



Radio listeners online: a case study of *The Archers*

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Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the nature and social composition of online fan cultures around *The Archers*. We hope to show how listeners engage with the programme online both on BBC and independent sites, and how this activity adds to their enjoyment of the programme. We have used two main methods: a questionnaire survey and interviews with *Archers* fans recruited through the BBC Archers website and analysis of online discussions including the BBC's own Archers messageboards, the 'Archers Addicts' fan club messageboard and social networking sites. Clearly, the role of the BBC Archers site is a major focus. We are exploring a success story: *The Archers* has an audience of 4.77 million¹ after 50 years of broadcasting, and the programme's website attracts large numbers of listeners each day. However, the age profile of the audience (average age 56), like that of Radio 4 generally, might be a concern. Therefore, we have paid particular attention to the emergence of younger Archers fans online and to the cultures they are developing.

We are interested in exploring 'ordinary fandoms' as well as the more extravagant versions which have tended to dominate academic interests, following the arguments of Williamson (2005) and Gray et al that fan behaviour encompasses a broad spectrum, 'from regular, emotionally uninvolved audience members to petty producers' (Gray et al 2007: 8). We are defining our sample as 'fans' of the programme since they listen regularly and are keen enough to visit the website. We are taking into account the need to explore Archers fandom in a way that is useful to the BBC. Keri Davies, the web producer of the Archers site and a scriptwriter for the programme, expressed an interest in finding out about the 'silent majority' who visit the BBC site but do not post on the messageboards.² Keri Davies reads the boards constantly as their host, and summarises the discussions of the programme several times each week for the production team and writers. As a result, he arguably knows more than anyone else, and the programme-makers generally know a lot about the posters on the BBC Archers site. Keri Davies and the programme-makers are very aware of the danger of seeing the posters' views as representative of the audience more broadly, but it is likely that there will be some slippage, given that the feelings of the silent majority are by definition much less available to them. This research can

¹ RAJAR Wave 1, 2008.

provide an insight into the views of committed listeners and users of the website who do not post, since only a minority of the sample (33% of 126 respondents) cite the messageboards as one of their main uses of the BBC Archers website, and of these 36% (12% of the whole sample) say they do not post. Finally, the mapping of online discussions of *The Archers* and messageboard analysis provides some insights into online fan cultures around *The Archers* on sites other than the main BBC one, about which less is known by the production team.

Part One: Survey and Interview Responses

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Who are the online fans?

Our sample consists of people recruited mainly through the BBC Archers website, but also 10 people were recruited via the Addicts website and 7 through the Facebook 'Archers Appreciation' group. We conducted 18 telephone interviews³ and received 108 completed questionnaires (with open-ended questions regarding the programme, the websites and listeners' online engagement with *The Archers*). Our sample is 76% women, mainly white British (81%) and UK residents (78%). While the largest number of respondents was in the 50-59 age range (34%), a significant 28% were between 40 and 49, and therefore younger than the average listener age in the RAJAR survey of the Archers audience (56). Most of them own their houses/apartments (80%), live in cities (37%), villages (24%) or towns (18%), with either their family or partner (36% and 37% respectively). It is interesting to mention at this point that 17% are British people living abroad, who only have the opportunity to listen to the programme online. For them listening to *The Archers* is often a means of keeping in touch with British cultural life, and it is significant that almost 20% (a further 2% live in Ireland) of our sample live abroad. The BBC Archers website is clearly crucial for

² Interview with Lyn Thomas, 26 February 2008.

³ 18 respondents were recruited for interviews: 13 through the BBC site, 2 through the Addicts site and 3 from the Facebook group. A further 3 respondents interviewed had participated in Thomas's earlier research on *Archers* fans: two of these do not post and one posts mainly on the Addicts board: they are occasionally quoted but as their interviews followed a different pattern, are not included in statistics.

this group. Our sample is very highly educated: 74% have been through higher education and 13% have a PhD. Finally, according to the National Occupational Standards Classification most of them exercise Professional Occupations and Associate Professional and Technical Occupations (33% and 32% respectively), followed by 14% in Administrative and Secretarial Occupations.

According to RAJAR statistics on the total Archers audience (this includes both the daily listeners and the Sunday Omnibus ones), the audience is predominantly female (58%), having an average age of 56, where 10% are between 15 and 34, 33% between 35 and 54 and 58% over 55. We recruited 18% more women than the broader audience and slightly younger age groups: 45% of our sample is under 50, as opposed to 43% under 55 in the RAJAR sample. This is an indicator that there are more women and a very slightly younger age range in the online 'fan' audience of the programme, though it should also be noted that women are more likely than men to express publicly an interest in soap opera, and therefore to participate in qualitative research such as this (Hargrave and Gatfield, 2002). The RAJAR statistics indicate that 73% of the Archers audience are ABC1 in terms of social class; we do not have the breakdown within the RAJAR figure, but it seems likely that at 65% in professional and associate professional occupations, our sample is even more weighted to social classes A and B. This, along with the very high educational levels can probably be attributed to a recruitment based on web use – given the social stratification of IT skills and computer ownership in the general population.

