



Radio listeners online: a case study of *The Archers*

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Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the nature and social composition of online fan cultures around *The Archers*. We hope to show how listeners engage with the programme online both on BBC and independent sites, and how this activity adds to their enjoyment of the programme. We have used two main methods: a questionnaire survey and interviews with *Archers* fans recruited through the BBC Archers website and analysis of online discussions including the BBC's own Archers messageboards, the 'Archers Addicts' fan club messageboard and social networking sites. Clearly, the role of the BBC Archers site is a major focus. We are exploring a success story: *The Archers* has an audience of 4.77 million¹ after 50 years of broadcasting, and the programme's website attracts large numbers of listeners each day. However, the age profile of the audience (average age 56), like that of Radio 4 generally, might be a concern. Therefore, we have paid particular attention to the emergence of younger

provide an insight into the views of committed listeners and users of the website who do not post, since only a minority of the sample (33% of 126 respondents) cite the messageboards as one of their main uses of the BBC Archers website, and of these

this group. Our sample is very highly educated: 74% have been through higher education and 13% have a PhD. Finally, according to the National Occupational Standards Classification most of them

the multicultural nature of British society, through storylines such as the vicar of Ambridge marrying a Hindu woman lawyer, the fan cultures around the programme remain white spaces. It is of course possible that the broader audience is more diverse in terms of 'race' and ethnicity.

Our conclusion is that the online 'fan' audience of the programme is predominantly white British women between 40 and 59, middle-class and highly educated. Furthermore, although these tendencies also characterise the broad *Archers* audience, they are more marked here, particularly in terms of gender and level of education, than in the broader audience who may listen more casually and may not go online in relation to the programme. There seem to be significant differences between the profile of fans of *The Archers* (and still more so our sample of online fans) and those of television soaps, with the predominance of women in the fan audience as the common point. Hargrave and Gatfield found that respondents they defined as 'fanatics' in terms of soap opera viewing were mainly women, tabloid readers, younger and of lower social class, while those dismissive of TV soaps were mainly men, in classes AB and readers of broadsheets (Hargrave and Gatfield, 2002). It seems that *The Archers* distinguishes itself from its TV equivalents by providing 'soap' for the educated middle classes. As previous research, and the comments of many of our interviewees indicate, *The Archers* is perceived as a high quality soap opera (Thomas 2002). This 'quality' attribution derives not only from the programme's production values, but also from the higher cultural status of Radio 4 and from the fact that the programme has some information values (and a history of association with information), and from the longevity of the programme generally: *The Archers* has become, for many, a national monument.

Online Fans' Responses to the Programme

As previous research on *The Archers* suggests (Thomas 2002), an extraordinary feature of *The Archers* is not only the programme's longevity, but also the fidelity of

'I cannot remember not listening to the Archers as my parents were also fans. I began tuning in deliberately myself when I was about 11 in 1992.' (F, 20-29, Project Development Officer, Q⁴)

'Alright. When I was in school we used to listen to Dick Barton. Dick Barton, special agent. Yes? No? Great fun. And it stopped and we had The Archers instead and I was deeply indignant about the whole thing but my parents liked it and I used to listen and I remember Grace Archer getting burned in the fire and that sort of thing, you know. So I really do go back to episode 1 and they were very boring to start with or I thought so. And it got more interesting as people started getting burned up in fires and things. And I stopped when I was at university largely, I didn't really listen very much though I did when I went home. For some years after that ... When did I get seriously interested in The Archers, that's a good question. It was some time ago. Twenty years, possibly more. More like thirty.' (F, 70-79, Retired Lecturer, I)

This history of early listening, followed by a break in young adulthood, and culminating in commitment to the programme in mature life shows the programme acting as a kind of marker in a life history, and providing a sense of continuity. The return in later years with the background of early listening gives the programme an added depth and resonance. Some respondents comment directly on how the programme is connected with memories of childhood and of home, so that the familiar voices (some actors also go back several decades) and theme tune have a comforting effect; the association of real family with the fictional families of Ambridge inspires both loyalty and nostalgia:

'Ever since I was a child. My mother was a great fan of the programme so it was always on at 7 o'clock in the evening. So it was just always there, it seeped into my radio listening at a very early age.'

