasters competing for advertising revenue which is attracted according to audience size (see Davis and Owen, 1996; Wright, 1983; Laufer, 1995: 209-12). The most important of these is profit-making via advertising. Of course this casts serious doubt on the potential for talk radio to be a democratic forum. Talk radio is not unique in this respect; Elliott (1986) identifies a general trend whereby the commercial functions of the (British) media are becoming increasingly important. This leads to consumption taking over from participation, and the audience increasingly being positioned as consumers rather than as citizens.

There are other problems associated with seeing talk radio as a democratic forum. While talk radio may appear to be an open forum, in practice many shows (including *The Gerry Ryan Show*) use screening processes which allow the production team to weed out inarticulate, boring, or potentially libelous callers. Interviews with ten unsuccessful callers to *The Gerry Ryan Show* point to the role that cultural capital plays in this selection process. While some writers have raised the question of whether callers can be taken to be representative of the general public their focus has been on political affiliation rather than class background (see Stern, 1991; Kurtz, 1996; Kohut and Bowman, 1995). This focus is problematic. In addition once a caller gets on-air s/he is always in a position of disadvantage as control rests with the host who has the power to cut the caller off at any time (see Avery and McCain,
These controls on participation make it difficult to see how talk radio might be seen as a democratic forum, where, in theory at least, access should be open to all (Habermas, 1989: 37).

It must also be noted that much of the research in this area has been done by political scientists and psychologists, and not by sociologists. The focus of these studies reflects the interest of these disciplines. In comparison to the in-depth qualitative research that has been done on the television audience over the last twenty years all of the work on the talk radio audience has been quantitative in nature. The focus of the majority of these studies has been that segment of the audience who participate in talk radio, the callers. Of course this focus is problematic as it ignores the majority of the audience who never call. Herbst (1995) reports that only 17% of respondents she surveyed reported having ever called a talk radio show. A conscious decision was made in this study to include both callers and other listeners to The Gerry Ryan Show. Shattuc (1997) points to the many difficulties involved in locating and studying the (television) talk show audience; perhaps this points to yet another reason why this group has been more or less ignored by academics studying talk radio.

The theoretical focus of many of these studies is also problematic. Most of the American research on talk radio takes a uses and gratifications perspective (following Mendelsohn, 1964). The talk show audience are presented as having found a genre that meets either their informational or interpersonal 'needs'. Morley (1992: 118) has pointed to the limits of the uses and gratifications perspective. He argues that people's responses to the media cannot be understood 'in terms simply of individual psychologies ... [but] are founded on cultural differences embedded within the structure of society - cultural clusters which guide and limit individual's interpretation of messages'. I also find it problematic that writers either seem to valorize the genre

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3 However see Moss and Higgins’ (1984: 364) particularly persistent caller; while the host ‘…signals the illegitimacy of the caller's messages… [he] has not been able to prevent an alternative set of meanings being broadcast’.

4 But see Moss and Higgins, 1981; Tulloch and Chapman, 1992; Hutchby, 1991; Hutchby, 1992; Hutchby 1995; Liddicoat et al, 1992; Liddicoat et al, 1994. All of these writers focus on talk on talk radio, taking either a discourse analysis or conversation analysis approach. These studies of radio talk establish the institutional nature of the talk; this type of micro-analysis also points to the power imbalance between callers and hosts, even where this is not explicitly drawn out. However their focus on the text is problematic as neither the production process nor the audience are considered.
or to present the audience as ‘cultural dopes’. Many seem unaware of the audience’s capacity to interpret, and even, on occasion, to resist media messages (see Moores, 1993 for a good overview of material on the ‘active’ audience). Any reader who is familiar with the work done by writers from the cultural studies tradition would also be puzzled by the consensual approach taken by these writers.

As far as I am aware no study has looked at talk radio as it is understood by its audiences. All ignore the process of reception, that is the meeting of the show and its audience. This is not surprising. The radio medium has been neglected by sociologists in recent decades and has taken second place to television. There have been a scattering of empirical studies of the medium (for example see Hobson, 1980; Karpf, 1980; Taylor and Mullan, 1986; Moores, 1993). However there has been almost no attempt made to theorise the genre (but see Mendelsohn, 1964; Goffman, 1981). The result of this neglect is that turning on the radio is seen as something ‘natural’, something that is done by most people every day;

Radio, in this age of television predominance, has taken on the role of a familiar family member - accepted, unquestioned and treated as part of the scene. Popular commentators and researchers alike have focused our attention on the electronic tube, to the neglect of radio. Radio, however, continues to outdraw audiences in both time and number. It is... an important part of the cultural day (Moss and Higgins, 1982: 282).

In contrast work focusing on television, and in particular on the television audience, has been both plentiful and theoretically rich. Recent work in the sociology of the media has been concerned with the process of reception. Research within the cultural studies tradition takes as its starting point a belief that media texts cannot be examined in the abstract; instead what is central is how audiences respond to texts. Work on the television audience was a major influence on this study.