Clearly women are overrepresented in both the Archers general audience and our sample as the UK population (based on the 2001 census) has an almost even split on gender. In terms of age, 15.7% of the overall population of UK is aged over 65 which is very close to the 18% of our sample aged over 60. Thus, Archers fans of these generations are part of a generally ageing population, which the BBC could be said to be serving in terms of age and gender, through this provision. Finally, in terms of ethnicity our sampling was relatively representative of the overall UK population insofar as it is mainly white British. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that ethnic diversity in our sample consists mainly of non-British white groups (12% of total sample). Only 4% belong to Asian or mixed race ethnicities, and there are no respondents of African or African-Caribbean origin. Despite clear efforts to represent

the multicultural nature of British society, through storylines such as the vicar of Ambridge marrying a Hindu woman lawyer, the fan cultures around the programme remain white spaces. It is of course possible that the broader audience is more diverse in terms of 'race' and ethnicity.

Our conclusion is that the online 'fan' audience of the programme is predominantly white British women between 40 and 59, middle-class and highly educated. Furthermore, although these tendencies also characterise the broad *Archers* audience, they are more marked here, particularly in terms of gender and level of education, than in the broader audience who may listen more casually and may not go online in relation to the programme. There seem to be significant differences between the profile of fans of *The Archers* (and still more so our sample of online fans) and those of television soaps, with the predominance of women in the fan audience as the common point. Hargrave and Gatfield found that respondents they defined as 'fanatics' in terms of soap opera viewing were mainly women, tabloid readers, younger and of lower social class, while those dismissive of TV soaps were mainly men, in classes AB and readers of broadsheets (Hargrave and Gatfield, 2002). It seems that *The Archers* distinguishes itself from its TV equivalents by providing 'soap' for the educated middle classes. As previous research, and the comments of many of our interviewees indicate, *The Archers* is perceived as a high quality soap opera (Thomas 2002). This 'quality' attribution derives not only from the programme's production values, but also from the higher cultural status of Radio 4 and from the fact that the programme has some information values (and a history of association with information), and from the longevity of the programme generally: *The Archers* has become, for many, a national monument.

Online Fans' Responses to the Programme

As previous research on *The Archers* suggests (Thomas 2002), an extraordinary feature of *The Archers* is not only the programme's longevity, but also the fidelity of its audience over decades. Although interestingly the largest number of respondents (27%) started listening in the 1980s, over half (53%) started listening in the 50s, 60s or 70s. Given that 45% of our sample are under 50 (and therefore under the average age of the broader audience) this implies that many started listening as children. Many respondents commented on this:

'I cannot remember not listening to the Archers as my parents were also fans. I began tuning in deliberately myself when I was about 11 in 1992.' (F, 20-29, Project Development Officer, Q⁴)

'Alright. When I was in school we used to listen to Dick Barton. Dick Barton, special agent. Yes? No? Great fun. And it stopped and we had The Archers instead and I was deeply indignant about the whole thing but my parents liked it and I used to listen and I remember Grace Archer getting burned in the fire and that sort of thing, you know. So I really do go back to episode 1 and they were very boring to start with or I thought so. And it got more interesting as people started getting burned up in fires and things. And I stopped when I was at university largely, I didn't really listen very much though I did when I went home. For some years after that ... When did I get seriously interested in The Archers, that's a good question. It was some time ago. Twenty years, possibly more. More like thirty.' (F, 70-79, Retired Lecturer, I)

This history of early listening, followed by a break in young adulthood, and culminating in commitment to the programme in mature life shows the programme acting as a kind of marker in a life history, and providing a sense of continuity. The return in later years with the background of early listening gives the programme an added depth and resonance. Some respondents comment directly on how the programme is connected with memories of childhood and of home, so that the familiar voices (some actors also go back several decades) and theme tune have a comforting effect; the association of real family with the fictional families of Ambridge inspires both loyalty and nostalgia:

'Ever since I was a child. My mother was a great fan of the programme so it was always on at 7 o'clock in the evening. So it was just always there, it seeped into my radio listening at a very early age.'

⁴ 'Q' indicates that this is a quotation from a questionnaire, 'I' from an interview.

