

Late Night Woman's Hour

- BBC Radio 4 podcast



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AS Component 1: Investigating the Media A level Component 1: Media Products, Industries and Audiences

Focus areas: Media Industries Audiences Media Contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- *Late Night Woman's Hour* is a **spin-off** from the long-running BBC Radio 4 daily **magazine** programme, **Woman's Hour**. It began broadcasting in 2015 on a limited basis but was so popular that it began a permanent run as a monthly, then in 2018, a weekly podcast.
- *Late Night Woman's Hour* is recorded weekly, hosted by Emma Barnett (occasionally with founder Lauren Laverne) and features female guests from a range of backgrounds including science, health and entertainment.
- Each episode focuses on a particular theme relevant to its female audience e.g. 'Lost Friends' and 'Extreme Breastfeeding'. The original broadcast was at 11pm on Thursday nights, which meant explicit and honest discussions could be had. Since becoming a podcast, the show has been less controversial.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS - Media Industries

Historical Contexts:

Woman's Hour was first broadcast in the 1940s, so it's worth considering the **historical and social shifts** that have occurred since the show's inception. The original show reflects possible **tokenism** (a show set aside for women might imply all other radio content was oriented towards men). *Late Night Woman's Hour* features frank and open discussions and demonstrates societal shifts and increased gender equality although some of the issues raised reflect the fact that society is not yet completely equal.

Consider the specialised and institutionalised nature of media production and the significance of economic factors to media industries and their products:

- Explore issues relating to **public service broadcasting** and consider the extent to which *Late Night Woman's Hour* meets the BBC remit to **inform, educate and entertain**. Consider whether the broadcast is typical of products created for the BBC and explore the hallmarks of productions made for this institution.
- Consider the significance of **license fee** funding and compare this to the financial considerations of commercial radio e.g. would this podcast be too "niche" for commercial radio? The broadcast has only female contributors, is made up predominantly of unadorned dialogue (without music, sound effects etc.) and the topic is explored using intellectual and **specialised vocabulary**. Learners might discuss why purely **commercial** institutions would be less likely to produce similar products.
- How significant is the move from broadcast to podcast? What could this tell us about the changes in the media forms the BBC is producing and the way they distribute them?

Consider recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent media platforms:

- The **podcast** offers a number of ways to explore recent changes to the radio industry in relation to digital technology such as the profound changes that have been brought about by switching from analogue FM radio to **digital audio broadcasting (DAB)**, and the boom in **downloading and streaming**.
- A brief history of radio before the mid-1990s should allow learners to appreciate the significance of podcasting and listening to broadcasts on digitally **convergent** platforms such as computers and smartphones.
- In November 2018, the BBC launched its BBC Sounds streaming service, featuring live broadcasting, audio-on-demand and podcasts. This a good example of **technological convergence** as Sounds is

available on PCs, laptops, tablets, phones.

- *Late Night Woman's Hour* used to have an 11pm broadcast time that was suitable for the adult discussions taking place. The switch to weekly podcast gives the producers more time to discuss a greater range of issues, but the topics and discussion are less explicit. Episodes can be any length, usually 10-30 minutes.
- Podcasts have soared in popularity in the past few years, with many - such as *Serial* - becoming cultural events in their own right. **Minority groups** who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream radio have used podcasts to **find a voice**, and producers have utilised the lack of regulation to discuss controversial issues, especially personal or sexual matters.
- Female-produced podcasts such as *The High Low* and *The Broad Experience* not only explore issues affecting women in society, they also attract high profile guests that rival those of traditional radio. Comedy podcast *Dope Queens* even had Michelle Obama as a guest!
- BBC Radio, whilst being a **traditional media institution**, does not treat these independent podcasts as **competition**. Rather they build a **symbiotic** relationship with the presenters, often inviting them to guest on BBC Radio programmes (Radio 1, 4 and 6 particularly do this). This could be seen as an example of **cross-media convergence**.
- A good example of this is regular *LNWH* guest Chidera Eggerue, who writes and presents *The Slumflower* blog and podcast. Controversial comments she made about race and feminism were re-tweeted and shared across **social media**, creating debate and promoting the 'edgy and candid' **brand identity** of both *The Slumflower* and *LNWH*.

Consider how media producers maintain varieties of audiences:

- The current presenter is Emma Barnett, a journalist and broadcaster, who also presents the BBC Radio 5 Live late morning show. She also writes the 'Tough Love' '**agony aunt**' advice column in the Sunday Times Magazine, where she explores extremes of peoples' personal lives. Her style therefore is light-hearted yet unafraid to explore emotionally sensitive issues. This suits the *LNWH* format.
- Barnett took over from founding presenter Lauren Laverne, who was renowned for bringing controversial, adult and explicit

content to the *Woman's Hour* brand, which previously had a 'safe' reputation.

- The podcast format - available without age restrictions or post-watershed scheduling - may have needed a less controversial host.
- The topics are not strictly based around female experiences. Though topics like 'extreme breast-feeding' are female-centric, other discussions about grief, male/female friendships and modern slavery offer a **female perspective** on issues that would also interest male listeners.