**An Introduction to The Gerry Ryan Show**

*The Gerry Ryan Show* is broadcast on 2FM each week-day from 9.00-12.00 and has been on the air since 14 March 1988. 2FM is the Irish state broadcaster’s (Radio Telifís Éireann) second radio station, and combines Top 40 hits, 'oldies', and Irish pop and rock music. Apart from *The Gerry Ryan Show*, the focus is on music rather than talk and 2FM is aimed at a younger audience than RTÉ Radio 1. *The Gerry Ryan
Show is the most popular show on 2FM, and is one of the most popular radio shows in Ireland. Talk is the mainstay of Irish daytime radio. The majority of Irish people listening to radio in the mornings listen to a talk radio show on either RTÉ Radio 1 or 2FM. Talk accompanies the routine activities of these listeners and is the backdrop to work both in the home and in other settings.

In-House Style

The Gerry Ryan Show features a mix of talk and music, and is less specialized than its American counterparts, dealing with a range of private and public sphere issues. It is a mix of information and entertainment, involving both serious and not-serious items and features. The show is described by the production team as tabloid; this is not meant as an derogative term by them, but is a style that they have created to differentiate themselves from their competitors. This term refers to both content and style. The staple of the tabloid press is the human interest story. This typically will feature a topic such as relationships/sex/love, crime, sport or gossip about celebrities (including politicians). There is also limited coverage of the major news stories of the day. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 51) has put it ‘the focus is on those things which are apt to arouse curiosity but require no analysis’. Human interest stories are most amenable to this framing. The final component of the show is caller’s stories about themselves and their everyday lives.

The Executive Producer of the show describes The Gerry Ryan Show way of doing a topic as follows;

…[It involves] seeing the fun in the subject, the irony in the subject (…) finding people who while telling the story can laugh at themselves as they tell it (…) there could be some sexual innuendo eh in it (…) and em, a general what we would call over the top, you know. Eh, (…) and a sense of fun prevailing.

The style of the show is informal, populist, irreverent, fun and sexy. This mode of presentation holds no matter what the topic under discussion. The trivial and the serious are treated as equally important by the show, and this is a key element of ‘the Gerry Ryan Show way of doing things’. To keep its listenership high the show must be entertaining. The production team are proud of the 'zany' reputation that the show enjoys, and are wary of 'boring' material (see Russell, 1991). Entertainment can be
seen as the key production value, and the team take the position that while ‘straight politics’ does not always make 'good' radio, 'craic' does.  

Form of The Gerry Ryan Show
The majority of shows begin with Gerry Ryan reading out a selection of items from that day’s papers (9/10 of the shows in this sample). There will also be two or three interviews with (paid) correspondents, or a report from the show’s reporter, or other features scheduled; these skeletal items provide a structure for the show. In the period under study there were 19 interviews with (paid) correspondents, and 10 features, usually involving media personalities (see Table 1 below). The host is provided with a script for these items which he follows, although he does usually improvise to some extent. No scripts are provided for guests or callers to the show (in contrast to Nelson and Robinson’s (1994) discussion of an unnamed television talk show in the US).

Table 1 : Overview of The Gerry Ryan Show Transmitted 17th May 1996- 30th May 1996.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Callers</th>
<th>Scripted Items</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Callers</td>
<td>Competitors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>17/05/96</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>30/05/96</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals:</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<td>Average</td>
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Another key feature of The Gerry Ryan Show is the access it offers to the audience. The audience are continuously addressed by the host as potential callers. Before nearly every advertising or music break he repeats his ‘catch-phrase’ ‘1850 85 22 22 the RyanLine is Open’. On occasion he reminds the audience in the middle of a discussion that that they too can join in: ‘… 1850 85 22 22 by the way if you want to

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5 The concept of 'good' radio refers to a set of general assumptions oriented to by media professionals ‘…when making decisions about... a radio programme' (O'Neill, 1993: 70).
add to that…’ (23/5/96); ‘What did you think? Give us a shout on that or indeed any other matter on 1850 85 22 22.’ (28/05/96).

**In Search of The Gerry Ryan Show Audience**

The Joint National Listenership Research (JNLR) data for June 1996 - July 1997 shows The Gerry Ryan Show reach to be 405,000, while the average ¼ hour audience is 241,000 (MRBI, 1997). Listeners are 44% male and 56% female. Listeners are concentrated in the 20-34 age group [49%]. 56% of listeners are married or widowed, and 44% are single. 34% are in social class ABC1, 55% in social class C2DE, and only 11% are in social class F1F2. 60% of listeners to the show live in urban areas, and 40% in rural areas. Of course although this is interesting background data it tells us nothing about people’s experiences of listening to The Gerry Ryan Show. The aim of this study was to explore both why people listen, and how people listen.

My reading of work done on the television audience had convinced me that ‘there was a limited value in inquiring how viewing groups selected by the researcher decoded a TV programme without first establishing whether these people would usually be watching at all’ (Moores, 1993: 7). I was critical of Livingstone and Lunt’s (1994: 182) study of television talk shows in part because the ‘viewers’ recruited were not regular viewers of the show at all.

On average, they had watched Kilroy several times, with viewing habits ranging between those who have rarely or never seen it to those who watch most episodes each week. Only two regular viewers were interviewed in-depth; the remainder were recruited through a University Subject Panel.