⁴ 'Q' indicates that this is a quotation from a questionnaire, 'I' from an interview.

Of course as you grow up with the programme you get to know who the characters are. It was rather nice and reassuring. It was always on at the same time each day. It was always on in the kitchen at home so I tended to associate it with home cooking rather so it was rather pleasant oral wallpaper rather than the drama but when I grew up I started being interested in the characters a bit more.’ (M, 30-39. University Lecturer, I)

‘15 minutes of time to myself to immerse in the ‘lives’ of people I have come to know as well as my friends and family.’ (F, 40-49, Accountant, Q).

‘Fun, nostalgia, 13 minutes of escapism’ (F, 40-49, Art Teacher, Q)

‘News of farming & rural life, interested in the story. Have got to know the characters over the years’ (F, 40-49, Local Government Officer, Q)

The provision of a sense of rural life was commented on by several respondents, and is interesting given that 63% of the sample live in towns or cities. Even those who themselves live in the country can find this appealing and relevant:

I also like learning about current farming i

As in previous research, we found that these pleasures are relatively guilt-free because of the programme's brevity and a widespread belief in its superiority to the TV soaps and 'quality' soap status (Thomas 2002). Particular features contributing to this were the slower pace of *The Archers* compared to the TV soaps and the effort of imagination required to visualise radio characters and scenes:

'It is the only 'soap' that I follow. It is enjoyable to have good storylines with realistic time scales, some episodes where not much happens, just like real life, humour, great characters, and the chance to use my imagination thinking about what the characters look like, and where they live etc'. (F, 40-49, Self Employed Classical Musician, Q)

'It's very comforting and they cover the storylines very well and the characters are very believable. They have storylines that take a long time. They are not like soap operas; like Eastenders or Coronation Street. They take a long time. You get to know the characters very, very well. They are almost like friends; people that you know. Some things can be very funny some things can be very sad some things are like normal life as well, you can get quite a lot out of it, I think'. (F, 40-49, University Lecturer, I)

Responses to the BBC Archers Website

The majority of our respondents have been users of the BBC Archers website for a fairly long period; 45% have been using it for between one and five years and 37% started using it more than five years ago. The features of the website that seem to mainly attract people were the 'listen again' and the 'podcast' facilities (50% said they used these features):

'The 'listen again' to listen to something I've missed. And now that I know that it's there I don't worry about trying to listen to it at the particular time; it gives me the flexibility to listen when I want to listen.' (F, 40-49, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I)

'The availability of the podcast is a great new addition – can listen now on my PC, MP3 player, mobile phone, etc.' (M, 50-59, Database and Web Developer, Q)

The middle-class nature of the sample is clearly in play here, leading to an 'early adoption' approach to technology even in a sample which is mainly over 40. Having been offered these alternatives, listeners do not have to organise their lives according to the broadcasting schedules and can still catch up on the programme:

'I get to see my friends or talk to them on the phone at any time now, whereas before they knew not to call me when the Archers were on, especially on a Sunday morning before I retired. Now I catch up on the BBC site.' (F, 70-79, Retired Showroom Manager, Q)

It was also the 'listen again' that made many respondents visit the website in the first place, and they then started looking at other features:

'It wasn't until probably.. I think probably 2004 until I first remember doing it, because I started having more regular access to internet. And also I think I started to go to the 'listen again' feature and then I started to look at the messageboards and other features that are on the website. But now I access it quite regularly mainly for the 'listen again' stuff actually.' (F, 20-29, PhD Student, I)

Again, the fact that the majority of our sample are in professional occupations means that they do not always have the time to listen to the programme daily, so that features such as listen again and the synopsis are very important. The latter is particularly useful as a way of catching up quickly and of getting new perspectives on the programme:

'The thing I use the most is the synopsis of the daily episode because I can never listen in real time, so what I will do every morning as a ritual is check my emails and have a look at the synopsis cause I don't ever listen in real time on my computer. I will pick episodes according to what I like the sound of it from the synopsis or if I'm doing the ironing on a Sunday I'll listen to a whole week's worth

of episodes or the Omnibus edition.' (F, 50-59, Librarian in an International

what would be a really well designed one but a lot of the BBC sites would be much slicker looking.’ (F, 40-44, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I)