Of course as you grow up with the programme you get to know who the characters are. It was rather nice and reassuring. It was always on at the same time each day. It was always on in the kitchen at home so I tended to associate it with home cooking rather so it was rather pleasant oral wallpaper rather than the drama but when I grew up I started being interested in the characters a bit more.’ (M, 30-39. University Lecturer, I)

‘15 minutes of time to myself to immerse in the ‘lives’ of people I have come to know as well as my friends and family.’ (F, 40-49, Accountant, Q).

‘Fun, nostalgia, 13 minutes of escapism’ (F, 40-49, Art Teacher, Q)

‘News of farming & rural life, interested in the story. Have got to know the characters over the years’ (F, 40-49, Local Government Officer, Q)

The provision of a sense of rural life was commented on by several respondents, and is interesting given that 63% of the sample live in towns or cities. Even those who themselves live in the country can find this appealing and relevant:

I also like learning about current farming issues, especially since I live in a rural area – it gives me some background knowledge when talking to farmers! – thank you Graham Harvey!’(F, 40-49, Self Employed Classical Musician, Q)

For many, as for TV soaps, whether listened to live or online, the programme structures the day and provides a space for relaxation – ‘something to look forward to’ - as the respondent quoted below remarks. The programme’s entertainment value was commented on by many:

‘I don’t watch much TV, so a bit of a change from the other programmes on Radio 4. Gives me something to look forward to....some of the characters are just purely comical and crack me up, some make me want to slap them, whilst others deal with issues which are both interesting and relevant to everyday life.’(F, 30-39, PhD researcher, Q)

As in previous research, we found that these pleasures are relatively guilt-free because of the programme's brevity and a widespread belief in its superiority to the TV soaps and 'quality' soap status (Thomas 2002). Particular features contributing to this were the slower pace of *The Archers* compared to the TV soaps and the effort of imagination required to visualise radio characters and scenes:

'It is the only 'soap' that I follow. It is enjoyable to have good storylines with realistic time scales, some episodes where not much happens, just like real life, humour, great characters, and the chance to use my imagination thinking about what the characters look like, and where they live etc'. (F, 40-49, Self Employed Classical Musician, Q)

'It's very comforting and they cover the storylines very well and the characters are very believable. They have storylines that take a long time. They are not like soap operas; like Eastenders or Coronation Street. They take a long time. You get to know the characters very, very well. They are almost like friends; people that you know. Some things can be very funny some things can be very sad some things are like normal life as well, you can get quite a lot out of it, I think'. (F, 40-49, University Lecturer, I)

Responses to the BBC Archers Website

The majority of our respondents have been users of the BBC Archers website for a fairly long period; 45% have been using it for between one and five years and 37% started using it more than five years ago. The features of the website that seem to mainly attract people were the 'listen again' and the 'podcast' facilities (50% said they used these features):

'The 'listen again' to listen to something I've missed. And now that I know that it's there I don't worry about trying to listen to it at the particular time; it gives me the flexibility to listen when I want to listen.' (F, 40-49, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I)

'The availability of the podcast is a great new addition – can listen now on my PC, MP3 player, mobile phone, etc.' (M, 50-59, Database and Web Developer, Q)

The middle-class nature of the sample is clearly in play here, leading to an 'early adoption' approach to technology even in a sample which is mainly over 40. Having been offered these alternatives, listeners do not have to organise their lives according to the broadcasting schedules and can still catch up on the programme:

'I get to see my friends or talk to them on the phone at any time now, whereas before they knew not to call me when the Archers were on, especially on a Sunday morning before I retired. Now I catch up on the BBC site.' (F, 70-79, Retired Showroom Manager, Q)

It was also the 'listen again' that made many respondents visit the website in the first place, and they then started looking at other features:

'It wasn't until probably.. I think probably 2004 until I first remember doing it, because I started having more regular access to internet. And also I think I started to go to the 'listen again' feature and then I started to look at the messageboards and other features that are on the website. But now I access it quite regularly mainly for the 'listen again' stuff actually.' (F, 20-29, PhD Student, I)

Again, the fact that the majority of our sample are in professional occupations means that they do not always have the time to listen to the programme daily, so that features such as listen again and the synopsis are very important. The latter is particularly useful as a way of catching up quickly and of getting new perspectives on the programme:

'The thing I use the most is the synopsis of the daily episode because I can never listen in real time, so what I will do every morning as a ritual is check my emails and have a look at the synopsis cause I don't ever listen in real time on my computer. I will pick episodes according to what I like the sound of it from the synopsis or if I'm doing the ironing on a Sunday I'll listen to a whole week's worth

of episodes or the Omnibus edition.’ (F, 50-59, Librarian in an International School, I)

