# The Listening Project as caring broadcast talk.

This paper examines the discourse of The Listening Project (UK Radio 4 2012-present), a relatively recent “public participation” (Thornborrow 2014) radio series. Several academic writers have focused on a “belligerent” trend in contemporary broadcasting (e.g., Higgins and Smith 2016), and demonstrated that “belligerent” effects require particular kinds of discursive work on the part of contributors. It is important to recognise the boundaries of the belligerent trend, and so, taking The Listening Project (TLP) as its key example in the national context of the UK, my paper argues (1) that there are contemporary forms of markedly non-belligerent, “caring” radio talk with characteristics of their own, and (2) that those characteristics require co-ordination between the interactive work of participants, and other kinds of work (e.g., editing) on the part of the broadcasting institution. In this particular series, broadcaster and the participants collaborate in evading, minimising and redressing potential conflict, the former through organisational and editing work, the later through local interactional facework/relational work (Locher and Watts 2005). Section 1 introduces the series; Section 2 situates it in relation to media trends; Section 3 discusses Daly’s (2016) critique; Section 4 reviews some methodological considerations. The general analysis is presented in Section 5 and a detailed case study in Section 6. Section 7 provides further discussion, and Section 8 concludes with a review of the implications for broadcast discourse research.

## 1. The Listening Project

The Listening Project (TLP) is a continuing series on BBC Radio Four in the UK which launched in 2012, inspired by StoryCorps (National Public Radio, 2003-present: Isay 2007), a public radio series in the USA. Each episode features ordinary people (not broadcasters, celebrities or experts) talking to one another about their lives, feelings, experiences – the subject matter is personal, often very intimate, even when it connects with social and political themes and issues. Participants are self-selecting volunteers who visit an appropriate local radio studio, or to the peripatetic Listening Booth. The volunteers offer themselves as pairs or threesomes who already know each other as friends or family. It is the participants not the broadcaster who sets the topical agenda for the recording, which is grounded in the relationship. One pair of friends (Riaz and Mark, curated under a Sport theme on the programme’s website)1 recall their involvement in the football hooliganism of the 1970s and 1980s. Husband and wife (Colin and Marie, Health theme) reflect on their separation and whether there might be a reconciliation. Friends Louise and Sam (Family theme) talk about coping after the death of their sons. An invitation to come forward is offered:

We continue to invite people to come and have their conversations recorded. Are you tempted? Or perhaps you know someone with a fantastic story that you’d love them to share with the world. There may be something that you’ve always wanted to discuss with someone close to you. Or maybe you’d just like to celebrate happy moments in your life, or reflect on memories of a dearly departed friend. What you talk about is completely up to you. This project is about creating space for you and a loved one to have the conversation you always meant to have. “About” tab on TLP website.

Broadcasts from this still-expanding collection are transmitted in daytime during the week. Although each episode is only around 3 minutes long (more like an interlude than a regular programme) the participants will have been in recorded conversation much longer (45 minutes or more). The broadcast versions are condensed from these longer recordings. No broadcaster takes an audible part in the programme, but the majority of the original, longer, recordings involve a facilitator, who manages the recording process as well as taking a delicate role in organising the conversation where appropriate. Some participants record and upload their own unaided conversations (the Listen section online has a Listener Uploads theme with 21 conversations in June 2018). There is a 15-minute Omnibus each Sunday.

These production arrangements have come about because TLP is a collaboration between the BBC and the British Library. The British Library is interested in the archive as a source of oral historical information on attitudes and experiences. The longer recordings are on permanent online public access via the British Library Sounds website (Oral History section). BBC local radio stations facilitate the processes and use the recordings as resources for public entertainment (in the broadest sense) in line with its public service remit.

TLP thus has very secure institutional foundations. It was created for radio, the older of the broadcast media platforms, under the auspices of a long-established and powerful (inter)national public service broadcaster, the BBC. Radio 4 is a speech-based national channel, combining in-house with commissioned production. It has a loyal audience maintaining a 11-12% audience share in recent years (RAJAR 2017a). Radio as a medium remains very popular in the UK, reaching 90% of the adult population in 2017, with as yet only about 13% of this via online platforms (RAJAR 2017b). There is an ongoing concern about perceptions of Radio 4 as “essentially white, middle class and English” and an acknowledgement that its core demographic is 55-75 (BBC Trust 2010: 11).

Like other more venerable Radio 4 shows (In Our Time, File on Four, Women’s Hour) TLP is designed as a distinctive brand, with its own regularities and promotion strategies. Its self-advertised claim to innovation lies in having participants in close relationships talk to one another, not to a professional broadcaster, (although professionals are responsible on the technical side, as well as for the editing and curation on the content side), combined with the emphasis on personal subject matter. The online platform gives access to past and current recordings.