Most people were happy with the BBC Archers website (including the mustard colour!) and could not think of anything that they would like to be different:

‘It’s just a really good website, it’s a good messageboard; I mean going back to the website, the articles that they put on, things like anaerobic digestion that was

Well the spats about Ruth and David or Lizzie are sometimes amusing though reflections on Jack's storyline can be illuminating. I think the interest it creates is fascinating: how people hear the mix between fact and fiction and characters is weird.' (M, 40-49, Manager of Financial Services Company, Q)

'Discussion of recent episodes on DTA interests me most. I particularly enjoy analyses of the characters, their behaviour and relationships, especially regarding fundamental aspects of life such as birth, divorce and money. Also posters' personal stories supporting or not the storylines (F, 40-49, Computer Programmer and Analyst, Q).

This doubling of pleasure, or double dose soap even leads very occasionally to abandonment of the programme:

'I don't actually ever listen to the programme itself very much at all anymore, which is strange really, I tend to catch up online and then to read what people think of it. I think what I like about it is any kind of drama is supposed to make you think and have reactions to it. I like reading about other people's reactions it's almost as good, well it's better in some ways than listening to the soap opera itself.

aspect of the site they disliked. Some people claimed that they used to use them or have tried to but find them very cliquey, and that they did not enjoy the people's comments on characters. This was attributed variously to the very fast threads or to the language used, or just to the fact that most of the regular posters seem to know each other and sometimes reply one to the other without taking into consideration other people's comments:

'..I'm afraid I do not like the message board. What a lot of rubbish people talk on there, and they are so critical of all the characters. Of course that is not a fault with the site, just the silly-ness of the people leaving messages. I cannot believe they are true Archers fans' (F, 60-69, Retired Supplier of Software for NHS, Q)

'I find it too difficult to navigate and to use and as I said the people on that site can be very insulting and very nasty at times and I don't particularly like that

more conducive to the time that I've got available, popping in and out 2 or 3 times a day and see what's been said and ask something; and you know you're not gonna miss a huge amount of things that have been said. I get more sort of personal interaction than on the other one and that's what I like on the Facebook

As we write, the Facebook group is on th

Part Two - Archers fan cultures online

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The first stage of the research consisted of a mapping exercise in relation both to Archers fan sites and discussion of *The Archers* on social networking sites. We identified the following fan sites in addition to the messageboards of the BBC Archers site and of the official 'Archers Addicts' fan club site:

umra⁷;

lowfield⁸ (where a small group write programme summaries);

Mustardland⁹;

Archers Anarchists¹⁰;

Saddicts¹¹.

On the Mustardland site, which mirrors the BBC site, and was created in 2005 because of a change of format on the latter, the founder of the site was the main poster, joined only by 5-6 other posters; the site lists 20 registered members. The 'umra' google group, which originates from an early Archers usenet group, has about 100 regular posters, its own set of abbreviations and nicknames, and social events. The threads are lively, but roughly 80% are concerned with issues other than discussion of *The Archers*. Threads on the 'Saddicts' site had 10-20 posters, who clearly 'knew' each other well and were regulars on the site. The 'Archers Anarchists' site has members only email discussions rather than a board. On this site there are regular 'surveys' on 'anarchist' themes such as 'which Ambridge resident would you most like to slap?'. These attract large numbers of votes (200-300), but since it's

⁷ <http://groups.google.co.uk/group/uk.media.radio.archers/>.

⁸ <http://www.lowfield.co.uk/archers/>

⁹ <http://www.paranormal.org.uk/mustardland/index.php>

¹⁰ <http://www.archersanarchists.com/>

¹¹ <http://www.saddicts.com/>.

possible to vote every 30 minutes over a period of two months, there is no way of knowing how many people are participating.