‘It gives me background and allows me to listen again if I miss anything. It isn’t the site, but I also receive emails which is handy for filling gaps, but which also gives me insights I haven’t got from the actual programmes. I mean if I have heard an episode and then read the email it may interpret something from the character’s point of view I hadn’t picked up from the programme!’ (F, 60-69, Legal Adviser, Q)

Being able to follow all storylines is very important to the loyal audience of the programme. Consequently, they also enjoy checking background information and things that had happened in the past, that they have either forgotten or didn’t know about in the first place as they happened before they started listening to the programme or in some cases even before they were born: *‘Catching up with the latest episodes and acquainting myself with the details of the programme, which I would have otherwise missed through not being old enough to have listened first hand to them’ (F, 40-49, Housewife, Q)*. Another feature that seemed to be quite popular was the weekly vote which one third of the total sample chose as an aspect of the site they used: *‘I mainly just use the synopsis and occasionally I will vote on the quiz of the week you know, what should characters do.’ (F, 40-49, Hospital Doctor, I)*

Interestingly there were not many critical comments on the website. A few people said they would like to have more archive clips or the option of listening to older Omnibus editions: *‘Sometimes it would be nice to be able to hear the weekly Omnibus of the previous week, you know so that there would be two weekly Omnibuses, but mostly it’s fine’ (F, 40-49, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I)*. The few suggestions for improvements to the site were by students or retired people, or people who work in IT. Seven people commented on the layout of the website arguing that it is off-putting. These comments were mainly by younger people, or those whose profession was web-related.

‘Overall design – I’m just looking at it now. It’s an old fashioned kind of design and it’s not very clear; it’s not well designed. I can’t give you an example now of

what would be a really well designed one but a lot of the BBC sites would be much slicker looking.’ (F, 40-44, Senior Manager in Software Agency, I)

Most people were happy with the BBC Archers website (including the mustard colour!) and could not think of anything that they would like to be different:

‘It’s just a really good website, it’s a good messageboard; I mean going back to the website, the articles that they put on, things like anaerobic digestion that was very interesting, the messageboard will always have useful information about anything, good comments about TA, enjoyable, fun writing from people and it’s just a great place to be and well done BBC for providing such an excellent service’ (M, under 19, student, I).

Responses to the BBC Messageboards

33% of our respondents use the messageboards, either just to read them (12%) or post and read (21%). When asked what they liked or disliked about the BBC Archers website, 7% commented favourably on the messageboards,⁵ emphasising the sense of community that participation in the messageboards offers. Talking to other listeners, mainly about storylines or characters, is a means of enhancing enjoyment of the programme for those who post on the messageboards:

‘It makes me quite deliberately listen to the programme and think about it before I come and read ... well, I would anyway because I can’t reply till after, you know. I listen to an episode and then I think they are probably going to say this and this and this and then I go and look at it and by God they have.’ (F, 70-79, Retired University Lecturer, I).

In some cases, the messageboard becomes a kind of alternative soap, whose characters and their conflicts and storylines are as interesting as the programme:

⁵ The highest percentage in response to this question was 17% (‘the website provides an easy environment’).

Well the spats about Ruth and David or Lizzie are sometimes amusing though reflections on Jack's storyline can be illuminating. I think the interest it creates is fascinating: how people hear the mix between fact and fiction and characters is weird.' (M, 40-49, Manager of Financial Services Company, Q)

'Discussion of recent episodes on DTA interests me most. I particularly enjoy analyses of the characters, their behaviour and relationships, especially regarding fundamental aspects of life such as birth, divorce and money. Also posters' personal stories supporting or not the storylines (F, 40-49, Computer Programmer and Analyst, Q).

This doubling of pleasure, or double dose soap even leads very occasionally to abandonment of the programme:

'I don't actually ever listen to the programme itself very much at all anymore, which is strange really, I tend to catch up online and then to read what people think of it. I think what I like about it is any kind of drama is supposed to make you think and have reactions to it. I like reading about other people's reactions it's almost as good, well it's better in some ways than listening to the soap opera itself. And there are identifiable characters on the messageboard who have a very witty take on the programme and I like reading their opinions and seeing whether they match mine or are different from mine. And the quality of the writing is really really good, on a lot of online messageboards there is rubbishy writing and people who cannot spell but on TA messageboard quite a lot of the commentary is very witty and well written and precise and I enjoy that, it is entertaining reading material.' (M, 30-39, University Lecturer, I)

It is clear that the quality of English and of the discussion on the boards are important to this 'lurker' and to many others, and that if *The Archers* is a 'quality soap', the BBC messageboards vehicle a correspondingly 'quality' fan culture where middle-class values and ethos dominate (see analysis of messageboards, below). The messageboards also offer to some the opportunity of displaying their knowledge about the programme or 'fan cultural capital' (Hills 2002). These comments were mainly

made by people who spend a lot of time on the website and have been listening to the programme for many years. These were also the people who called themselves ‘fans’ of the programme:

‘I love the ones with questions about various characters. I keep loads and loads of notes about TA and because I’ve been listening for so long I’ve got loads of stuff about TA. I also receive the Village Voice as an email attachment, Hedli Niklaus sends it to the members so I’ve got that on the computer. So I usually answer questions about when characters last appeared, how long a character has been in TA, so I love those sorts of threads.’ (F, 30-39, Student, I)

It is not surprising that the display of fan cultural capital in this context is often combined with cultural capital in the broader sense. The ‘Fantasy Archers’ board provides a space for display and performance of this kind: *‘A feeling of participation; again friendship, the opportunity to let off steam, opportunity to show off (posting parodies to Fantasy Archers)’ (M, 40-49, Civil Servant, Q)*. On the ‘Discuss The Archers’ board, high cultural references also abound; on several occasions in recent months, posters quoted Voltaire to justify everyone’s right to express their opinion. One of our interviewees commented humorously on this:

‘You may think it’s Voltaire but it’s not. And I keep saying this. And people keep quoting the ruddy thing and it wasn’t Voltaire. If you google it you get the whole history. This keeps coming up. People keep saying why shouldn’t we say what we feel like saying on the message board because Voltaire said ... And I think, “Oh God, not again!” However’ (F, Retired University lecturer, 70-79, I).

As this quotation and the analysis that follows below indicate, there is a high level of irony on the boards – in relation to the programme, and sometimes to the discussion itself. The display of cultural capital is embellished and rendered still more subtle and sophisticated by its ironic deployment.

Whilst for many, the high levels of cultural capital and the intellectual games played on the BBC boards are an attraction, inevitably, these aspects of the boards can seem off-putting to some, and 10% of the sample listed the messageboards as an

aspect of the site they disliked. Some people claimed that they used to use them or have tried to but find them very cliquey, and that they did not enjoy the people's comments on characters. This was attributed variously to the very fast threads or to the language used, or just to the fact that most of the regular posters seem to know each other and sometimes reply one to the other without taking into consideration other people's comments:

'..I'm afraid I do not like the message board. What a lot of rubbish people talk on there, and they are so critical of all the characters. Of course that is not a fault with the site, just the silly-ness of the people leaving messages. I cannot believe they are true Archers fans' (F, 60-69, Retired Supplier of Software for NHS, Q)

'I find it too difficult to navigate and to use and as I said the people on that site can be very insulting and very nasty at times and I don't particularly like that aspect of it. I know it's human nature but. And that's the main reason I don't use the other boards and I use only the Archers Addicts. One more is that it's just basically a nicer class of people to be honest on the AA site.' (F, 30-39, Former Office Worker now Full-Time Mother, I)

'There are often discussions about whether the message board is cliquey, and the guilty parties always deny that it is – as a non-posting lurker, I would say it is definitely cliquey in that some posters obviously know each other very well, and seem unaware that their messages are readable worldwide by many people to whom the posters' relationships are meaningless and boring.' (F, 40-49, Former Computer Programmer and Analyst now Full-Time Mother, Q)

This is in contrast to the participants in the other *Archers* online discussions in the sample who found those spaces very friendly:

'There's more to it than just TA, it's a very friendly sort of forum and there's quite a bit of personal chat that goes along as well, and I enjoy that. I am registered to the group, you know, the BBC messageboard and I do look at it occasionally but I just don't enjoy it so much. For one thing it is too fast moving and I don't have time to sit there for hours I just like the Facebook group that moves a bit slower,

more conducive to the time that I've got available, popping in and out 2 or 3 times a day and see what's been said and ask something; and you know you're not gonna miss a huge amount of things that have been said. I get more sort of personal interaction than on the other one and that's what I like on the Facebook group.' (F, 50-59, Retired Clerical Officer, I)

They (Archers Addicts) are a lot friendlier than the BBC board, they are always getting at one another over stupid things. (...) They are quite intellectual as well on there as well. I think a lot of them – I shouldn't say this – they are all university probably, lecturers or something. And they are on their computer and they write these long posts in-depth. I mean, we can do that if we want but I would think I was boring people, you know. And that's why you can't keep up with it. You can't ... I defy anyone to keep up with all the messages on there (F, 60-69, retired legal secretary, I).

It should, however, be borne in mind that forming factions and defining one's own group in opposition to others are strong features of most fan cultures (Johnson 2007). In this sense, inevitably, the various spaces occupied by Archers fans online develop their own cultures, and each space / group attempts to define itself as 'true' fandom. Slightly different intersections of age, gender and class may also be in play in each case, and will generate a particular habitus⁶ (Bourdieu 1984). Again, inevitably, feelings of unease will result from visiting an unfamiliar habitus and in this sense the fan cultures analysed here reflect and participate in the hierarchies and inequalities that characterise contemporary British society.