## 2. The distinctiveness of The Listening Project.

The interactions displayed by TLP are built on the basis of broadcasting’s standard “double articulation” (Scannell 1991): speakers are talking to/for an audience as well as to one another. In 2018 the series can be regarded as exceptional on two counts. Firstly, although TLP operates as a gatekeeper of “public speaking” to mass audiences, it is doing so in the age of online user-generated content where professional broadcasters no longer have a monopoly of public speaking, and a diminished gatekeeping role. Secondly, the caring interactions which TLP fosters are at odds with the designedly confrontational and offensive uses of language now so apparent not just in online environments (Coe et al 2014; Rainie et al 2012; Duggan et al 2014; Rowe 2015), mostly in written form, but also in the domain of mainstream broadcasting (Luginbühl 2007; Lorenzo-Dus 2008; Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Hutchby 2011; Higgins et al 2012; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al 2013; Eriksson 2014; Camauer 2016; Drake and Smith 2016; Higgins and Smith 2016), mostly in spoken forms.

The belligerent turn in contemporary non-fictional broadcasting has been treated as a novelty against a tradition of sociability between broadcasters and audiences (Scannell 1991; Fitzgerald 2006) as well as formalities designed, inter alia, to keep direct personal confrontation under control. According to Higgins and Smith (2016: 25), this new belligerence is mostly “synthetic”, a matter of organised performance professionally designed and implemented to accomplish a diverse range of communicative goals, rather than emotional leakage and failures of anger management. Belligerence in this sense also differs from earlier confrontational phone-in radio (Hutchby 1996) whilst drawing on some of the same strategies: belligerent media discourse is as likely to be found on TV as on radio; it covers personal as well as social issues; strong emotional engagement is to be expected, and it often involves vigorous displays of partisanship by studio audiences. It might take place on phone-in programmes – “outrage” (Berry and Sobieraj 2013) is certainly found there - but is not restricted to these.

The marked “niceness” of TLP is just as synthetic (which does not imply “insincere” or “inauthentic”) as the belligerence found elsewhere in the 21st century mediascape. It has some characteristics in common with the characteristics of broadcast ‘chat’, discussed by Tolson (1991) in relation to television. Certainly the ‘chat’ tradition of well-disposed interaction provides some of the foundations for initiatives such as TLP, (notably its focus on personal rather than public issues). But Tolson’s view of ‘chat’ (originally elaborated in relation to television) involves professional broadcasters as well as or instead of members of the audience, and the witty playfulness of ‘chat’ is less relevant for TLP. For an extended discussion contrasting ‘chat’ and ‘talk’ on radio, see Ames (2016). Everyday (non-broadcast) niceness and nastiness, are managed locally by speakers and hearers (see Mills 2011; Mills 2017; van der Born and Mills 2015, on the discursive turn in (im)politeness research). The interactional resources for doing this are available for on-air talk as well, for professional broadcasters as for members of the public, and are complemented there by (a) any awareness speakers may have of what the broadcast context may additionally require of them, to take account of audience needs; (b) behind-the-scenes production activities of the broadcasting institution.

## 3. Evaluating The Listening Project

Daly (2016) offers a holistic positive evaluation of TLP :

[…] it is hard to imagine that anyone could plumb “The Listening Project” archive and not be positively rewarded in some way by at least some of these conversations, finding them revelatory, reassuring, comforting, challenging, amusing, charmingly unusual, refreshingly commonsensical, or whatnot. (Daly 2016: 145).

With terms like ‘comforting’, he is describing possible effects of episodes on audiences: what speech act theory (cf Austin 1975) might refer to as their perlocutionary effects. He also draws attention to the absence of conflict in the broadcast material:

Perhaps predictably, all parties to these conversations tend to emerge from them morally intact, seldom in the blameworthy red, almost always in the praiseworthy black. One is unlikely to encounter here a discussion in which a gay teenager informs his violently homophobic father of his hitherto undisclosed sexual orientation. One is unlikely to hear a neo-Nazi explain to a black co-worker why she thinks she should be repatriated to the country of her grandparents’ birth. One is unlikely to hear two estranged people who were once a couple expatiate to one another on their sustained mutual bitterness. This “snapshot of contemporary Britain” seems rather engineered to be low on conflict and controversy. How accurate a snapshot is that? (Daly 2016: 146).

The idea here is not that the absence of conflict is an issue in itself, but that it is at odds with the programme’s self-description as a snapshot of the country.

Daly couples “controversy” - a property of the public sphere - with “conflict” - a property of a relationship. In media discourse and elsewhere, “conflict” may be present where “controversy” is absent and vice versa. “Conflict” implicates confrontation in person-to-person exchange. It is not the same as argument, since interpersonal argument can be sociable rather than confrontational (Schiffrin 1984; Myers 2004) and can take the nonserious form of banter (Higgins and Smith 2016: 117-118) or be aligned with the cool rationality of logic rather than the heat of passionate interaction, as in argumentation studies (van Eemeren and Snoeck Henkemans 2017). Two of Daly’s hypothetical examples of unlikely TLP conversations link the personal with the social and involve a participant whose views (homophobic or fascist) are publicly intolerable - beyond legitimate controversy. The work of Chantal Mouffe is relevant here, especially her distinction between antagonists and adversaries, the former (the homophobe and the fascist, in this case) as enemies beyond the space of the political community and the latter as contestants in permanent agonistic struggle within it. (Mouffe 2013). Mouffe is less relevant to purely personal confrontation of the kind suggested by Daly’s third scenario. A potential example of personal confrontation from TLP involves Colin and Marie, a separated couple who elected to talk about the viability of a reconciliation, with Colin keen to return to the marriage and Marie convinced that he is not yet ready (Health theme).Even here, the participants are past the stage of engaging in recriminations about the past.