The BBC Archers site has seven boards, with high levels of activity. The 'Discuss the Archers' Board has 35,401 threads dating back to October 2005, (on 14.07.08), and some of the threads contain over 1000 posts. In one hour, on the same date, there were 20 new posts. The messageboards of the official BBC fan club - Archers Addicts - proceed at a statelier pace, but there is also sustained activity here: there are 8 boards (referred to as 'categories' on this site) including Archers Discussion, Plotlines, Events and Quotes, Poems, Puns. At any one time on any board, 25 threads are visible, dating back 2-6 months depending on the amount of activity, and with about 10-20 posts in each thread. On checking the site on 14.07.08,

book-cases, agas, shaggy dogs and walls of paintings' (Post 82, F., 9.08.07, Captain, Adam's Angels thread). Some screen names refer to the programme, as is the case here – 'Captain' was the name of a long lamented dog belonging to one of the characters, Jack Woolley. Screen names of this kind often refer to Ambridge pets or to silent, minor or even dead (as in 'Grace's Ghost'!) characters, or have some rural connotation, whilst some posters choose names which refer to other aspects of their cultural capital, or to some aspect of their identity, whether 'real' or imagined: 'I'm named after my old teddy bear, Growly, I've had him since birth' (9.08.07, post 84, Adam's Angels). Screen names can obscure gender and thus open up a further possible realm of performance and play:

The screen names also become the source of play, jokes and the display of cultural capital of various kinds, as in the following thread:

Which of you posting here is actually Caroline IRL? All your lines, like "We're not in a Thomas Hardy novel" are nicked from this MB. Who is it? COMe on out now, we won't bite! (5.08.08 Post 1, Redbookish)

'Snot me. I'm in a Shakespeare play' (5.08.08 Post 2, Lady Macbeth [officially old but with pink hair])

'Sorry, I'm Marge Simpson' (5.08.08 Post 3, Laurie [no longer lurking]).

'Well it serpently isn't me. I am but a humble blow up airbed incapable of any acts

thread for one of the characters (Adam's Angels, following on from an earlier thread, 'Adorable Adam, Irresistable Ian & Family'), an ironic exchange of this type about

and the scriptwriters is a feature of the BBC boards which is present on some of the other boards and sites analysed, though less sustained¹⁶. It is important, however, to note that what Derek Johnson has called ‘fan-tagonisms’ or clashes between factions are typical of the operation of fan cultures generally (Johnson 2007) and that the ‘anti-fan’ stance can be as indicative of passionate engagement as celebration (Gray 2003, Click 2007). The ‘anti-fan’ posture adopted by some here is perhaps also connected to the high levels of educational capital shared by the participants, for whom the ability to be critical is both a sign of this status and a deeply ingrained habit resulting from their education. The messageboard thus illustrates Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, where ‘taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (Bourdieu 1984: 6). *The Archers* is a suitable field for this cultural work because of its own reputation for quality. Posters are affirming their cultural position and superiority by discussing *this* soap opera, still more so when they are being critical of it: ‘This is just the sort of junk rubbish you get on the likes of Eastenders. *The Archers* should be above catering to the lower intelligence level in this country (post 72, ‘A Heartbreaking, Satisfying Conclusion’ thread, 13.08.08, moonlight on the Am).

One might, furthermore, speculate as to whether the pleasures of taunting authority, through criticism of a programme which is seen as part of the establishment outweigh those of more celebratory forms of fandom for some posters. However, as we have seen, these tendencies are not shared by all posters, and the resulting conflicts fuel many of the threads, as well as attempts to distinguish other fan sites as ‘more friendly’ or ‘less vitriolic’. In a recent thread entitled ‘A Heartbreaking, Satisfying Conclusion’ 12 positive posts are interrupted by the following more critical intervention: ‘But it was so wretchedly written! OK, I see what the SWs were trying to do, but the poor actors were given a real handful of left-overs to cope with’ (post 13, 11.08.08, DracoM1). A poster then protests, implying that the intellectual combat might for once be relinquished in favour of emotional pleasures: ‘Oh, Draco, do lighten up a bit and let us have a good wallow for once’ (post 15, 11.08.08, jennet_device). A third poster then remarks on the reversion to the critical mode: ‘It was nice on this thread while all those of us who enjoyed the episode were chatting

¹⁶ With the exception of the Archers Anarchists, whose ‘surveys’ are always framed by an anti-fan discourse, such as focusing on the most loathed, rather than the most loved character.