The choice of respondents seems strange given that Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 2) argue that ‘the programme may have many unintended consequences which only audience research can discover’. It is difficult to imagine how one might uncover these consequences through an approach which looks at the meaning-making activities of those who do not usually watch Kilroy. In my view this study falls short

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6 The JNLR data is compiled by the Market Research Bureau of Ireland on behalf of radio stations and is aimed largely at advertisers. It gives information about audience size, socio-economic breakdown, and demographics. The reach figure indicates the number of people who listen to a part of a programme.
of an audience reception study (1994: 2). It would seem that audience reception of the shows is not given as much weight as the analysis of the structure of the shows. It is also problematic that the study contains only minimal information about respondents’ television viewing or their viewing context. Here I would agree with Jensen (1991: 28) that reception ‘should be studied in its social and discursive context’.

Feminist studies looking at a wide variety of popular cultural forms as they are used by women in their everyday lives reinforced this point for me (see for example Hobson, 1980; Radway, 1987). Therefore I was determined to recruit a purposive sample for this stage of the study rather than a convenience sample. By this I mean that I wanted respondents to be regular listeners to The Gerry Ryan Show. However despite this conviction the problem was how to make contact with The Gerry Ryan Show audience. Schaefer and Avery (1993), in an innovative study of The David Letterman Show audience, had broadcast an appeal at the end of one show broadcast by a NBC affiliate in Salt Lake City, to which they received 240 responses. So my first move was to ask the executive producer of The Gerry Ryan Show if they could broadcast an appeal for me at the end of one of the shows. I was hopeful that this would work as the production team had been generous with access in the past, allowing me observe the production of the show and putting me in touch with callers to the show.7 He dismissed this idea out of hand, saying that it would be a lot of hassle for the team. Listeners would ring them to see what this appeal was about, and they did not have the resources to manage this. He suggested I use records from one of their telephone competitions. I did not want to take telephone callers to competitions as representative of The Gerry Ryan Show audience. My guess was that these were probably a special sub-group of the audience. Many of the competitions require callers to come on-air and perform in some way. I thought that it would not be wise to take these as ‘ordinary’ audience members. It was interesting that several of my interviewees later mentioned that they would never enter one of the competitions. I felt that this vindicated my decision not to use these records.

7 RTÉ had funded this research through a postgraduate scholarship and this facilitated negotiations around access.
The show had been running a postal competition which had attracted a huge volume of entries and I was able to get access to these entries. The *Gerry Ryan Show* Budget Travel competition had finished, but the company that processed the entry forms, Shop’n’Save, still had one black plastic sack full of (late) entries. Each of the entries contained the entrants name, address and telephone number as well as the answer to a simple question. One problem was that I did not know if all these people would be *Gerry Ryan Show* listeners. The entry forms for the competition had appeared on the back of supermarket receipts. I myself had received several of these forms when out shopping. Although the winners were announced on-air on the show each week the question did not relate to the show in any way. I realised that I could not assume that all the entrants would be listeners, although I did assume that many of them would be.

I drew up a postal questionnaire both to recruit regular listeners for in-depth interview and to collect information both on listeners and non-listeners to the show. The questionnaire combined open and closed questions. The literature suggests that it is inappropriate to use open-ended questions in postal questionnaires, as postal questionnaires should be kept simple (De Vaus, 1985: 80). The literature also suggests that postal questionnaires are not appropriate for exploratory research (Bourqé and Fielder, 1995: 30). However I decided to follow Schaefer and Avery’s (1993) lead as our research questions were similar. Their study used open-ended questions, and was exploratory in nature. I used this questionnaire to obtain general background information about talk show listening (for example what programmes respondents listened to); what listeners like about *The Gerry Ryan Show* (for example reasons for listening, opinions about the host); why people do not listen to the show.

The aim here was to supplement the quantitative information provided by the JNLR. I sent 399 questionnaires out in December 1996. As I was worried about a high non-response rate I included a SAE with each questionnaire, and also offered an incentive of a draw for two prizes of £50. This seemed to have worked, and I achieved a response rate of 58%. More importantly 93 respondents (24%) indicated that they were willing to participate in next stage of research.

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8 There were approximately 3,000 entry forms in the sack.
9 It must be noted however that this is an expensive way to recruit participants. It is also labour intensive and time consuming. However using a questionnaire did offer a relatively straightforward way of both accessing regular listeners to the show and gathering a limited amount of information about their listening habits.
The questionnaires elicited some interesting data. It found that less than half of respondents listen to the show at home [45%], while one-fifth [21%] listen in their car and one-fifth [20%] listen at work. The evidence of this study suggests that the majority of listeners have made a conscious decision to listen to the show; the show has been chosen from a range of available shows because of its specific pleasures, with two-thirds [major and minor reason combined] reporting that they listened to the show because it was the best thing on at the time. In contrast Crissell (1994) paints a more passive view, arguing that radio listeners are attached to stations, and not to programmes. His theory is that radios are more difficult to re-tune than televisions, and so listeners stick with the one station all day.

At the survey stage listeners pointed to a number of key reasons why the show is so popular. The show is experienced as both entertaining and informative. The host is central to understanding the attraction of the show. The show engages listeners; this is also experienced as pleasurable by them. The majority of survey respondents reported that they listen to the show because it is entertaining [70%]. Less than 5% indicated that this was not a reason why they listened to the show. Other respondents drew on public service understandings of the show, with 46% indicating that ‘I like to know how other people feel about issues’ and 41% reporting that they listen to the show because it is informative. 81% of listeners reported listening to the show because they liked Gerry Ryan [major & minor reason combined]. Of those who did not listen to the show, 44% [major & minor reason combined] reported that they did not like Gerry Ryan. A gender difference was evident here. 91% [N=97] of female respondents who answered this question said that they listened to the show because of the host, as opposed to 64% of male respondents [N=39]. In addition male respondents were more likely to say that they don’t listen because they don’t like the host than female respondents (12/5).