Daly believes that the programme’s format offers little scope for conflict between the participants. It is possible to find counterexamples– Mother and son Christine and Adam (Sexuality theme) provide an example of interpersonal conflict. Adam criticises his mother Christine for telling the rest of the family that he was gay when he had asked her not to, and she defends herself. But Adam and Christine do not raise their voices, there is little interruption, rational arguments are used, and there is a sense that the issues are now in the past. There are also examples where possible sources of interpersonal conflict are explicitly raised, and are reviewed by speakers in generous ways, as with Holocaust survivor Thea and German Brigitte consciously acknowledging “victim” and “perpetrator” positions in WW2 (War theme). There is also covert conflict between participants (manifest divergences of view that are not explored) and conflict between participants and third parties, reported in the narratives that speakers share with one another. An interesting case of the former is the conversation on football hooliganism (Riaz and Mark, Sport theme) where the participants differ on the question of ‘regrets’ for their own involvement in the hooliganism but never quite manage to confront this difference in the recording. As for the latter, a WW2 Kindertransport refugee clearly still has a grievance with her mother for keeping two boys in the family home whilst putting her daughter in an orphanage: “I’ve never really understood that” (Ruth and Ruth, War theme).

## 4. A note on method

There are no transcripts of TLP interactions, which rules out certain kinds of analysis (e.g. corpus linguistics). There are plans to transcribe the longer BL versions for linguistic and social-scientific purposes (McEnery 2017). The utility of BL transcripts for media studies could be limited, in the absence of cross-referencing between these versions and the TLP podcasts. Microanalysis of particular examples has limitations in terms of representativeness, but also has advantages for showing in depth (a) the participants’ negotiations of face and (b) how professional editing contributes to the manifestation of facework/relational work (Locher and Watts 2005) in the data. Section 6 will focus on a conversation between members of the public, Mel and Donna, who talk about the UK miners’ strike of 1984/5. Mel experienced this as a striking miner himself, and Donna recalls it from her perspective as a young child in a striker’s household. The miners’ strike has potential to facilitate confrontational interaction but at every level, from participant (self)selection, to their fresh talk, to the edited talk, this potential is side-stepped or mitigated in practice. The argument follows approaches taken in recent studies of public participation media (Thornborrow 2014) and belligerent broadcasting (e.g., Higgins and Smith 2016).The approach is aligned with the discursive approach to (im)politeness (e.g., Mills 2011; Mills 2017; van der Born and Mills 2015). Key ideas on (im)politeness as “facework” or “relational work” have been drawn from Goffman (1972); Brown and Levinson (1978); O’Driscoll (2017); Locher and Watts (2005).

## 5. Minimising conflict in The Listening Project

### 5.1 Minimising conflict in The Listening Project: the broadcaster

The broadcasting institution controls the discourse of TLP participants in three ways. Firstly, broadcasters are responsible for the brand and for making it attractive to the appropriate kinds of potential contributors (as well as audiences); secondly, the broadcasters act, case by case, as facilitators and gatekeepers, and thirdly they edit the recordings, ensuring that new additions cohere with the existing output. These production activities take place behind the scenes, where textual analysis does not go. Yet there is clear evidence of branding on the programme’s website, including, as indicated earlier, efforts to curate the archive thematically (the current themes are Listener Uploads, Family, Health, History, Love, Loss, Religion, Sexuality, Sport and War. Several recordings are entered under more than one of these very expansive categories – Louise and Sam, talking about coping with the death of their sons, are entered under Family as well as Loss). There is also, because TLP is a collaboration between the British Library and the BBC, evidence of how recordings have been edited, which will be explored in section 6.5.

