

Broadcast manifesto – 1931

Comment

We first became aware of the broadcast manifesto in 1999. From the start, we found it an intriguing document and became somewhat obsessed both with its history and with its content. During the year 2000 our time was spent almost exclusively researching the document. Although credited to four broadcasters, (Dr Fitzgerald, Dzaniger, Vallee, Cantor) we discovered that the bulk of the work was actually done by Fitzgerald and it was him that remained the driving force throughout his life. Since 1931 the manifesto appears to have disappeared and been rediscovered many times. In every decade up to the present we have found at least one show or broadcaster that "re-discovered" the manifesto and taken its ideas on, if not in full, then at least in part. Many have found themselves attracted to a specific principle (Chris Morris), others to the entire document (Lee Travis), and some have used it, with limited success, rather as a "what not to do" guide (Dee).

Off course, nearly seventy-five years have passed since the manifesto was first published and the world of radio broadcast has changed immeasurably. Many of the principles simply do not make sense in the modern world. Principle 3.7, for example (The broadcaster should be clean-shaven although the wearing of moustaches maybe permitted in those counties in which there is no consequent conflict with the local customs or law) seems ludicrous to us today. But it is important to remember that in 1931, issues regarding facial hair were of the utmost importance. The proviso allowing broadcasters to wear moustaches was, at the time, considered to be extremely risqué and many broadcasters took issue with this. Dzaniger even considered withdrawing his support of the manifesto on account of this principle and it was certainly became the start of the eventual falling out of him and Fitzgerald.

Many of the other principles that were equally surprising and challenging in 1931 have now become so commonplace that it is hard to imagine they could ever have been controversial or innovative. The principles encouraging audience interaction were thought to be extremely experimental and even dangerous. And it was only a year earlier that the very idea of a variety style show had been developed. Up until that time, a radio broadcast dealt solely with a single idea. The concept of a broadcast mixing together news, weather music and guests was revolutionary.

In the early days of radio there was much confusion about formatting and structure. The conventions of theme music, playout tracks and jingles were new ideas. Principle 1.4 (It should always be made clear to whom and to what the audience is listening. The disciplined broadcaster will employ the regular use of musical and spoken announcements) is the first recorded reference to what we now know of as the jingle. This, and many other broadcast conventions, were first properly clarified by Fitzgerald and his influence on modern day broadcasting is immeasurable and certainly underrated. During our year 2000 study we interviewed over 500 radio producers in Europe and the US. Of those, barely a third had heard of Fitzgerald and his manifesto and less than 30 could actually tell us a specific principle!

The Manifesto does not deal with the specific nature of content. It is concerned purely with the manner of presentation and ordering of that content. Early drafts of the manifesto reveal that there was some discrepancy and disagreement amongst the authors concerning this. Fitzgerald always wanted a pure framework for broadcast. Dzaniger, conversely, favoured a document that would specify and categorise content. In these terms he had less trust in the broadcaster's ability and creativity. Following Fitzgerald and Dzaniger's split in 1935, the latter attempted, to publish an earlier, more content driven version of the manifesto. Following legal action brought about by the Fitzgerald camp, Dzaniger was forced to step down. However, despite Fitzgerald's public resolve, it is now known that he in fact held extremely strong views concerning the specific nature of content. Ironically, just prior the court action, he was himself preparing a document for publication offering extremely specific advice regarding the appropriateness of specific forms of content. It is a matter of speculation as to whether in fact, the action he took against Dzaniger was, not one of principle, but rather because of a fear that Dzaniger was to pre-empt the forthcoming publication of his Document of Content. It is widely accepted that the fire that swept through Fitzgerald's offices the night before the Document was due to go to press, was the result of foul play. The fire, which destroyed all copies of the Document, proved to be a near fatal blow to Fitzgerald, and one from which he never fully recovered. All that is left is a few charred pages from his notebook outlining his (extremely strong) views on the importance of drama and history in broadcasting, and his distaste for idle frivolity.

As a result of our study, and by way of raising awareness of Fitzgerald, in 2003 we took on the challenge of producing a radio show that precisely adhered to the principles of the manifesto. We wanted to see whether it was possible to make a show that was both relevant and entertaining and which also connected to a contemporary audience. London's Resonance FM was just getting going at this time (a station with an almost blanket regard for the manifesto!), and they gratefully allowed us a 90 minute weekly slot in which we could conduct our experiment. This is what we attempted to do:

1. Produce a weekly magazine show that strictly adhered to the principles of the Broadcast Manifesto 1931.
2. Produce a weekly magazine show consisting only of features that were in keeping with the conventions of popular contemporary radio. (a manifesto requirement)
3. Produce a weekly magazine show that was in keeping with the artistic and broadcast policy of the radio station (a manifesto requirement)

Our show, "Big Ears" was broadcast on Monday evenings from October 25 2004 to August 29 2005 8.30pm to 10.00pm. Following a move in the resonance schedule to 5.00pm, we re-named the show, Big Ears drive time. The final show was broadcast on December 5th 2005.

We made Big Ears as a variety show in keeping with the style of show that might be heard on BBC's Radio Two. We adopted a contemporary chatty and informal style and included a wide range of features. These included:
Guests in the studio
Phone-in competitions

Broadcast of CDs and records of a variety of styles
Topical information
Regular music, word and educational features

This book and CD documents the range of features we included on the show. We have referenced the manifesto using the following convention: A feature relating significantly to, for example, principle 2.5iia, carries the reference (FZ 2.5iia). In those cases where two or more principles are particularly relevant we have reference each dividing them with a slash. Those principles that govern the entire broadcast have not been specifically credited on each item. In those cases where there was a significant danger of us breaking a principle, we have explained what mechanism we put in place in order that we ensured that we strictly adhered to the manifesto as a whole. In some cases we found that two or more principles seemed to contradict each other. In these cases we made an assessment of what we felt would have been most in keeping with the spirit of the manifesto. Often we found ourselves saying, "what would Fitzgerald have done?" This question generally solved any dilemma.

Afterthought

The manifesto helped us far more than it hindered. As with any strict set of rules, they can at first, appear to be restrictive, but with time they tend to become liberating. This was our experience. The early broadcasts were extremely difficult. We conducted every activity as though Fitzgerald was looking over us about to beat us for any slight deviation or liberty we may have taken. But with time, we relaxed as we found the path through the principles and the show developed a style that was at once, economical and logical, but whilst maintaining the chaotic quality that is characteristic of so much contemporary popular radio. With time, strange and wonderful things began to occur. The principles seemed to direct us into areas of creativity and invention that were both surprising and alarming to us. It was almost as if the principles, and Fitzgerald, were in control and we were merely a vessel through which the broadcast was realised. In retrospect, we look back at some of the things we broadcast and features we developed. Many we can hardly remember. Others do not seem like our work. We were supported in our endeavour by the Sonic Arts Network; an organisation devoted to the promotion of sonic art in all its various forms. Consequently we felt a commitment to play music and interview guests that were relevant to that organisation (Fitzgerald would have insisted upon this). In the early shows this was extremely difficult on account of our ignorance of this rather strange world. But with time, we became more familiar with the genres and the shows became stronger.

Of all the principles the one we found the hardest was Principle 3.6. Neither of us have ever been jacket, shirt and tie wearers and the discipline involved here tested us to the limit. It became almost a formality that we would remove our jackets once everyone else had left the studio. Whilst this is strictly speaking allowable, Fitzgerald would almost certainly have disapproved.