The figure for those listening at work is much higher than found by the BBC in the 1980s, where only 6% of those aged 25-44 had a radio ‘available’ to them in their workplaces (see Barnard, 1989: 140).

I think that Crissell over-estimates the effort involved in changing between radio stations. Some radios have pre-set buttons which are as easy to operate as a television remote control. For example Carol used the pre-set buttons on her car radio to avoid listening to ad breaks several times during our interview, turning back to 2FM after a couple of minutes.
The comments written in response to the open questions also reveal either an identification with or an antipathy to the host.

You should have chosen a more interesting person than Gerry Ryan. He has no class (Q9).
I think Gerry Ryan is awful! (Q7)
Hope Gerry isn’t too upset but I find it hard to take him seriously (Q135)

He makes me laugh. I mean actually laugh out loud (Q136)
He has a fabulous personality (Q179)
Gerry Ryan gives me a boost (Q210)

So the questionnaire data gave me some useful information about both listening habits and the pleasure of The Gerry Ryan Show for the audience.12

As I have already indicated, the primary purpose of the questionnaire was to recruit listeners for this next stage. At the end of the questionnaires I asked ‘If you are a regular Gerry Ryan Show listener and would be interested in taking place in a follow-up study please tick the box below’. Ninety-three respondents (24%) indicated that they were willing to participate in next stage of research. Once all the questionnaires were in I then wrote to ten of those who had indicated that they would be willing to participate further, letting them know that I would be in touch by ‘phone over the next few days. I thought a sample of ten would be sufficient, given the exploratory nature of this research and the data already collected on listening from questionnaire and from interviews with callers to the show. I chose to interview regular listeners only. I also chose a mix of men and women, from different classes and from both rural and urban areas. Despite the fact that the daytime radio audience has been characterised as ‘female’ women are only just the majority of listeners to The Gerry Ryan Show and it was not thought appropriate to concentrate on this segment of the audience (see also Gledhill, 1997 who questions the characterisation of soap opera as a ‘woman’s genre’).

My intention was to uncover the meaning The Gerry Ryan Show has for these listeners. Meaning making is an on-going activity, and one that takes place in a social

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12 Additional information had also been collected from interviews with callers to the show.
and cultural context. However unlike watching television, listening to radio is usually a solitary activity; 72% of respondents reported that they usually listened to The Gerry Ryan Show alone (see also Taylor and Mullan, 1986: 201). At this stage my preference was for ethnographic case-studies with regular listeners wherever they listened to the show: in their homes, workplaces and cars. I was eager to observe listening to the radio in much the same way as others had observed watching television. I intended complementing these observations with in-depth interviews.

However once I started to recruit participants I found that they were very reluctant to become involved in this type of a study. This was despite the fact that they had already indicated a willingness to participate further in the study. The telephone calls were agonising. I had prepared my ‘sell’ but no-one was buying. I spoke to ten regular listeners, none of whom were willing to get involved in an ethnographic study. It is interesting to note that many conversations ended with an offer to fill in another survey. On reflection I think that this points to a more general problem with qualitative audience research. Although people are used to filling out questionnaires and participating in survey research, qualitative research involves a step into the unknown for the majority of potential respondents. To my mind this perhaps explains why focus groups have been used so widely in audience research. Focus groups involve less time and energy from respondents. Focus groups are also widely used by market researchers and are familiar to many. The presence of others’ also works almost as a shield or a defence from the researcher. Respondents often feel they don’t have much to say about their viewing or listening habits; this might not be a barrier to participation in a group discussion where others’ are present. This explains, at least in part, why it is often easier to get respondents to participate in focus groups than in other forms of qualitative research.

At this stage I had to re-evaluate my plans as I was running out of potential participants. For example there were only a small number of men who had indicated their willingness to participate further and I was going through them rapidly. The main obstacle seemed to be the time commitment that the study would involve. No-one was willing to accept my reassurances that I would be as unobtrusive as possible.
It is also possible that some people ticked the box on the questionnaire because they thought it might affect their chances in the £50 draw.

At this stage I scoured previous studies of the television audience for hints about recruitment but to no avail. This is not surprising. Alasuutari (1999: 5-6) argues that many ‘audience ethnographies’ are in fact in-depth interview studies and points to the ‘restrictions to an ethnographer’s possibilities of doing a long-term participant observation study in a home’. Other studies are merely enthusiastic about the possibility of audience ethnography without ever giving it a go. My choice of topic played an important role here. A show like *The Gerry Ryan Show* is so taken-for-granted that none of the people I spoke to could see the point of the exercise they were being asked to participate in. I think that perhaps I should have given more details about the next stage of the study on the questionnaire, and allowed regular listeners to the show to select themselves.\(^{13}\)

I was still convinced that it was essential to include an audience perspective in the study. The questionnaires had raised some interesting issues and I was eager to explore these further. So I made a tactical switch and decided to try in-depth interviews instead. I arranged the interviews to take place when the last half an hour of the show was on so that I could listen to at least some of the show with respondents. I felt that this was preferable to using a pre-recorded segment as this would involve selection on my part, which would be problematic. I also thought that using a recorded extract from the show would work to remove the listeners even further from their usual listening situations. As Schroder (1994: 341) argues ‘… since people live their lives and use media in various interactive situations, this is where the researcher should engage them’.