### 5.2. Minimising conflict in the Listening Project: the participants

TLP discourse takes intelligible form and can therefore be regarded as formally and minimally co-operative in a Gricean sense (Grice 1975). Grice sees talk as being governed by an overarching co-operative principle with associated maxims such as ‘Be relevant’. Breaches of those maxims give rise to implicatures – meanings that can be attributed to speakers even though they have not been made explicit. TLP discourse goes further than this, and manifests what we might call Interpersonal collaboration - manifest displays of participants’ solidarity and mutual supportiveness. For contrast, we can remind ourselves that angry disagreements, for example those spectacularly displayed in programmes like The Jeremy Kyle Show and The Jerry Springer Show, can play out with a high degree of basic communicative co-operation, interpretable with reference to Gricean maxims and the Co-Operative Principle to which the maxims are aligned, yet they are anything but collaborative in the interpersonal sense or in terms of common substantive goals. (Pavlidou 1991: 12; Bousfield 2008: 25-29; Lumsden 2008; Culpeper and Halnaker 2017: 209). Interpersonal collaboration does not demand equal proportions of contribution, or identical participant roles. Such collaboration in the context of an interview implies the differentiated discourse roles of interviewer and interviewee; collaboration in a conversation implies co-conversationalists, more or less equal, at least in theory (Cameron 2001: 8-10). (Cameron points out that the word “conversation” in English can be used with broad reference to interactive spoken discourse in general, but I am using it here in its narrower sense of sociable talk). Interviews imply some degree of preparation by at least one of the participants; conversations presume greater spontaneity. Interviews of course come in many forms – police interviews, broadcast accountability interviews, job interviews, research interviews – which serve different purposes and affect the discourse roles accordingly (including the power relations). TLP interaction is, perhaps awkwardly, positioned between research interview, broadcast interview and conversation activity types (Levinson 1992). The exact combination depends on who the participants are and what they are talking about. Friends Winifred and Helen (War theme) who reminisce together about their younger days provide something very close to egalitarian conversation but with occasional third-person references to each other as they orient to an overhearing audience. Great-grandson Declan mostly asks great-grandmother Linda narrative-eliciting questions (War theme).

The self-selecting participants should for the most part know what is expected of them, both from their encounters with the programme as its listeners and from the guidance of the facilitator. Participants may have taken pro-formas or scripts to the studio or booth, but what they actually say will be “fresh talk”, (Goffman 1981: 171), determined by ongoing requirements to respond appropriately to the previous utterance, including any prodding from the facilitator, beyond, or even on occasion in spite of, any preparations they have made.

The participants will understand, for example, that it is the relationship between them which is of interest to the programme makers, more than their citizenly opinions deriving from their stake(s) in the polity. The programme’s claim to “intimacy” derives in part from this key characteristic, and the warrant to speak derives from the solidary relationship of the contributors. Mum Nicola has a vested interest in son Jordan’s plan to make a career in the armed forces (Family theme) and interrogates him on that basis. The existence of an ongoing relationship outside the world of media discourse makes possible the expression of intimacy which can claim to be “authentic”, even if the permanent publicness of the talk may inhibit some aspects of disclosure (Daly 2016a: 145). This is in contrast with the “pseudo” intimacy of radio phone-in chat (Matwick and Matwick 2018) between participants whose only relationship is the one that exists in and through the programme.

With the focus on family relationships rather than identities grounded in the economic or political realms, there is another reason for the absence of overt conflict. The recorded encounters are just brief moments in the ongoing acquaintance of the participants. They have talked together before and will talk again, with and without other people present. Relational work in this context means that they will be wary of saying things that could have difficult repercussions when the microphones are turned off – and their prior acquaintance also suggests that they will normally know in advance of the recording what those things are. The emphasis on “intimate” subject matter here means that the pressure on face comes not just from the potential for conflict but also from the potential for excess intrusion. The solidary relationship in itself is no guarantee that intrusion is interpersonally “safe”, but it may give speakers more confidence in choosing appropriate relational strategies. One recording in the BL collection (Radio Ulster section), lasting 1 hour and 20 minutes, leads to an aunt quizzing her nephew at length on why he has decided to settle in Canada and not closer to home near his family in Belfast, where he can support his aging parents. This part of the recording does not make it into the broadcast version (Marie and John, Family theme), but it makes for interesting listening as Marie, with prompting from the facilitator, tactfully raises the subject and persists with it on behalf of the family over several turns, whilst being respectful of the justifications which John offers, such as his greater job opportunities there, and his enjoyment of the local culture. There is equivalent considerateness on his side in his acknowledgements of concern and regret. They are negotiating emotionally difficult territory, but they choose to do so in a way which represses the potential for conflict over obligations versus desires, and they are operating at some level of separation from any public controversy in this area.

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1 Mel and Donna (BBC 2013)

The case study selected for more in-depth exploration with reference to actual episode discourse is a recording featuring a father and daughter, Mel and Donna, which took place in April 2013 and was broadcast in its edited version two months later (Radio Leicester collection; Sunday edition June 2 2013: Work theme and Family theme). The main topic they focus on is the UK miners’ strike of 1984-1985, though in the long version of the recording (British Library Sounds 2013) they also talk about Mel’s life before and after the strike. Donna’s own experiences come into it where they intersect with his, or where she can speak from a comparable perspective (e.g., as a parent). It is not uncommon in the series for participants of one generation to ask questions which oblige the other to tell a story, ‘as if’ the younger speaker was unfamiliar with it.