It would, however, be wrong to see the BBC boards as functioning solely as fora for intellectual debate and argument. The boards which are not focused on discussion of the programme ('The Village Hall' and 'The Bull') also seemed to be of great interest to many people. The sense of community discussed earlier creates a supportive environment which people can bring their problems to:

⁶ A term coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to denote the shared beliefs, attitudes and practices which both emanate from and enable us to adapt to our position in social hierarchy.

'No, dreadful things that have happened to people tends to be the Village Hall which I avoid. And the Village Hall is full of people having a good moan and I've read some of that from time to time and I think oh no, I am not going to moan on a message board. I mean, for heaven's sake. But you do ... It's made ... It is presumably very helpful to people from time to time. Or some people.' (F, 70-79, Retired University Lecturer, I)

This comment displays an interesting and rather English ambivalence about self revelation online, which is no doubt shared by many, who will avoid the 'Village Hall' board as a result. However, even those who would not dream of talking about themselves and their problems in this way are deriving social support and connections from the BBC boards, and for some, they can become a lifeline. This can apply to people in busy jobs with apparently full lives, but also, and importantly, to those who are wholly or partially housebound, because of a disability or caring responsibility.

The social benefits of the boards and friendships made are augmented for some by the regular and well attended meets organised through the BBC boards, but also occasionally by Archers Addicts, and recently by the Facebook Archers Appreciation group. Whilst not many of our interviewees had taken part in off line activities regarding *The Archers* such as fan club events and performances, several commented positively on 'meets' organised through the BBC messageboards:

'The meets you mean, that sort of thing? Yes I've been to a few meets now. I went to my first one when I was 16 I think and yes I really enjoyed it that was great, really good fun. And my parents were a bit concerned, you know meeting people off the internet, you hear all these horror stories but it's been great, I've really made a lot of good friends through the meets people from the messageboard.' (M, under 19, Student, I)

'Not yet, not yet, no. I am hoping to do so not this Saturday but next Saturday when they have a vast meeting at the Tate, something like 80 people have signed up for it, including Keri Davies. Yeah, that's what I thought. Oh dear! But I haven't signed up for it. I am just going to go along. I think. If I can, I am not sure.' (F, 70-79, Retired University Lecturer, I)

As we write, the Facebook group is on the point of meeting in London (19.07.08), and several of the other fan sites also create a 'RL' social dimension. The activities organised by the official 'Archers Addicts' fan club have declined in recent years, perhaps in part because they have been replaced by this thriving culture of 'meets', particularly those organised all over the UK through the BBC Archers boards. Whilst Keri Davies sometimes attends these meets (and is very welcome there), and they clearly would not be possible without the BBC boards, we can conclude that online Archers fans are creating their own autonomous social spaces, and that they are flourishing.

Part Two - Archers fan cultures online

Lyn Thomas

The first stage of the research consisted of a mapping exercise in relation both to Archers fan sites and discussion of *The Archers* on social networking sites. We identified the following fan sites in addition to the messageboards of the BBC Archers site and of the official 'Archers Addicts' fan club site:

- umra⁷;
- lowfield⁸ (where a small group write programme summaries);
- Mustardland⁹;
- Archers Anarchists¹⁰;
- Saddicts¹¹.

On the Mustardland site, which mirrors the BBC site, and was created in 2005 because of a change of format on the latter, the founder of the site was the main poster, joined only by 5-6 other posters; the site lists 20 registered members. The 'umra' google group, which originates from an early Archers usenet group, has about 100 regular posters, its own set of abbreviations and nicknames, and social events. The threads are lively, but roughly 80% are concerned with issues other than discussion of *The Archers*. Threads on the 'Saddicts' site had 10-20 posters, who clearly 'knew' each other well and were regulars on the site. The 'Archers Anarchists' site has members only email discussions rather than a board. On this site there are regular 'surveys' on 'anarchist' themes such as 'which Ambridge resident would you most like to slap?'. These attract large numbers of votes (200-300), but since it's

⁷ <http://groups.google.co.uk/group/uk.media.radio.archers/>.

⁸ <http://www.lowfield.co.uk/archers/>

⁹ <http://www.paranormal.org.uk/mustardland/index.php>

¹⁰ <http://www.archersanarchists.com/>

¹¹ <http://www.saddicts.com/>.

possible to vote every 30 minutes over a period of two months, there is no way of knowing how many people are participating.