\(^{13}\) It must be noted at this stage that I had a much easier time when interviewing callers to the show. I completed forty-two interviews over the telephone and had only six refusals from callers to the show. Telephone interviewing worked well in this study, in part because of the minimal inconvenience involved to callers. In addition my interest focused for the most part on a one-off phone call to *The Gerry Ryan Show*. In overall life-history terms this is a very narrow focus. The literature on telephone interviewing identifies respondent fatigue as a potential problem. The average caller finds it tiresome to talk on the telephone for longer than twenty or thirty minutes (Lavrakas, 1987: 12). Frey points out that if people are kept on the ‘phone too long this may lead to premature closing, or low quality responses (1989: 72). I did not think that this problem was significant here given my interest. However I think that it is of limited value as a method in qualitative audience research, expect where the focus is equally narrow.
It was still quite difficult to persuade people to participate, but no longer impossible. I managed to recruit ten regular listeners. My selection criterion was simply that they were regular listeners to the show. Even still many people thought my request was very strange. It would appear that at least some respondents saw my visit as potentially dangerous. One commented on how brave I was to visit people in their homes and also said that she felt that they were being brave letting people into their houses (Elaine). Participating in this type of research does involve a leap of faith on the part of the respondent and this is something that is difficult to encourage without any prior rapport or trust.

It was particularly difficult to persuade people who listened to the show at work to take part in the study. Many refused point blank, and were unwilling to even discuss the possibility with me. These difficulties were despite the fact that some of these people were clearly fans of the show and had written lengthy answers to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire. Perhaps in some cases it would have not been possible to do research in the work setting. Perhaps permission would have been needed from a supervisor or manager in other cases, and this was the barrier. It was also evident that people saw an incongruity in being researched at work (and in work-time) about a leisure activity. One respondent explained that he would only do the interview at his break time as it would be inappropriate for me to visit his workplace (a farm). Another respondent who I interviewed at work tried to put me off by saying that his office was very difficult to locate and only agreed to participate when I mentioned that I had worked in an industrial estate nearby. When I arrived to interview him I found that although he shared an office with two others, they had moved out for the morning. This probably involved an amount of negotiation on his part, negotiation that others may not have been willing to enter into.

The interviews were completed in March/ April 1997 in a variety of locations, as can be seen in Table 2 below. Two of the interviews were done in the evenings in the respondents’ homes. One was with a man who drove a truck for a living and who was not allowed have passengers in the vehicle for insurance reasons. One woman working in the home felt that her children would disrupt things too much and
preferred to talk to me in the evening. Both of these respondents had listened to that
day’s show and I used that as the stimulus for these interviews.
Table 2: Interviews with *Gerry Ryan Show* listeners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Interview Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Small rural town</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>In house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Dress-maker [works from home]</td>
<td>In house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Sales-rep</td>
<td>In car [while out doing calls]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annette</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>W-class homemaker</td>
<td>In house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>At work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Works on farm</td>
<td>In pub</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Truck driver</td>
<td>At home [in evening]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Child-care worker [crèche at home]</td>
<td>At home [day off]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>At home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>At home [in evening]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In retrospect I feel despite these compromises the method worked well. The interviews lasted on average between one and two hours. I was pleased with the interview data; all of the respondents spoke at length about listening to the show, and so I was able to build up a comprehensive picture of their listening habits. This is appropriate given that my focus was on listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show*, and not just to the one show. The interviews moved back and forth from the show we had just listened to, to previous shows and callers. Another major topic in all the interviews was the host. As a regular listener since 1994 I was familiar with many of the examples respondents were discussing which facilitated their account I feel. They saw me very much as a fellow fan of the show (see also Shattuc, 1997 who makes a similar point in relation to her study of talk television shows).

**The Multiple Pleasures of Listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show***

Listeners to *The Gerry Ryan Show* were found to be active and engaged. The evidence of this study would not lend support to the notion that the radio is merely on in the background and is not attended to by the listener. The pleasures of listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show* include the host’s on-air persona, the ‘fun’ of the show as well

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14 All names are pseudonyms.
as the way the show draws the listener in. Although respondents clearly enjoyed the show, these were not a sycophantic group. They could not be described as an ‘adoring’ audience, to use Lewis’ (1992) term. Rather resistance to different elements of the show is evident. Following Hall (1994: 265) I would term this a negotiated reading; ‘negotiated readings are probably what most of us do most of the time… Most of us are never entirely within the preferred reading or entirely against the whole grain of the text’.

At the interview stage the host was the subject of prolonged discussion, often initiated and maintained by the respondents. More text units referred to the host, than the show, topics or callers.\footnote{Of 1055 text units, 211 referred directly to Gerry Ryan (20%).} The centrality of the host evokes Hobson’s (1990: 106) study; ‘Responses to questions about radio are always given in terms of the disc jockey who introduces the programme’. This centrality is not surprising when you consider that the majority of on-air time is taken up with the host’s talk (42% of all text units for the two week period under study were host contributions).