The table below provides a full transcript of the Mel and Donna episode as broadcast. Column 1 shows whose voice we are hearing. Column 2 are row indicators to facilitate analysis. Column 3 shows what we actually hear, and Column 4 relates this to the untranscribed original British Library recording. Column 4 is further explained in the table legend.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Line reference** | **Full transcription of broadcast material** | **Source of broadcast material in the long recording** |
| 1 | the notion of re-living and laying down important memories is a key theme in the listening project (.) Mel is sixty four married for forty five years and born and brought up in Loughborough Leicestershire (.) he started work in Bagworth colliery in nineteen seventy four and in the nineteen eighties he was one of thirty men who became known as the dirty thirty for their year long strike (1.0) Mel has three daughters all grown up now Donna is the youngest and was just nine at the time of the strike (1.0) around the walls of Mel’s dining room there are pictures of each generation from his grandparents down to his grandchildren (0.5) family means a lot (1.0) |
| 2 |   | **clip 1:** **context** occurred 10 m. into original recording |
| 3 | it was a lot harder on your mam (4.0, including audible exhalation) | **clip 2:** **key sequence** occurred 30 m. into original recording : there is a cut of about 100 words between ‘anything’ and ‘but it wasn’t’),  |
| 4 | go on dad say what you were going to say (1.0) |  |
| 5 | looking after you |
| 6 | yeah (1.0) well there were three of us weren’t [there  |
| 7 |  [yeah |
| 8 | three girls (1.0) it is it is hard in't it it’s very stressful but she stood up and supported you like she has done for forty five years but (0.5) in that year in particular (.) she she stood up and (.) was right behind you all the time (1.0) |
| 9 | yeah well she could see what other kids were getting (1.0) what her kids weren’t getting (.) ‘cause  |
| 10 | oh I think as a as a parent you do that (.) but when you're the child (.) you don't notice that (.) I can't ever remember going without anything (3.0) ever (1.0) like I say on that Christmas (1.5) when people had sent in (1.5) donations from all over the country I had the most fabulous Christmas and as a nine year old that’s what you remember (.) getting up on Christmas morning (.) seeing a pile of presents and I remember getting a um a beautiful doll (.) that somebody had sent me (1.0) um in support of me dad which is absolutely fantastic (.) so I know it’s difficult from (1.5) you know from you and me mum's point of view are thinking well we missed out (1.0) I mean I’m thirty seven on I’m telling you now we we didn’t feel that we missed out on anything  |
| 11 | but it wasn’t that your mam could give you what she wanted (0.5) to (1.0) we were relying on other people giving us and then (0.5) trying to pick presents (1.5) for you and er (.) I can remember (1.5) Sheffield a a place called Hallam in Sheffield sent us (.) (with slightly chuckling voice) thirty thirty turkeys (1.0) [so every mi every miner got a turkey that Christmas |
| 12 |  [(audible intake of breath, laughing) wow |
| 13 | which was fantastic yeah . they were like the damaged ones you know with a foot missing or a (. )  |
| 14 | (laughing loudly) |
| 15 | or a wing missing or a leg or something but |
| 16 | we didn’t notice |
| 17 | no no no there were still plenty of turkey (0.5) so er and that’s what got us through that’s what made it (2.0) I say that’s all you want to remember the best part because (3.0) | (background piano music introduced from ‘the best part’) |
| 18 | it can be a bit painful sometimes | **clip 3:** **pathos** (occurred 20 m. into the original recording: background piano music continues) |
| 19 | Yeah (1.0) |  |
| 20 | I I reflect on it now (2.5) and I think well what did I lose (1.0) I lost money (1.0) what did I gain (0.5) I gained friends all over this country (1.0) so [[xxxx] | **clip 4:** **coda** (occurs 15m into the recording: background piano music continues, gets louder, then replaces speech, and leads into presenter sign-off, not transcribed.) |
| 21 |  [friends who are friends for life  |
| 22 | some friends for life yeah (1.5) I don’t consider I’ve lost anything (.) I think I gained a lot  |

TABLE: Donna and Mel: the broadcast. Written language punctuation is avoided, and capitalisation is used only for proper nouns and the first person singular pronoun. Filled pauses (“er”, “um”) and repeated words are included; overlapping talk, pauses and untranscribable talk are indicated, but nonverbal vocalisations such as laughter are glossed rather than transcribed. A table format is employed, to show visually how the broadcast episode has been edited from the BL original, with column 4 used (i) to identify broadcast sequences as ‘clips’ from that original, (ii) to give a thematic ‘gloss’ to each clip (e.g., ‘context’), and (iii) to indicate where in the BL recording the clip originated (e.g., ’30 minutes into original recording’).

This episode is a relevant recording for the purposes of this article because the year-long strike was such a hugely controversial political event at the time, across multiple axes of conflict (government/union; striking/non-striking miners; picketing miners and police). Non-participants aligned variously across these axes with different levels of involvement. The general character of TLP as a series, the specific series-relevant identities of the participants involved, the experiences they choose to focus on, and the editing that the broadcasters apply to the long recording, are all effectively deployed to suppress the potential for conflict, in the interest of a focus on family-sustaining memories, signalled by Fi Glover’s introduction (row 1 in the table).

