

# ***New Postscripts: Reinventing J.B. Priestley's BBC Broadcasts for a Diverse and Contemporary Bradford***

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*New Postscripts*<sup>1</sup> is an arts-based research project made in collaboration with the BBC and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.<sup>2</sup> The project is made up of a series of commissions by writers and sound artists, inspired by the work of playwright and author J.B. Priestley (1894-1984). The commissions included the creation of a text/script which was then delivered as a sound piece in the style of a radio program with (where relevant) sound effects and music. The *New Postscripts* project was inspired by the focus of the BBC 100 centenary celebrations and paid special attention to radio and sound art, an important aspect of the BBC's remit since its inception but in the twenty-first century an art form, in the face of HD TV and film and interactive media, that was felt somewhat neglected.

It is perhaps worth noting that the project was commissioned as part of a raft of funded initiatives completed to celebrate the BBC centenary. As such there was no direct theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> [canvas-story.bbcrewind.co.uk/postscripts/](http://canvas-story.bbcrewind.co.uk/postscripts/).

<sup>2</sup> The project was managed by Dr Mark Goodall (PI), Dr Karen Thornton (CI), and Dr Yunis Alam (CI) all from the University of Bradford.

foundation for the project other than using a historical (BBC) artifact as inspiration to contextualize the social and political relevance of radio and make a connection between the history of the BBC (past) in the present (now).

The aim of the project was essentially to “remediate” the WWII broadcasts made by Priestley between May 1940 and March 1941. These were short talks of which there were twenty-eight delivered by Priestley across two series and broadcast after the 9 o’clock news on BBC Radio. While other speakers occupied the role, Priestley was by far the most famous public figure, and it was his broadcasts that of all wartime speakers had such a “powerful national impact” (Hawkes 1) reaching at times around 11 million listeners (Hawkes 20). While the BBC received over 100 letters per week, the majority of which were supportive of Priestley, the broadcasts were essentially war propaganda intended to counteract the then immense popularity of the propaganda radio broadcasts from Hamburg of “Lord Haw-Haw” (William Joyce).

Despite this, Priestley did manage to incorporate some of his socialist principles into the broadcasts<sup>3</sup> and to at times shift focus from the military and technical aspects of the war to the effect of the conflict on the lives of ordinary people. This included documenting the quirks of everyday life that continued despite the great physical and psychological damage caused by such a major global conflict.

While it was always the BBC’s intention to offer a range of voices with the postscript broadcasts, the popularity of Priestley dictated that the organization was forced to continue with his voice alone. The team behind the project saw it as an important aspect of the *New Postscripts* that the original remit of having a diverse range of voices be included, not only in terms of the

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<sup>3</sup> From the 14 July broadcast onwards, for example, Priestley stressed the importance of maintaining wartime cooperation post-war to “usher in a new and truly democratic Britain and to reject the unjust society of the 1930s” (Hawkes 11).

delivery of the sonic aspects of the commissions but also the subjects and experiences explored by the contributors. In addition, the effectiveness of Priestley's postscripts was that they offered a broad portrait of the UK, one that was unfamiliar to most London-centric BBC speakers at that time. As it happens, the *New Postscripts* covered a range of different subjects, but with a clear "Bradford" dimension to all the pieces. The aim was to offer a range of sound works that had an everyday appeal, even in the most experimental works.

### **Remediation**

Priestley considered writing, unlike radio as a "lonely art" (Mitchell 41). Yet his original Postscripts were delivered, typically for the era, "dry" with just the writer's voice heard throughout. With the *New Postscripts* the impulse was to create more of a soundscape, in keeping with some of the innovative radio that has been created by BBC Radio 3 and BBC Radio 4 in recent years.<sup>4</sup> In addition, we acknowledged that the *New Postscripts* would be inspired by issues other than military conflict. In this sense they were not copies of (or a homage to) Priestley's original broadcasts but were examples of what Bolter and Grusin argue are Remediations, creating an interplay between the original broadcasts of the 1940s in retaining certain elements (a personal, subjective focus and a style of intimate speech-delivery) while incorporating new elements (sound design, music and dramatic dialogue).