For Valerie and Annette their listening pleasure revolves around the host;

(...) it must be his voice [(laughs)], I don't know what he does to you, I think he hypnotises you, I really do [(laughs)] (Annette).

Yes, yeah [(uhum)]. Em… I've just, I've always liked him, I've always you know liked his show... [(oh have you, yeah)]. Yeah (Valerie)

The audience see the host as ‘fun’. Another important element of the host’s appeal is his on-air persona which is a key point of engagement for listeners to the show. Gerry Ryan uses a number of techniques to create this on-air persona: talk about himself and his family are the most important here. This talk works to create an intimate relationship with the audience, as we shall see. In Livingstone and Lunt’s (1994: 75) study of talk television shows respondents focused on ‘… the host’s role in facilitating and managing the discussion and on evaluating that role’. The majority of callers I interviewed also focused on this aspect of the host’s role. However in interviews with regular listeners, the majority of the comments about Gerry Ryan refer to the host’s on-air persona. While the majority enjoyed the host there were also resistance to this persona evident.

15 Of 1055 text units, 211 referred directly to Gerry Ryan (20%).
The host constantly draws on his own experiences, particularly his own experiences of family life. At least once in every show there is a reference to his wife and to his children. This technique helps establish an intimate and informal relationship between Gerry Ryan and his audience (see also Bayard Smith, 1998). The show’s audience gets to ‘know’ the host as they are listening to the show. Eight of the respondents mentioned this feature of the host’s persona. Respondents clearly experience insights about the host’s family, career, weight and eating habits as pleasurable:

I was listening about two weeks ago and he told about his interview. When he went to get the job he lied! (laughs) (Simon)

I think he's good at that as well because you'd know he's a real family man as well [(uhum)] (...) you'd know by him he had children [(uhum)] and he's always interested. (...) And often like than he'll talk about his children [(uhum)], you know little bits and pieces from his children [(yeah)]. I like him for that as well [(yeah)], you know (...) Yeah, well its life. And you'd know by him, you'd know that he had children [(yeah)] (Maria)

These incessant revelations about the host’s life act as a ‘hook’ for listeners and also allow him to position himself as a ‘common-man’ (Carol).

Yeah, I find he can relate you know, he's got kids like and he'd be saying like you know, he was on about this morning like that the wife hadn't asked him to mind the kids for so long you know, and the very minute she was gone out the door like they were getting sick or whatever else (laughs) [(laughs)]. Reality like, really. I suppose you'd be thinking like 'Oh God, Gerry Ryan is so well of, and they must have someone in minding their kids and whatever'. But I think no, no, no they're just, he is a sort of basic, you know, normal, down to earth really [(uhum)]. (...) (Rachel)

The host is presented as someone like the listener, who is judged by lifeworld rules.

We all talk about our kids and our family at some stage, don't we really you know [(yeah)] (...) (Rachel: 67)

There is a consensus that he comes across ‘as an ordinary sort of guy’ (Maria), despite the vast differences of wealth, education etc. that exist between him and his audience.  

16 Again this is something that is mentioned by some questionnaire respondents; While listening to the show Gerry Ryan also talks about his own life i.e. his home, family and when he was growing up. It just shows he is just an ordinary person like anybody else and not just a radio personality (Q190). (...) he tends to talk a lot about himself when callers phone the show (Q176)
By using these techniques Gerry Ryan has successfully created an on-air persona which listeners can relate to, and this is central to the success of the show. Of course these features are not unique to this show, and comparisons can be drawn with British television programs going back as far as the 1970s (see Brunsden and Morley, 1978). The privileging of the commonsense, along with the almost total absence of class, race and gender, allows *The Gerry Ryan Show*, like *Nationwide* ‘to present its own particular ‘domestic’ perspective as both a-political and natural’ (Brunsden and Morley, 1978: 92). The impression of intimacy created by the presenter can be seen as establishing ‘a false equivalence/ homogeneity between us, dismantling our real differences of positions and power’ (Brunsden and Morley, 1978: 19; see also Bayard Smith, 1998). This is a major achievement given that Gerry Ryan was a practicing lawyer before he moved into radio, while his audience, in contrast, are concentrated in what marketing executives term the CDE socio-economic grouping. In addition Gerry Ryan is one of the highest paid presenters in RTÉ. Speculation about the salaries of RTÉ Radio and Television stars is almost a national preoccupation, and pops up regularly in the national press, particularly the tabloid press. Listeners to *The Gerry Ryan Show* would inevitably have come across this speculation, and would be familiar with the rumours about the star’s salary. Despite these immense differences of education, class and personal wealth Gerry Ryan manages to position himself as ‘the ordinary guy on the street’. Once these differences are dismantled, a consensual and classless Gerry Ryan Show ‘world’ can be created by the presenter, contributors and callers to the show.

Nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that this talk is experienced as pleasurable by regular listeners to the show. Perhaps one reason why respondents enjoy this talk is because it legitimates their own lifeworld experiences. It is rare to come across public discussion of the small details of domestic life. The skills associated with

17 See also Schaefer and Avery’s (1993: 266) study of the David Letterman audience; one respondent said of the host ‘he’s one of us (...) And I think that’s why a lot of people identify with him’.