The BBC Archers site has seven boards, with high levels of activity. The 'Discuss the Archers' Board has 35,401 threads dating back to October 2005, (on 14.07.08), and some of the threads contain over 1000 posts. In one hour, on the same date, there were 20 new posts. The messageboards of the official BBC fan club - Archers Addicts - proceed at a stately pace, but there is also sustained activity here: there are 8 boards (referred to as 'categories' on this site) including Archers Discussion, Plotlines, Events and Quotes, Poems, Puns. At any one time on any board, 25 threads are visible, dating back 2-6 months depending on the amount of activity, and with about 10-20 posts in each thread. On checking the site on 14.07.08, we observed that there had been 20 new posts across all categories in almost 4 days – as opposed to the 20 posts in one hour rate observed on the BBC board. Our conclusion from this mapping exercise is that the BBC site is the most active online, Archers fan venue, but that the programme has generated several smaller, less active groups, who zealously affirm their difference from other Archers sites / boards, and particularly from the BBC site.

In terms of social networking sites we found discussion of *The Archers* in two places: Mumsnet and Facebook. On Mumsnet ¹² we found discussion mainly under the 'Culture Vultures' and 'Telly addicts' headings. A thread under 'Telly addicts' – 'Admit it...someone else must listen to The Archers!!!' had 62 messages by 30 posters. We can conclude that on Mumsnet this is a minority interest, but the presence of *The Archers* on this site is nonetheless an instance of a fan culture around the programme in a broader cultural context than its own fan sites and the BBC Archers site. It is also indicative of the programme's popularity among women.

Discussion of *The Archers* on Facebook strongly reinforces the point that diverse fan cultures around *The Archers* exist online and are not confined to specific fan sites. The numbers involved here, and degree of involvement, are far more significant than Mumsnet. Facebook has an Archers Appreciation group with 5

¹² <http://www.mumsnet.com>

officers and over 2000 members¹³, having attracted a further 800 members since our first mapping of the sites in February 2008.¹⁴ Facebook also hosts three smaller, less active groups: 'I listen to the Archers and I love it!' which has 83 members, 'Petition To Make "The Archer's" Theme Tune The National Anthem Of England' whose 41 members only discuss this topic, and a spin off from the BBC site – a Facebook 'Mustardland' where group members are encouraged to use their BBC screen names. Here there are 57 members, 30 wall posts and one discussion thread, alongside an announcement for the BBC Archers messageboard 'Mustardland' meet at Tate Modern, London in January 2008. This Facebook sub-group clearly does not replace the BBC messageboards but allows participants in the latter to exchange profiles and photographs and thus connect in other ways. The Facebook site connects to the Mustardland theme (mustard is the background colour of the BBC site) by displaying photographs of Mustardland meet badges, packets of Colmans mustard and so on...

Having surveyed these sites, we selected four for detailed analysis on the grounds that they are the most active discussions of the programme and cover BBC and independent spaces as well as fan sites and social networking sites with Archers groups or threads: the main BBC 'Discuss The Archers' board, the Archers Addicts, Mumsnet and the Facebook Archers Appreciation group.

The BBC 'Discuss The Archers' Messageboard

The playful performance of identity is as strong a feature of the BBC DTA messageboard as of other internet based cultures and fan cultures. Whereas on social networking sites most posters use their real names and many display a photograph of themselves, the DTA messageboard operates on the basis of invented 'screen names', so that posters can create a 'persona' on the boards from the outset, revealing as much or as little of their real identities as they choose. As one poster comments: 'It's quite fascinating actually, the tiny glimpses people give you of themselves; it's like walking down a street with some of the curtains and blinds half open, tantalising glimpses of

¹³ Circa 1200 in February 2008, 1500 in July and 2000 by February 2009. Membership of the group does not necessarily imply active participation in discussions, but is clearly a measure of interest in *The Archers*. Some members may of course lurk, rather than post.

¹⁴ <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2215391357>

book-cases, agas, shaggy dogs and walls of paintings’ (Post 82, F., 9.08.07, Captain, Adam’s Angels thread). Some screen names refer to the programme, as is the case here – ‘Captain’ was the name of a long lamented dog belonging to one of the characters, Jack Woolley. Screen names of this kind often refer to Ambridge pets or to silent, minor or even dead (as in ‘Grace’s Ghost’!) characters, or have some rural connotation, whilst some posters choose names which refer to other aspects of their cultural capital, or to some aspect of their identity, whether ‘real’ or imagined: ‘I’m named after my old teddy bear, Growly, I’ve had him since birth’ (9.08.07, post 84, Adam’s Angels). Screen names can obscure gender and thus open up a further possible realm of performance and play: ‘People thought I was a man when I first started posting. So what! I thought it was quite humorous actually and took some time before I admitted I’m female. It’s like coming to the ball in fancy dress, or in a masque, and having a laugh! In and out of different rooms, different masks’ (9.08.07, post 80, Captain, Adam’s Angels).