about it - but alas, now the cynics have arrived. Oh well....they're entitled to their views, of course!' (post 29, 12.08.08, Mircalla Karnstein). Despite these complaints, in fact, those intent on enjoying the scene are not prevented from pursuing their discussions, and the two lines – of criticism and praise - continue in parallel, with the latter most numerous. It could be argued that the clash of different modes of fandom on the BBC boards (anti-fan, ironic and celebratory), along with the pleasure of mutual recognition of shared high cultural capitals and their playful deployment is what draws both posters and lurkers to the boards, and makes them flourish. It is also a particular feature of this online space, which because of its direct connection to the programme attracts a range of fans and fandoms, whereas other spaces are more homogeneous. This can also be seen as a way in which the BBC's online provision has changed the fan cultures: whereas previously fans would meet in like-minded groups, in this relatively public arena they are likely to encounter a range of views and performances of fandom.

The relationship with the BBC is complex in these contexts, and the liberal ethos I found, again, in some previous research on *Archers* fans (Thomas 2002, chapter 5) is expressed here through resistance to anything even remotely resembling censorship. At the same time, the posters are sometimes nervous about the boards being closed down, and speculate that the host Keri Davies is trying to warn them about the hidden intentions of some higher authority in the BBC. This does not prevent conflicts ensuing with the host (known, rather affectionately, as 'Mr Keri'¹⁷), when he intervenes to rein in the 'anti-fan' mode:

'This – and similar comments in this thread and elsewhere – is exactly the sort of rubbish passing for criticism that I have been talking about. It demeans the writer and this messageboard and I would like it to stop, please. Please base your comments on what actually happens in the programme'. (Post 31, 12.02.08, Keri Davies).

¹⁷ When I use 'Mr Keri' in this report, I do so in order to distinguish between Keri Davies and his online persona, which like those of the other posters, is constructed.

'Right it's now official. Th

Thus, despite the impression one might form that the board is dominated by posters who dislike the programme, and are in conflict with the BBC and its producers, in reality a class habitus shared by producers and fans, and a corresponding ethos of 'liberal' values and ironic humour ensure that communication thrives in this space. We can also, in this way, differentiate between what we have found on the Archers messageboards and Bethany Klein's report on the Radio 1 and 2 boards. The posters here benefit from a direct line to the production team via the boards' host, Keri Davies, and the personal relationship that he offers to them means that the feelings of frustration in terms of communication with the BBC and lack of engagement by the programme-makers which Klein reports on are not generally in play here. Whilst the posters may be critical of the programme, or even of Mr Keri's interventions on the boards, they clearly do feel a strong sense of connection with both. Furthermore, confusion about what the boards are for (communication with the BBC or with each other) is not a feature here, and one could argue that the two aspects co-exist successfully. The posters are strongly engaged with each other, and clearly derive great pleasure from their online community; in this sense, they are autonomous. At the same time, the fact that this is a BBC board and that Mr Keri occasionally intervenes provides a generally valued and respected framework and springboard for their creativity.

The 'Archers Addicts' Board

The 'Archers Addicts' are the programme's official BBC fan club, which was established in 1990 and is run by a member of the cast, Hedli Niklaus. After many years of organising fan conventions, Archers events and even cruises, the fan club went online in 1995. The Club still circulates a newsletter – 'The Village Voice' to

‘Great to see the Archers having a storyline showing how much of a strain growing up can be for teenager and parents. My heart went out to Ruth having to almost let her little girl go as she went out to meet the mystery boyfriend at the gate’ (...)
(post 1, 18.02.08, daisams, ‘Pip growing pains’ thread).

‘Mrs Thermal and I had three boys and worried enough about them. We didn’t have the pleasure of a daughter. So we missed all the dramas of boyfriends. We have two grand-daughters and will watch with interest. Very good episode I thought’ (post 2, 18.02.08, thermal).

The Addicts also make critical comments on storylines and characters, but in a more neutral tone than that adopted by some posters on the BBC board. In one instance, there is an interestingly spontaneous feminist response to Lillian Archer consoling herself for her troubles with her partner Matt by going shopping, with several female posters finding this implausible:

‘This doesn’t ring true to me either. I don’t believe that Lillian needs a new bag. Why? What on earth for? I’m sure she’s plenty of them. Do women still use bags? I’ve managed for years without one. Doesn’t she wear trousers like the rest of us?’
(Post 2, 18.02.08, Denny, ‘Lillian’s spending spree’ thread).