### 6.2 The broadcasters: evading conflict through participant selection

The fracture lines in British society created, exacerbated or made visible by the strike, have in the 21st century been supplemented by a new and different kind of division: that of generation. For Mel and Donna, the major 1984 axes of conflict are not relevant to their father/daughter relationship. Donna positions herself as a non-confrontational information-seeker in relation to Mel’s experience and also as someone whose own parental experience allows her to express empathy with his feelings (row 10 in the table).

### 6.3 The participants: evading conflict by talking about something else.

Conflict can be evaded by picking up aspects of the topic that do not activate controversy. Donna has an agenda, to talk about her mum’s role in the strike of supporting her husband and family, and although the broadcast gives Mel the first words on this subject, he does so by talking about the striking miners’ wives in general, rather than Donna’s mum in particular. It is Donna who has most to say on the subject of her mother (row 8 in the table) and who encourages Mel to continue (row 4), whilst it is Mel who, in-turn, switches topic to the generosity of strangers (row 11), a focus which produces humour that they can both enjoy, and surprise for Donna who did not know about the turkey gifts. But neither Donna’s topic nor Mel’s speak to the controversies of the strike period or its aftermath.

### 6.4 The participants: minimising conflict through relational work.

Although the major axes of controversy in 1984 do not divide Mel from Donna, they are potentially divided on an axis of family obligation, on the basis that families in the strike might have grievances for being made to suffer for the principles of one of its members. In terms of “facework” (O’Driscoll 2017), or “relational work” (Locher and Watts 2005), Donna is able to construct Mel as ‘apologising’ or ‘confessing’ or ‘admitting’ that he has caused harm in his way. His values (assumed rather than spelled out in the conversation as broadcast) caused him and his wife to impose privations on their children. To read this as something like a ‘confession’/’absolution’ sequence (cf Freund 2015 on public autobiographical storytelling as confessional) we have to rely mainly on the work that Donna does: it is not apparent until row 10 (Donna’s turn) that Mel may have ‘apologised’ or ‘confessed’ or made an ‘admission’ at row 9. This interpretation is possible despite the distribution of the apology/confession/admission over some non-sequential talk turns (especially across rows 3 and 9), and its remoteness from any conventionalised formulation of confession or regret on Mel’s part (“I’m sorry for what I/we put you through, and what that put your mum through”), not to mention the fact that although he is sad that Donna’s mum suffered, he has also co-opted her into a joint “offence” against the children. Rather than explicitly accept the apology/give absolution for the confession, Donna deploys positive politeness (attend to H’s interests; display solidarity) by denying the necessity for such a gesture in relation to her own stake in that confession as an injured party. She administers this denial with detail that makes it specific and thus potentially more convincing: “I remember getting a um a beautiful doll (.) that somebody had sent me (1.0) um in support of me dad which is absolutely fantastic”. (On the use of the third-person reference to Mel here, see section 6.4 below). If Mel is confessing an offence against Donna’s mum, a transgression beyond the daughter’s authority to ‘forgive’, relationally speaking: it is sensible on the daughter’s part to take an approach which leaves her and her father in accord on the reality of the mother’s suffering. Whatever the detailed interpretation, my own being proxy for one credible possibility, the sequence as it plays out strongly services the brand’s “intimacy” requirements.

### 6.5 The broadcasters: minimising conflict through editing choices.

This section requires reference to how the broadcast/podcast cut and re-ordered elements from the original BL recording. The original can be accessed on the British Library Sounds website, in the Oral History section, classified under Fathers and Daughters/BBC Radio Leicester/History. Unfortunately, no transcription is available. The table at the start of Section 6 (fourth column) indicates where in that recording the broadcast segments have been derived from.

To create a broadcast version which lasts about 2 and a half minutes (not including Fi Glover’s introduction), the editor has homed in on a sequence starting at about 30 minutes into the original recording (British Library Sounds 2013) which lasts for 2 minutes and 40 seconds. From this sequence he or she has eliminated a few utterances, leaving about 2 minutes’ worth of running time (rows 3 to 17). This is the material labelled “key sequence” in the table. There are additions before and after the key sequence. Before the sequence is a clip featuring Mel which provides context (row 2). After the sequence we get, firstly, another clip featuring Mel, providing, as I hear it, an element of pathos (rows 18-19). Mel acknowledges to his daughter the pain that he has felt. Donna quietly honours the emotion. We can regard this as equivalent to an Evaluation in the narrative analysis framework of Labov and Waletzky (1967) and lastly, a co-constructed clip which provides a coda, reflecting philosophically on the experience of the strike with the benefit of hindsight (rows 20-21). In terms of the original running order, the context clip and the key sequence are in the right order, although the former occurred about 10 minutes into the original recording, much earlier than the key sequence. The pathos clip and the coda occur out of order with respect to the key sequence and to one another. Both occur between the context and the key sequence in the original but are edited to follow the key sequence in the broadcast. The pathos clip occurs 20 minutes into the original recording, and the coda occurs 15 minutes into that recording.