18 For example Radio Ireland (an independent radio station) were widely reported to be interested in signing up Gerry Ryan before they went on-air in March 1997. These rumours were fueled by the fact that the host was friendly with two of the station’s owners. By July 1997, according to the Irish press, Radio Ireland had offered Gerry Ryan a deal worth £1 million over three years to bring his show to the station. His new contract with RTÉ ‘is understood... [to] come close to the Radio Ireland offer over a longer period’ (Coulter, 1997: 7).
family life in particular are undervalued, and parenting skills in particular go unrecognized in public. Perhaps the very fact that it is a man who is revealing his private self is also something experienced as liberating by respondents, both male and female.

This pleasure is not monolithic. There is resistance to this talk from some respondents who see it as aimed at others, namely the ‘dreaded housewife’.

90% of the show I think is more oriented towards women, you know (...) Well, talking about problems with children and so on [(yeah)] (John, Caller ii; see also Andrew, Caller 18)

It was not just men who disliked this aspect of the show.

/ But this sort of em, its, its a silly little house-wifey thing (...) and when he goes on about children I just turn it off completely
I so you don’t like those sorts of topics at all?
/ Oh god no! [(yeah)] I, that really sends me uugh [makes noise to signal her disgust]. People say my children won’t do this and all of that and just get on with it! (Cathy, Caller 42)

In addition several regular listeners found the way the host interacted with callers to the show problematic at times. Rachel, Anne, Maria, and Elaine are all critical of the way Gerry Ryan deals with callers (see also Schaefer and Avery, 1993: 264 who make a similar argument about David Letterman). For these listeners the show is also ‘about’ the callers and on-air debate and discussion. This creates a tension for this group. They enjoy aspects of the show, and of the host’s persona (as we have already seen above), but are not totally positive about the host’s treatment of callers. For example Elaine mentions several times that she is worried about coming across negatively, ‘I do like him’. She realises that the host is at the centre of this talk radio show. However despite their criticisms all enjoy the host most of the time, recognising that the host is not always like that with callers.

Another pleasure of listening to The Gerry Ryan Show is that it offers various opportunities for audience involvement. Mendelsohn (1964: 244) argues that one of the attractions of talk radio is that it allow listeners to ‘participate vicariously’;
..the talk show conveys the notion of serious activity in which “important” individuals are involved. By attending... the listener enjoys a feeling of participation (Mendelsohn, 1964: 245).

Now Mendelsohn appears to be sneering at the audience here. However this study found that listeners do engage with debate and discussion on *The Gerry Ryan Show* in a number of ways, and that this is one of the pleasures of listening to the show. It is impossible to listen to the show without some degree of personal involvement. The show presents a series of emotionally real people and situations. There are parallels to soap opera here; in both genres ‘The structure of the text... plays an essential role in stimulating the involvement of viewers’ (Ang, 1985: 28).

I found the majority of the respondents to be engaged listeners.

(... in your own mind you're giving your opinion of what you would say or what you would do, you know [(yeah)] (Simon)

People are ringing in you know with general problems and you kind of say 'yeah', you know what I mean 'I've felt like that' or 'I've been like that' or you know so (Rachel)

At both the survey and the interview stage respondents also reported talking about things they had heard about on the show with others.

(... for days, everybody would be talking, maybe on the bus [(yeah)], sitting in the bus and you'd say "God, did you hear that on Gerry" (Maria).

Again *The Gerry Ryan Show* is not unique in this respect. Schaefer and Avery’s (1993: 260) survey of viewers of *Late Night With David Letterman* found that only 11.1% of viewers said that they did not talk about the programme regularly (see also Jenkins, 1992). For Byrne (1997: 101) this social interaction can be seen as pleasurable; her study of cinema goers found that ‘part of the pleasure of cinema was talking about it with friends and workmates’ (see also Hobson, 1990). Regular listeners were found to discuss the show with both other listeners, and also non-listeners. Listening to the show provides resources for social interaction. However this study found no evidence to suggest that regular listeners to *The Gerry Ryan Show* could be characterised as part of a subcultural group (see also Ang, 1987).

There is also an affinity evident between the production team’s and the audience’s understanding of what *The Gerry Ryan Show* is ‘about’. This too is part of the
pleasure of listening to the show. One respondent explains, ‘there's something to
amuse everybody with, on Gerry's show [(uhum)] basically [(yeah, yeah)]’ (Anne).
One indicator of amusement might perhaps be laughter. All the respondents laughed
and smiled at the show while we listened to the show together. One respondent
describes the pleasure of listening to a ‘fun’ show;

(...) you'd catch yourself laughing [(yeah)] (...) I think it lifts you, whichever
way (...) I mean I have been cracked up, if anybody seen me walking round
laughing, you know [(yeah)] at things he's said. (Valerie).

An important component of the pleasure of listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show* is
audience enjoyment and appreciation of the fun of the show. What makes the show
fun is not immediately obvious however. Listeners report that the show makes them
laugh, but jokes are rarely told on-air.

The fragility of the comic becomes particularly evident as soon as the attempt
is made to analyze it... Try to grasp it and it dissolves (Berger, 1997: xiii-xiv). Despite Berger’s warning I think that it is important to unpack the fun aspect of the
show. This was something that respondents tended to ‘gloss’ over, assuming that I
understood what they meant by the term (Garfinkel, 1984). When I probed the term
respondents were unable to explain exactly what made the show fun, although a
number did try.