A male poster then interjects ‘Isn’t this supposed to be a woman’s answer to sadness to go on a spending spree?’, but two female posters take up Denny’s theme:

‘How very outdated to ‘get back’ by spending a man’s money. We must have an old-fashioned, unreconstructed SW on this one’. (Post 5, 19.02.08, Ella)

‘I must be a strange woman then because I’ve never understood the concept of “retail therapy”. If that’s what cheers them up though, fine – I just don’t understand why she was using Matt’s money. I have to admit I find it an outdated concept to “get back” at a man in this way, but then perhaps it says a lot about Lillian and Jenny’s idea of a relationship?’ (Post 6, 19.02.08, Brittany Addict).

The question of realism – which is ubiquitous in talk about media texts (Thomas 2002, Buckingham 1987) – is the main issue here, and in many other threads on this

board. The discussion of how realistic a character's response is allows the posters to reveal something of their own beliefs, in this case on the subject of gender. As in previous research on *The Archers* we find feminism associated with modernity, and considered to be almost a 'given' in the contemporary conjuncture. In previous research with fan club members female respondents commented on the strong women characters of the soap opera (Thomas 2002). It is interesting that these online fan club members, ten years later, find these women characters rather old-fashioned in their devotion to their 'behaving badly' male partners.

There is, also, an awareness of the constructed nature of the realism being discussed (in the reference to the scriptwriter, or SW), and language such as 'unreconstructed' and 'concept' indicates that on this board too, a middle-class, educated habitus is on display. However, here this is combined with a version of 'common-sense' knowledge of human relationships (seen in the quotations above from the Pip's growing pains thread) which relies less on educated cultural capital, and more on a feminine ethos shared mainly by female but also to some extent by male contributors. As a result, the expression of emotion involves less struggle here than on the BBC DTA board, and exchange of personal information is welcomed: 'My eldest lad has just told me I'm about to be a granddad for the first time. Boy or girl if I've anything to do with it we will have a poster here to carry on the good work. Now back to the snooker, beer and crisps' (plumber, 4.05.07). This post receives five congratulatory and humorous replies, to which 'plumber' then responds: 'thanks for the congrats chums'. The warmth of this interchange among posters who clearly know each other well is striking, and 'plumber' basks in it, while simultaneously reaffirming his masculinity through recourse to 'snooker, beer and crisps'. The Addicts board offers an unusually supportive space where posters are able both to praise and criticise the programme and to speculate on storylines and characters whilst offering each other high levels of affirmation: 'I love your idea Vicky. I think that would work beautifully for Lilian' (Denny, 12.01.08).

The 'Mumsnet' Archers Threads

As might be expected, since many of the posters are at home looking after small children or combining childcare with paid work, the Mumsnet threads about *The Archers* are particularly characterised by the programme's association with

domesticity, noted above and in previous research. Discussions of listening while cooking, doing other domestic chores or childcare are peppered with Mumsnet specific, mildly ironic references to the family context – DH (darling husband), DD (darling daughter) and DS (darling son):

‘I just got dragged in much to DH’s disgust because it was on radio at the time I would be cooking. And now I’m addicted and have the synopsis emailed to me when I can’t listen live’ (Othersideofthe channel, 29.08.07, CultureVultures: The Archers).

‘Oh dear..am 22, 23 in two weeks. The radio in the kitchen is the only thing that goes loud enough to hear over DSs shouts while he is eating. Very bad I know but I have to have background noise on if it’s just me and ds I go mad’ (Anoush, 31.05.07, ‘Admit it..someone else must listen to *The Archers*’ thread).

‘Hi Anoush I’m a fan too but wouldn’t say addicted! Certain storylines are better than others, I think, very moving at the mo with Siobhan etc...Find it very relaxing of a Sunday morning, doing the ironing and listening to the omnibus (my kids think it’s the pits but then I loathe Eastenders!)’ (happystory, 31.05.07, ‘Admit it..someone else must listen to *The Archers*’ thread)

However powerful the image of the radio in the kitchen may be for these and other Archers fans, it is often far from the reality of how people listen, and the Mumsnet posters are no exception, greeting new modes of availability of the programme with enthusiasm, and again emphasising how it is enmeshed in the domestic and everyday routine:

‘REALLY????? Archers as a podcast???? I am SO excited (...)’ (seeker, 12.10.07, ‘Culture Vultures: The Archers’ thread)

‘I had lost touch with The Archers for years because of general domestic chaos at Archers time. But now I will be able to follow it while out with dog. Glee’ (ThreadyKrueger, 12.10.07, ‘Culture Vultures: The Archers’ thread).