One of the consequences of the editing is to remove most of the indicators that the interaction was an interview rather than a conversation. There are many characteristics of the data in its original form which align it with research interview genres (Cameron 2001: 146-147; Briggs 1986; Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008: 161-181). For example, one participant, Donna, positions herself as information-seeking, which then positions the other, Mel, as information-giving (a positioning which he does not resist); that as a result the information-seeking participant gets very much less floor-time than the other and she performs mainly questions and tokens of sympathetic circularity, whilst the other produces statements of various kinds.

EXTRACT 1

DONNA: OK dad let’s start the conversation with you've been in Loughborough all your life so tell me what it’s like growing up in Loughborough as a lad

EXTRACT 2

DONNA: so how old were you when you left school

EXTRACT 3

DONNA: how old were you when you went to be a miner

EXTRACT 4

MEL we got a rent and rate rebate 'cause the wages were that poor.

DONNA really

The sequencing of Donna’s questions indicate that she has a predetermined, chronological, agenda for how the interaction should progress – from ‘early life and work’ to ‘strike’, to ‘from the strike to the present day’. Mel explicitly recognises the event as an interview:

EXTRACT 5. [edited by author]

MEL: we’re at our house and my daughter’s going to interview me (from the BL recording). (British Library Sounds, 2013)

 Not only does Donna behave like an interviewer in the original recording, she also on one occasion can be heard to exhibit discursive traits of a broadcast talk interviewer. She demonstrates awareness of the wider audience as an addressee/ratified participant, when she temporarily abandons direct address to her father, and talks about him in the third person in Row 10 of the broadcast version: “I remember getting a um a beautiful doll (.) that somebody had sent me (1.0) um in support of me dad which is absolutely fantastic”.

The broadcast version is much less interview-like than the original, as the table in at the start of section 6 has shown. In the shorter version (column 3 in the table) Donna’s voice and Mel’s are represented in almost equal proportions. (218 words for Donna, 228 words for Mel). The broadcast (after Glover’s introduction) begins with Mel’s voice, not Donna’s. None of Donna’s many questions appear in the broadcast, though we do hear her prompt her father: “Go on dad, say what you were going to say”, as part of the key sequence. In its edited context, this prompt comes across as her persuading him to overcome emotion which has him tongue-tied. In its original context it can also be taken that way, but it can alternatively be heard as a prompt to say, on the taped record, something that they had discussed beforehand in preparation for the interview, but unsure in real time how it links to what they have immediately previously been talking about. Rows 11-18 in the broadcast version are especially conversation-like because of the way that the two speakers overlap one another and jointly produce discourse of amazed pleasure around the gift of the damaged turkeys. This has been taken without change from the original.

The conflicts of 1984 are present in parts of Mel’s discourse, but Donna does not pick these up, and the editor excludes them. For example, the words displayed in row 2 of the table comes right at the end of a long monologue sequence: immediately preceding this line is a statement that evokes the conflict between the mining communities of different areas on the question of crossing picket lines. This conflict is not relevant to the broadcast’s focus on family solidarity:

EXTRACT 6. [edited by author] the thing about miners we always believe you don’t cross a miners picket line (0.5) no miner will cross a miners picket line (.) till you come to Nottinghamshire Leicestershire and South Derbyshire well I wouldn’t cross a picket line (0.5) and (1.0) you know that there were thirty of us come out on strike that’s (.) thirty men which involves thirty families with the children the wives and everything (1.0, audible inhalation) and we relied heavily on us wives support (3.0, including audible exhalation). (British Library Sounds, 2013).

Mel evokes the industrial solidarity of the mine workers: “no miner will cross a miners picket line” and affiliates himself with this community: “we always believe you don’t cross a miners picket line”. The miners of his own region violated that principle, “till you come to Nottinghamshire Leicestershire and South Derbyshire” but he himself did not “I wouldn’t cross a picket line”. “You know that”, addressed to Donna, evokes her prior knowledge of the circumstances and possibly makes claims on her loyalty to his side of the conflict.

## 7. Discussion

In fostering intimacy, TLP is playing to the strengths of radio as a medium:

One of the most interesting things about radio is that, although produced for a remote mass overhearing audience, the language is oriented towards creating a sense of intimacy between the presenter and the listener. The disembodied remote talk, promiscuously broadcast to anyone with a radio, attempts to generate both the sense that the listener is being addressed directly by the presenter and also that the listener is part of a listening community. (Fitzgerald 2006: 348)

Within the arena of public service radio broadcasting, if much less in the commercial and televisual environment, caring discourse is valued enough to sustain programming of the type analysed in this paper. The appeal of conflict as a source of drama and spectacle, driving ratings, is not the only rationale for format development. TLP may appeal to a niche audience (no listening figures are publicly available), but there are other more popular programmes in British broadcasting which also favour a good natured ethos. The Weakest Link (BBC 2000-2012) was a quiz show which would fall into the ‘belligerent’ category (Culpeper 2005, Bayraktaroglu and Sifianou 2012). Its teatime slot on BBC One (the UK’s most mainstream TV channel) is now filled by Pointless, (BBC 2009-present) also a quiz show but with an altogether more amiable approach and strong audience figures (3.6 m. on average: Hogan 2013).

