

TV on the 'Radio': The Audio Afterlife of Television

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The flow of television has always included a stream of sounds as well as images. That these sounds anchor the image and hail the audience has been perhaps relatively, though certainly not completely, neglected by media scholars. The audio address of television facilitates, or may even encourage, the “distracted” viewing explored by various scholars. I am especially interested in the official and unofficial audio recordings of television transmissions and how these texts preserve, transform, and mobilize specific content and television as an idea. Unofficial recordings, in particular, indicate a desire to (re)use a text, and also perhaps to create a bulwark against the (perceived) ephemerality of television, whether live, “live,” or even subject to syndication (and so endlessly looping back around). These works uncover the home as an—audio—archive of television (decades before the DVR became as much of a fixture as lamps and rugs). The transformation of an audio-visual television text into an audio text can be linked not only to sound studies but also discussions of paratexts and “paratextual memory.”

Official audio adaptations of television and film texts dot the history of media, and DVD and Blu-ray releases make audio versions of works like *Stagecoach* available for close study. Less studied (if no less readily available) are releases such as the albums (vinyl, cassette, CD, download) for works such as *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1979). As early as 1979, two episodes appeared as audio texts on LP as an offering from BBC Radio, though the texts are not radio adaptations but a transfer of audio content. Currently users can purchase the texts as CDs or MP3 files. These offer the complete audio material from the TV episodes: dialogue, music, sound effects and audience responses. The “distracted viewing” of television becomes an aurally focused experience, and one that may involve mental viewing. This is television available for personal and home use (before the monetizing of home video). This is TV for your commute as much as to accompany cleaning house or ironing clothes.

The added value of interview material with creator and star John Cleese is not particularly unusual for such releases. But the texts also include Andrew Sachs—doing the accent of his character Manuel—describing events that are not easily understandable in the absence of visual information. The program’s full audio material is supplemented by narration very much like, if more comedic and less detailed than, audio description. This added audio material transforms the work into something between TV and radio (but closer to the former).

Other audio texts are unofficial and necessarily cannot incorporate newly created voice acting or circulate legally. But audio recordings (texts) have—intentionally or not—served for decades as documents of audio-visual media. Amateur recordings of TV sound have historically allowed users to preserve broadcasts. For just one (and famous) example, the *Doctor Who* episode fan reconstructions (“recons”) have, as their

foundation, audio recordings of the TV broadcasts. The homemade audio recordings also affirm the audio portion of the television address. These texts provided concrete incentive for the BBC to release animated versions of “lost” serials, such as “The Power of the Daleks” (1966/2016), where new animation is synched with the existing audio. The rich history of (un)official audio texts of *Doctor Who*—with or without newly recorded narration—further reveal an audio history of television. These audio versions make, and acknowledged, television as a sonic form.

Furthermore, whether official or unofficial, these audio TV texts transform “original” material. Their fidelity is slippery beyond the bare audio facts. In this earlier moment, the limited microphone capacity of an audio cassette recorder relays the (less than ideal) audio signal coming through a single speaker of a unit whose goal was the mere presentation of sound. But our digital recordings, whatever their strengths, only seem to offer to true fidelity.

Their use is also of great interest to me. Such texts I think reveal that “paratextual memory” crosses senses. These audio TV texts mix types of memory: sound and image are jumbled delightfully. They foreground the power of sonic memory and allow, or encourage, the user to mentally (re)construct audio-visual texts from the sound. Or the individual can simply use the sounds as radio, or audiobook, or even background sound. I am interested in the ways the *Fawlty Towers*, *Doctor Who*, and other audio texts preserve and alter the originary televisual texts.