This enthusiasm over technical developments is accompanied by the pleasure of discovering other Archers fans online and of ‘coming out’ as a fan: ‘Also glee that people post about The Archers on mnet. I had toyed with the idea but lacked nerve because of fear of ridicule’. This comment and the title of the ‘Admit it’ thread quoted above are indicators of the continuing low status of soap opera fandom generally, and of the perhaps slightly ‘uncool’ image of *The Archers* for these young women. Like older Archers fans in other spaces, the Mumsnet posters employ self-directed irony to show that though they may be fans, they are not mindless fans. The term ‘sad’ is frequently used in this way: ‘Just reviving this thread to let everyone know that you can now PODCAST The Archers – how exciting is that?!? Or how sad am I for being excited (wink)’ (emsiewill, 12.10.07); ‘I was thrilled out of proportion when I read this on the BBC. Very sad woman’ (lilibet, 12.10.07, , CV: The Archers). This need to distance oneself from being a fan in any straightforward way may contribute to the creation of a thread on the most boring characters, which demonstrates that the critical aspect of Archers fandom is far from being confined to the BBC boards: ‘Pip is shaping up to be really annoying and dull – another eco-warrior’ (snice, 8.01.08). However, several characters receive more positive reviews, even in this thread: ‘I LOVE the racy Lilian’ (orangina, 08.01.08); ‘I lurve Brian (and Charles Collingwood’s not bad either)’ (WendyWeber, 09.01.08), and one poster undermines the ‘boring’ theme by emphasising the ‘comforting’ aspects of *The Archers*, already noted in this research: ‘Actually they are all dull but that’s what I like about it. It is quite soothing to hear ruth and david mithering on about badgers on a Sunday morning. I hate it when it gets all sensational’ (The GoatofBitterness, 08.01.08).

The main content of the threads, however, is speculation about dramatic storylines, such as Siobhàn’s death, Betty Tucker’s death or the rape of Kathy Perks. Interestingly the storylines highlighted all foreground women characters and the themes of sexuality, marriage and love. Like the Addicts’ board, a predominantly feminine culture is developed on Mumsnet, but a younger demographic (indicated by the use of more internet and texting features such as capital letters, exclamation and question marks, smileys and so on) and the fact that the participants here are all women lead to different concerns. A mirroring game with younger women characters who are also mothers is a feature specific to Mumsnet: ‘For years Siobhan’s storylines have mirrored my RL’ (yeahinminute, 31.05.07); ‘Oh dear yeahinminute, sorry to

hear that but well done for avoiding Brian. ds was born a week after emma had george
but fortunately we don't have brother!

Roisìn: Gosh – Primark’s finest with a bit of H&M cos it’s a special occasion. Probably not that slutty but bright and loads of jewellery including huge hooped or heart shaped earring – I hate those! ...

(...)

I’ve decided Annie should be Lilian sans cigarette. She’s good looking, young at heart, bit of a wild streak and a glamorous style so us girlies will have to think again.

I really should have been a dictator (F, 7.12.07, 5.31am)

The youth of the protagonists – ‘us girlies’ - is clear from this exchange, and various other indications. They make a distinction between a style they might aspire too – ‘the right side of cute and funky’ and a working-class style which they describe as verging on ‘slutty’ and involving cheap clothes and jewellery. They associate the positive pole of these style distinctions and themselves with Fallon, a popular young female character (about whom we found no negative posts in all of the samples we looked at across the sites). Fallon combines ‘love interest’ through her (failed) relationship with Ed, with a burgeoning career as a singer. Her rival Emma is a single mother who works as a cleaner and in a café; in relation to Emma, on the contrary, there is a great deal of ridicule on and across the boards, beginning with her nickname here, Emmur. Although Roisìn volunteers to come to the ‘party’ as Emma, it is clear that both girls are attributing a negative female working-class identity (single mother, hooped earrings) to the character and distancing themselves from that. Whilst Fallon cannot be described as middle-class (her mother is an amateur country and western singer renowned for her *décolleté*