The humour on *The Gerry Ryan Show* in the period under study (May 17th-30th) was
usually what Berger (1997: 99) calls benign; it ‘is harmless, even innocent. It gives us
a break from seriousness, ‘a harmless diversion’ (Berger, 1997: 114). Rather than
being in any way transgressive, it is intended to evoke pleasure, relaxation, and good
will’. Benign humour is the most common type of humour found in everyday life; ‘It
is quite close to everyday life, though it takes out of it what is painful or threatening’
(Berger, 1997: 101). Much of the humour on *The Gerry Ryan Show* draws on the
incongruitities of everyday experiences and everyday life. The host makes frequent use
of puns, word-play and juxtaposition in his talk. The verbal dexterity of the host is
something that some respondents mentioned as entertaining. Sexual innuendo is also
used as a source of humour by the host.
Much of the on-air ‘fun’ is created collaboratively between the host and other speakers, i.e. callers, reporter, interviewees. Many callers collaborate willingly in ‘doing humour’. One respondent describes the pleasure of listening to this interaction.

Remember he had something on there about em he started talking about Star Wars [(yeah)]. They were just after being re-released. And he just started talking about it and then he got a few phone calls (...) And em it was just, it turned out to be for about 20 minutes just general good humored banter, you know [(yeah)]. I can relate to it and have a bit of a giggle with it, you know [(yeah)]. Things like that you know [(yeah, yeah)] (Mark).¹⁹

Mark’s description brings to mind a ‘carnivalesque sense of play’ (Brown, 1990: 195).

Not all the humour on The Gerry Ryan Show is benign. The host sometimes positions the caller as the object of the joke; he does this on eight occasions over the period under study (17th-30th May 1996). This often occurs at the closing stage of the call, when the caller does not have a chance to respond.

Well done, well done. They’re out there folks, they’re out there. Some have been abducted [i.e. by aliens], others haven’t. Really hard to tell the difference on occasion (22/5/96).

This is a direct exercise of host power and is recognised as such by several respondents. Some listeners enjoy the host making fun of callers in this way;

I think that's his attraction, how ignorant he is (laughs) [(laughs)]. If someone really gets up his back he just hangs up on them [(yeah)]. I find that his whole manner is, he actually sounds like yourself, if someone gets on your back [(yeah)]. He does exactly on the radio what you would tell them to do in face-to-face [(yeah)]. I find that very funny [(yeah)] (Simon)

However others take no pleasure from this aspect of the host’s on-air persona:

No, em there was just one thing now this morning with the way Gerry reacted to one of the women for, a woman from, I think she was an English air hostess or an air steward. She rang in and Gerry was mimicking her accent [(uhum)], she had a funny accent [(uhum)], I don't like it when he does that now [(yeah, yeah, yeah)]. I think, I think that's a wee bit unfair [(yeah, yeah)]. (Anne) (see also Rachel, Maria and Elaine)

Berger points to the function of comic cultures in differentiating between insiders and outsiders (1997: 68);

There will be a common stock of experiences to which insiders refer to or allude in code that the outsider does not know... Knowing when and at what to

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¹⁹ One measure of this ‘good humoured banter’ might be laughter. There were 437 incidents of laughter across the ten shows studied, an average of 44 laughs per show.
laugh is an important part of the process by which the outsider is, so to speak, naturalized within the in-group and vicariously internalizes its history. A similar distinction between insiders and outsiders is made by Schafer and Avery (1993) in their study of Letterman audience. The comic culture shared by the Gerry Ryan Show listeners in this study appears to be a more fluid one. This reflects the range of pleasures available to the *The Gerry Ryan Show* audience. As we have seen some listeners concur with the show’s preferred meaning of fun. However there isn’t always a consensus about what is funny and what is not. In addition some respondents resist aspects of the show’s fun as we have seen.

**Conclusion**

In this study the findings in relation to the audience were certainly worth the time and effort involved. Regular listeners’ talk about the show pointed to the multiple pleasures of listening to *The Gerry Ryan Show*. These coalesced around an enjoyment of the host, the fun of the show, and emotional affect. Entertainment was understood to be what the show is ‘about’. The remainder of the content of the show featured in a very minor way in comparison. This was in contrast to findings of previous studies of the genre. It was also a welcome corrective to my own Habermasian reading of talk radio and provided a fruitful line of theoretical enquiry. Simon Frith (1988: 123) has argued that the meaning of rock music is not only organised around its words. Equally important are features such as style and feeling. A similar argument applies to *The Gerry Ryan Show*. In relation to gender, the findings of this study suggest more fluidity than previous studies; there is no link between gender and specific pleasures and no gender-specific reading of the text (although all those who found the way the host interacted with callers to the show problematic at times were women). In fact what we find is that some men read the show in a manner previously characterised as ‘female’ and vice versa.

Many of the difficulties encountered over the course of this study were, in part at least, a function of my preference for a purposive rather than a convenience sample. However I would advocate using a purposive sample even if it means access is more difficult to negotiate. There is a need for those doing research in this area to pay close attention to methodological issues such as sample selection, recruitment and so on. I

would also welcome the inclusion of accounts of doing audience research in the literature. This I believe would assist other researchers working in the area.

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