Every interaction, in this or any context, can be regarded as having the potential for “conflict”, or something like it (dispute, argument, face-threat, etc). If listeners do not hear overt conflict between participants in TLP broadcasts/podcasts, it is because of the work that has been done to ensure that result. The solidarity (Donna reassuring her father that she did not experience privation during the strike) is manifest, but an underlying basis for possible friction (Mel put his principles and longer-term goals before his children’s immediate material needs) is there as well, even after the editing of the BL recording has removed other themes with conflict potential. The brand slogan of the series is “It’s surprising what you hear when you listen”. It has been a theoretical postulate of media reception research since the publication of Hall (1973) that audiences are not homogenous and do not hear (‘decode’) in uniform ways. In this article, some threads of possible discord have been identified through close analytic attention to relational work and editing. They are threads which are amongst the affordances of the recording for TLP audience members according to their own particular experiences, values and understandings.

One aspect of the discourse I have been keen to draw attention to, exploiting for research purposes the availability of alternate versions of the ‘same’ material, is the effect of broadcast editing in converting ‘interview’ to ‘conversation’, in the particular case of Mel and Donna. Yet it would be a mistake to regard either of these genres as intrinsically more conflictual than the other. Interviews can exhibit tension and conflict, or interpersonal collaboration, according to context, just as conversations can. Nor is it the case that TLP broadcasts always involve this kind of generic conversion, and it is certainly possible to show from the LP corpus examples where ‘caring’ effects are not dependent on such conversion.

A broadcast involving mother and teenage son offers such an example. Nicola and her 13-year-old son Jordan participate as conversational equals in an hour-long British Library recording. Their more conversational approach, with less information-seeking and more direct probing of beliefs and feelings than in the case of Mel and Donna involves moments of criticism, disagreements and interruptions of one by the other. The extent and tone of such ‘confrontation’ falls well short of belligerence, is often accompanied by laughter and is not prolonged through many turns. Nicola and Jordan’s conversation also involves the exploration of a difficult topic – Jordan’s plan to make a career in the armed forces. This is the topic selected by the BBC for its Listening Project broadcast. Listeners hear Nicola admitting her fears, (threatening her own face) and expressing reservations about Jordan’s suitability for the realities of military life (threatening his). Yet she also undertakes positive relational work – she offers her support if he sticks to his plan despite her warnings and compliments his bravery. What can be heard as a sensitive attempt by her to counter his naivety in fact allows him to resist her discouragement with a response predicated on his superior knowledge of the military world.

## 8. Conclusion and further research.

It was as long ago as 1991 that statements about the essential sociability of broadcast talk began to appear (Scannell 1991). Work on confrontational talk dating from the mid-1990s did not seriously challenge this proposition. However, the so-called “belligerent turn” in broadcasting (Higgins and Smith 2016) has required researchers to reflect on the relationship between sociability and belligerence, the principal argument being that belligerence is always directed at participants, never at the overhearing audience, and a sociable relationship with them (us) remains in place. The research presented in this article shows that the belligerent turn also has limits and has not yet wholly displaced more supportive forms of broadcast talk. It has also shown that supportive talk, like belligerent talk, is an effect of production practices, and these practices implicate broadcasters behind the scenes, as well as performing speakers. The availability of two public data sets, the BL archive and the BBC archive, should facilitate further research exploring the contribution of broadcasters as editors to the production of broadcast talk. This is usually difficult to do without special access.

On the conceptual side, matters requiring further thought and analysis concern the relationship between ‘talk’ (as in talkback radio) and ‘chat’ (as in conversational exchanges between hosts, or hosts and guests, on TV and on radio). Ames (2017) has begun to explore this relationship, but further consideration is necessary in the light of my findings, since TLP recordings fit into neither of these categories. TLP-talk is typically not confrontational enough for ‘talk’ in this narrow sense, and it is too strongly rooted in public participation (and not characteristically witty enough) for ‘chat’. Norm-transgression is a feature of chat, according to both Tolson (1991) and Ames (2017). This may be worth exploring in relation to belligerence. The issue here is whether participants displaying belligerence are transgressing broadcast discourse norms that still favour interpersonal collaboration, or are in fact conforming to the norms of genres which now require this form of display. Judgement here may be in the ear of the beholder and what their prior experience has led them to expect.

## Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise stated, references to particular conversations will refer to versions accessible via the Listen tab on the TLP website, where recordings are organised by BBC local radio station and by theme. All the examples referred to in this paper were online in June 2018. I have indicated as appropriate where they can be found within this navigational system. Home page is www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01cqx3b

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