Another significant feature here is the supportive and friendly nature of the exchange, indicated by the 'xxx' ending of Roisín's second message, and her offer to be Emma, which seems in part motivated by a desire to 'play with' her friend Melanie – 'we'll need an Ed to fight over'. An older female poster is also in absentia included in the play, as the two younger women recognise her claim on one of the 'cooler' older women characters, Lilian, the wealthy wi

in contrast to the threatening closure of photographs of actors (which in the case of *The Archers*, listeners frequently refuse to look at). In this way, the messageboard extends the openness and polysemy of radio, by providing a space where new meanings and stories can be generated by listeners, and where the imaginative work of listening can in some measure, be shared and captured:

'I like the characters and I can relate to them all. And I think because it's actually on radio you can use your imagination more and you can actually imagine what the characters look like. And it becomes a bit of a disappointment when you actually see the actors that play them because they are not how you imagine them from listening to their voices. But because it is on the radio you have to use your imagination. Not only to imagine what they look like, but they become like friends.'
(F, 30-39, full-time mother, former office worker, I)

Summary and Conclusions

The research confirmed that the BBC *Archers* website is used by large numbers of listeners and is very successful. The fact that over 200 people replied to our request for interviewees (posted on the 'backstage' section of the site) in just 2 days is a measure of commitment to the site and the programme. Our sample – who can be characterised as online fans of the programme – is predominantly female (76%), white British (81%) and aged 40-59 (62%). The level of education is very high indeed with 74% having been through Higher Education. These tendencies – particularly in terms of gender and education - are present in the broader *Archers* audience, but they are more marked among online listeners. *The Archers* is unique among British soap operas in attracting this demographic, and the website has clearly reinforced this effect – providing a space for keen listeners to keep up with the programme and exchange views with others. Catching up with the programme via Listen Again, podcasts or synopses is the most popular use of the site. The weekly vote is also popular, and for some, the website provides a visual accompaniment to the programme. Most respondents are happy with the website as it is, though a small group with strong web orientations thought it could be updated. A redesign and a new

'look' may attract more of the younger listeners, and cause them to linger longer on the site.

Only a third of our respondents said they used the BBC Archers messageboards, which nonetheless are the most active of all the *Archers* fan sites we mapped. The second most active board is the Facebook Archers Appreciation group, which is growing rapidly and has over 2000 members. New generations of listeners in their 20s and 30s, and some older listeners are discussing the programme on social networking sites such as Facebook and to a lesser extent Mumsnet. With the notable exception of the 'umra' group, most of the independent fan sites are now used by very small groups. The official fan club site, the 'Archers Addicts' has a faithful group of around 20 posters on its messageboards.

For some, the BBC messageboards are an important social network, and they can be a lifeline. They can also intensify the pleasures of the programme by providing a 'double dose soap' in the form of the messageboard 'characters' and their exchanges. There is some evidence of the BBC Archers website (including the messageboards) becoming a visual accompaniment to the radio broadcast. For some respondents, the 'anti-fan' and ironic fan postures adopted by some posters on the BBC boards are off-putting, and in these cases other spaces, such as the Archers Addicts and the Facebook Archers Appreciation group are sought out. However, the clash of different versions of fandom found on the BBC boards makes the discussion very lively, and stimulates participation. The presence of the BBC host 'Mr Keri' and the sense of connection with the programme and the producers that this provides make the posters feel at home and 'listened to'. This contrasts with Klein's findings in relation to the Radio 1 and 2 messageboards, where feelings of confusion and alienation were reported. Here passionate engagement, however critical, is the order of the day, and a marker and contributor to the programme's and the website's success.

The Archers has a unique relationship with its audience because of its longevity, and the fact that many have been listening since childhood. Words such as 'comforting', 'security', and 'domesticity' are associated with *The Archers*. One of the scriptwriters spoke of a bond with the audience, which consisted of not allowing

anything 'too terrible' to happen.¹⁹ This research suggests that this is an impos-
sible task. (p. 4)

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