The piece by Adelle Stripe exemplifies this process and only works when all of these elements (subjective speech, field recordings, a specially commissioned musical track) are combined together in a complex sound mix. This process of reconfiguration turns what could have become a nostalgia piece on Bradford's Ice Rink into revision, operating as both a

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the BBC radio series "Between the Ears." The episode on Gateshead car park portraying "An unlikely journey of sound through the concrete building that faces demolition as part of the town's redevelopment" was a particular influence on the current project ([bbc.co.uk/radio3/betweentheears/pip/dm920/](http://bbc.co.uk/radio3/betweentheears/pip/dm920/)).

celebration of the original media and as a contemporary critique, exploring memory and culture history, and the iconic Bradford landmark that is still relevant today. In a similar way but examining the impact of Bradford Council's new Clean Air Zone initiative, Augustin Bousfield takes this as a starting point to reminisce on personal connections to the cities' "green spaces," bringing past and present together to create a clear and current connection.

One of the innovations of the original Priestley postscripts was that the scripts were delivered by the author with his characteristic West Yorkshire accent, unusual then at the BBC which favored RP English. Initially, the plan was for hired actors to deliver the *New Postscripts* until it was realized that the authors speaking in their original "natural" voice was preferable, creating a further link with the original broadcasts. When producing Bob Stanley's celebration of the rise of the social club(s) and their relevance in local communities, the initial recording was performed by a third party and this immediately lacked the authenticity present in the other postscripts, performed by the original authors. The piece was subsequently re-recorded with Stanley delivering the script, with the intonation and pace perfectly performed by the author himself (see Figure 1).

The team also decided to retain the "written" aspect of the original postscripts. We quickly realized that the pieces would only work if the words were put down "on paper" first and that in turn determined the choice of artists commissioned. A call was put out to invite contributions to the project, and once commissioned, the submitted texts were studied and approved before any audio recording took place. According to Hawkes (2008), many of the passages in Priestley's postscripts "invited a deeper understanding of what it meant to be alive in these islands at this time." With the *New Postscripts*, we hope to achieve, in a modest way, this kind of effect in the listener. For her contribution Bradford author, poet, and educator Kirsty



Fig 1. Bob Stanley recording his postscript (copyright University of Bradford).

Taylor reconfigured two key scenes from her upcoming play *Cashy C's: The Musical* which documents working class struggles from inside the set of a pawnbroker's shop. Whilst this is clearly a story set in Bradford, it speaks to all those living with working-class struggles, wherever they happen to reside (see Figure 2).

Similarly, Tammie Ash, exploring the term “melting pot” in relation to what culture means in 21st-century Bradford is evidently exploring issues that are not confined to a “Bradford only” experience. As is Saima Mir in her exploration of, and the transformative effect digital technology has had on the equality of opportunity within previously excluded communities. Mir talks about the power of being connected and the value being online has brought, celebrating what is often a much-maligned aspect of contemporary culture. The use of authentic voices and differing stories claims inclusivity and diversity and the co-creation of the podcasts as a more democratic form of media production.



Fig 2. Augustin Bousfield recording Kirsty Taylor's postscript (copyright University of Bradford).

As a legacy of the “remediation” process, we intended to use the sound works produced as inspiration for subsequent audio-visual works. Indeed, one of the *New Postscripts* (by Pisani but not included in the BBC website) incorporated video footage so that it works as either an audio or an audio-visual work. In addition, Furaha Mussanzi's postscript has also inspired a short film about the work of the author as a social activist and her role in the faith community.

Drawing on her background as a Congolese refugee who with her family has made her home in Bradford, Mussanzi's postscript explores the universal concept of self-identity and home.

In choosing to celebrate 100 years of the BBC by remediating an iconic radio broadcast, we ultimately believed that this medium, even in the 21st century, is a vital tool of mass communication. A number of the recordings use location sound to immerse the viewer in the world of the narrator and thus add a level of authenticity to the broadcast/podcast format. A public event promoting the *New Postscripts* (at the 2023 Bradford Literature Festival), a

listening *and* speaking experience, inspired a range of responses to the project, including Priestley's wider work, the role of the media in The Second World War, the future of local radio and broadcast propaganda, reflecting how radio can encourage broader cultural reflection.

The project demonstrates the continuing power of sound art and re-affirms how the audio realm can be as influential, if not more so, than images. As Eric Sevareid has pointed out, television pictures "reduce all to literalness; they cannot show an idea or value; they block out the imagination of the listener: they have no eloquence" (Sevareid viii). That may be going too far, but still, the spirit of the argument, that sound can be as powerful if not more powerful than images, was at the heart of the *New Postscripts* project.

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