

The Archers

Component 1: Exploring the Media

Focus areas:
Media Industries
Audiences
Media Contexts

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

- *The Archers* is aired on Radio Four, has over 5 million listeners and is considered a significant part of British popular culture. Running for 65 years, with six episodes a week and an omnibus on a Sunday, it is the world's longest running radio soap opera.
- *The Archers* follows the residents of the fictional farming community of Ambridge, in the fictional county of Dorsetshire, in the English Midlands. Its tagline is, "contemporary drama in a rural setting".

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Industries

Historical Context:

- *The Archers* was originally established in 1951 to **educate** farmers which, it was hoped, would increase food production after the second world war. It was thought that the show could be used as a way for the Ministry of Agriculture to communicate important **information** to farmers.

Social and Cultural Context

- Wherever possible, *The Archers* happens in **real time** i.e. it portrays **events** taking place on the date of broadcast, allowing a variety of **topical subjects** to be included. If a real-life event can be predicted, it is often written into the script. Even unforeseen events have been weaved into the script with scenes being re-written and re-recorded at short notice such as the 9/11 attacks, the death of Princess Margaret and the 2001 foot and mouth crisis.

Consider the importance of different funding models and production processes:

- Like TV, radio broadcasting falls into two categories: **public service** and **commercial** broadcasting. Commercial broadcasting is funded

by the sale of advertising slots and public service broadcasting is funded by public money either directly from the government or a licence fee. In the UK, **BBC radio is funded by a licence fee.**

- *The Archers* is aired on **Radio Four**, the BBC's main spoken-word channel, and so is funded by the licence fee. The BBC has a **public service remit** (to educate, inform and entertain) and *The Archers* was originally established to **educate** farmers. The show soon became a major source of **entertainment** for people from all walks of life, not just the rural community. However, the show still prides itself on the quality of its research and its ability to portray real rural life.
- **Producing** a radio series like *The Archers* requires tight **schedules** and long term **planning**.
 - » The production team meet biannually to plan the following months, and sometimes even years' worth of storylines.
 - » Monthly script meetings then take place where four writers have to produce a week's worth of scripts each.
 - » Recording takes place every four weeks and actors only receive their scripts a few days before. Actors are employed for six days in which they record 24 episodes. There is very little room for error as each 13 minute episode is only allocated two hours of studio time.
 - » Episodes are then broadcast 3-6 weeks after recording.
- Due to these recording schedules, actors are not held on retainers and are not employed full time on a show and often have careers in film, theatre, television and other radio shows.

Consider regulation of the media:

- Radio broadcasting is regulated by **Ofcom**, the government-approved regulatory authority for broadcasting. Ofcom sets **standards** for programmes and one of its duties is to examine specific **complaints** by listeners about programmes broadcast on channels that it has licenced.

Consider the impact of technologies and convergence:

- In order to keep up with the different

ways people prefer to **consume** their media, there are a variety of **ways for fans to engage** with the show:

- » Aside from the **regular radio slot**, listeners can catch up with the **omnibus** on a Sunday, hear recent episodes repeated on **BBC Radio Four Extra**, download the **podcast**, or listen ‘on demand’ through **BBC iPlayer Radio**.
- » Alternatively, they can check out *The Archers*’ page on the **BBC website**, follow the show on **social media** by following it on **Twitter** or liking their **Facebook** page.
- » All of these **platforms** are provided to help audiences increase their enjoyment of the show and make it as accessible as possible for them to keep up to date with it.

The Brand

- *The Archers* is big business for the BBC as it’s the most listened to BBC programme online. In today’s society, **market share and brand identity** are massively important and *The Archers* succeeds on both of these. If the BBC was ever to lose its **licence fee**, there are certain shows that it is guaranteed people would pay to subscribe to – *The Archers* is one of these. Therefore, it’s important that the producers keep the show fresh. One way of doing this is by introducing new characters or pushing the boundaries on plotlines.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

Social Context

Not one to shy away from controversy, the BBC has opened the gates to less talked about topics and issues in recent years. The **domestic abuse storyline** of Rob and Helen has been building for some time. The **listeners’ privileged position** of being able to eavesdrop in on characters’ private conversation has added a very real touch to the storyline. Audiences have witnessed first-hand Rob’s controlling nature, his coercive behaviour and insidious ways (e.g. constantly undermining Helen’s looks and clothing), and listened whilst he has progressively isolated her from friends and family. The **realistic portrayal** of this storyline has even prompted audiences to raise over £100,000 in charitable donations, proving the **importance** of such a show – and the strong relationship it has forged with its **audience**.

Consider the ways in which media organisations target audiences:

- Historically, radio soap operas have always

focused primarily on women’s lives, particularly family relationships, domesticity and marriage. Therefore the target audience was traditionally **females** who looked after the home.

- Listeners from different walks of life could engage with the show in different ways due to its multi-stranded **narratives**. As a listener you might be rooting for one particular character whilst your friend might be interested in another character relationship entirely.
- *The Archers* is perceived as a high quality soap opera and distinguishes itself from TV soaps by providing soap for the educated middle-classes. Radio Four has a **high cultural status** and so the audience for *The Archers* consists mainly of well-educated middle-class professionals, most of whom are middle aged and above, white women.

Consider how audiences may respond to and interpret media products, and the social, cultural and political significance of media products:

- For many of these listeners, *The Archers* was a **familiar friend** which provided a comforting background and, until fairly recently, there was an unwritten rule that nothing too terrible would ever happen.
- However, in recent years some listeners have complained that *The Archers* is beginning to mimic the excesses of TV soaps such as *EastEnders*. The most notable example of this is the 2016/17 storyline of Rob’s abusive relationship with his wife. For some listeners, the show they once considered to be light, mellow drama, has now morphed into actual **melodrama**.
- That being said, such a move has attracted **new listeners** which are welcomed by the broadcasters, and there is an argument that such shows should reflect the **society** in which they are aired. This move has also given the BBC the opportunity to open a conversation about **topics** like domestic violence.
- Because the BBC can be accessed from around the world, it’s important to understand that some of the online audience is **global**, including British people living abroad. Listening to *The Archers* is a crucial way for them to keep in touch with **British life**. In fact, even within the UK, some listeners from urban areas have stated how they like the sense of rural life that is evident in the show. Perhaps, like many, they dream of getting away from the city and moving to the country and *The Archers*

helps them imagine this for a short time.

- If we consider Blumler and Katz's **Uses and Gratifications theory**, we could argue that audience members listen for all of those given reasons:
 - » simply for **entertainment**/diversion from their everyday lives
 - » to be **informed or educated** about rural life or topical issues that the
- storyline may be dealing with
- » for **social interaction** to discuss with family/friends or by continuing the conversation on Twitter or Facebook
 - » for **personal identity**, to compare their life experiences with those of the characters.