Consider theoretical approaches:

Power and media industries - Curran and Seaton

- It could be argued that *Late Night Woman's Hour* challenges the idea that media is controlled by a small number of companies driven by the **logic of profit and power**.
- Whilst the BBC is inarguably a large, significant company, the nature of **PSB** (discussed above) and the content of the broadcast seem to be at odds with the "logic of profit and power". Consider the **funding** of the BBC in comparison with commercial organisations. Candidates might explore the extent to which the license fee frees BBC producers from the pressure to generate profit and the way in which this impacts the content of their broadcasts.
- *Late Night Woman's Hour* podcast format might also be used to support Curran and Seaton's idea that **socially diverse patterns of ownership** help create conditions for varied and adventurous productions.
- Candidates might consider the proliferation of podcasts across a wide range of topics and genres in recent years. Do the relative **low production costs** of this medium and the inexpensive hosting/**digital distribution** costs offer producers (and often **prosumers**) opportunities to take risks and develop adventurous content that still manages to reach diverse international audiences?

Regulation - Livingston and Lunt

- As a PSB, the BBC has quite strict **guidelines** about what content can be broadcast or published. BBC1 for instance rarely features sex, nudity or swearing, and all the broadcast channels (TV and radio) follow the '**watershed**'.
- The original *LNWH* was broadcast at 11pm on Radio 4, where shocking discussions and swearing were acceptable. The podcast version is somewhat 'safer' and less controversial, whilst having uncompromising and honest discussion.

- This seems to **challenge** Livingston and Lunt's assumption that 'new media' is harder to regulate. The BBC has considered the access of potential audiences and regulated within the institution.
- The sacking of Radio 2 DJ Danny Baker in May 2019 after an inappropriate tweet shows how strictly the BBC regulates their content.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Audiences

Social and cultural contexts:

A gendered discussion of the podcast is likely to benefit from some context regarding the **changing roles of women** in the UK over the past 70 years. *Woman's Hour* was originally broadcast in the 1940s and candidates might consider how different life in the UK is for women now (possibly focusing on shifts from the 1950s housewife towards the independence of young women in the 1960s and comparing this with present day). What about the changes to a **male's role** in society and their representation in the media? Candidates may use this information to consider the way that audience responses to, and interpretations of, media products **reflect social and cultural circumstances**.

There has been a raised awareness about **inequality** between males and females in the media, and the BBC has made efforts to address **gender imbalance**. With a roster of female presenters across its radio channels, some people have questioned the relevance of a show just dedicated to women, and then having a 'late night' spin-off. The impact of the #MeToo campaign and other social media campaigns highlighting sexism, and the popularity of women's podcasts, show there is a diverse and engaged audience for 'women's media'.

Consider how audiences interpret the media, including how and why audiences may interpret the same media in different ways:

- Candidates might consider a **male response** to the content of the show. They might consider how many other media texts are composed of only female members (even *Loose Women*, for instance, has male guests) and how this might be unsettling or alienating for male listeners. They might compare this to a **female audience** and question whether or not this same gender composition might be appealing to some female audiences.

- Explore responses to *Late Night Woman's Hour* on Twitter and other **social media platforms**. *The Spectator* described the initial response to the show as a "twitter storm" and candidates might discuss the ways in which the broadcast has been designed to invite audience members to enter the discussion through social media platforms.
- The topics in the podcast tend to be more focused on personal experiences, some serious (e.g. 'taking your child to work') some more light-hearted (e.g. 'objects you just can't throw away') compared to the broadcast version. This may be intended to create discussion on social media.
- Candidates could conduct some **audience research** into male and female responses to the podcast - what do male audiences find interesting (or not)? Does it make a difference if the guests are all women?

Consider how media organisations reflect the different needs of mass and specialised audiences, including through targeting:

- A return to the remit of **PSB** here could invite discussion about the BBC and attempts to produce content for all audience **demographics**. Candidates might ask whether the broadcast has been designed to explicitly appeal to a **specialised** (educated, female) audience as part of the remit of the organisation itself. An extension of this discussion might explore whether there are any other media products that appeal to this specific target audience on the radio (BBC or otherwise).
- In 2014 the BBC famously introduced a ban on all-male TV and radio panels to offset this dominance. Candidates might use this as a discussion point to consider preferred readings of *Late Night Woman's Hour* and why it might be particularly welcome to some audiences.

Consider theoretical approaches:

Reception theory - Stuart Hall

- Discuss possible different readings of the broadcast. What is the **intended** meaning? What might be a **negotiated** meaning (e.g. from a male audience member)? What might be an **oppositional** response (e.g. from a sexist male listener)?

Feminist theory - Van Zoonen

- To what extent does *LNWH* achieve Van Zoonen's suggestion that **gender stereotypes** in the media can only change if more women produce and appear in the media?

Feminist theory - bell hooks

- Radio 4's audience is often pigeonholed as being white and conservative middle class. Bell Hooks has written about how women of lower class or different ethnicity are even more oppressed by **patriarchy**. To what extent does *LNWH* challenge this by featuring guests and issues that reflect the **diversity** in the female audience? Think about regular guests Chidera Eggerue and Ambreen Razia.