Posters often address each other by screen name on the boards (and indeed at DTA meets this is the convention), reinforcing the ‘reality’ of the personae and creating a sense of intimacy and community. Familiar forms of the screen names emphasise the intimacy of posters’ relationships with each other: ‘Hi Draggers, I was hoping you’d be along some time to get into the interesting nitty gritty of this SL’ (Post 72, 6.08.08, Cath replying to Dragonfly, ‘In his 50s, Tony hesitates about taking on a mortgage’ thread). The use of screen names is particularly noticeable during discussions where posters disagree, and can become a way of aligning oneself with some posters and distinguishing oneself from others: ‘Hello Anna.¹⁵ I wanted to add my support to your sentiment as it is pretty lonely in here. They mostly talk amongst themselves and avowedly ignore dissenting posts’ (Post 211, 25.08.07, Captain, Adam’s Angels thread).

¹⁵ It should be noted that the full screen name referred to here is ‘anna kist’, so that the apparently ordinary ‘Anna’ of the shortened form here conceals a play on words and political reference in the full name.

The screen names also become the source of play, jokes and the display of cultural capital of various kinds, as in the following thread:

Which of you posting here is actually Caroline IRL? All your lines, like "We're not in a Thomas Hardy novel" are nicked from this MB. Who is it? COMe on out now, we won't bite! (5.08.08 Post 1, Redbookish)

'Snot me. I'm in a Shakespeare play' (5.08.08 Post 2, Lady Macbeth [officially old but with pink hair])

'Sorry, I'm Marge Simpson' (5.08.08 Post 3, Laurie [no longer lurking]).

'Well it serpently isn't me. I am but a humble blow up airbed incapable of any acts of espionage' (5.08.08 Post 4, LiLo).

'Whereas I am a Witch of Pendle' (5.08.08 Post 5, jennet_device).

This thread then interweaves discussion of *The Archers* with references to *Little Women*, the playwright Christopher Fry, and Monty Python, among others. The thread flits from one cultural reference to another, demonstrating how this is a space where those with the ability to follow and participate in cultural games of this kind can thrive. In this way, the boards become a site for the expression of the posters' middle-class, highly educated habitus, just as the images used by the poster quoted above ('Captain', p. 28) to describe the glimpses of real identities which the board reveals were actually glimpses into middle-class or even upper middle-class homes, with their 'book-cases, agas, shaggy dogs and walls of paintings'. Interestingly, the agas and shaggy dogs seem to be borrowed from the fictional world of the programme, illustrating how, as Cornell Sandvoss and Matt Hills have pointed out, even when fans are apparently not talking about the text itself, its atmosphere and ethos are mirrored in their communications (Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2008 forthcoming).

As in previous research on Archers fans (Thomas 2002), these online fans manage the apparent contradiction between soap opera fandom and middle-classness not only, as above, by displaying knowledge of 'high' culture alongside their knowledge of *The Archers*, but also by the deployment of an ironic stance in relation to the programme. For these fans, it is possible to talk about fictional characters 'as if they were real' if a large dose of irony is administered at the same time, making it clear that the speaker is only 'playing'. Early in what had been opened up as a 'fan'

thread for one of the characters (Adam's Angels, following on from an earlier thread, 'Adorable Adam, Irresistable Ian & Family'), an ironic exchange of this type about one of the characters in the same family, Brian Aldridge, occurs:

'Yes Anna. As you and I know so well, Brine is the most caring, generous and selfless being ever to tread the hallowed Ambridge earth, a very king among men (...). Would there were a few more Brines in this world to lighten our darkness and supply us all with cottages, horses, cushy jobs and trips to the dark continent' (Post 5, 07.08.07, MsMumboJumbo).

Whereas the ironic fan culture I analysed earlier (Thomas 2002) was based in a friendship group, and therefore self-selecting, here on the messageboard the ironic mode of fandom meets, and can come into conflict with fandom of a more conventional kind – where fans want to express their admiration for the programme and / or indulge in the activity observed in much previous research on soap opera fandom – talking about the characters as if they were real, without the protection of irony (Buckingham 1987, Brown 1994). The 'ironic' posters complain about being ignored, whilst the 'fan' posters carry on chatting about the characters: 'But since Adam is an angel (to some, not all) then I don't have a problem with him comforting Brian or playing with Rory' (Post 80, 9.08.07, Growly), occasionally pausing to defend their position: 'I like the thread too Growly, and I never understand the people who come here and read it and then complain about it. We try to go somewhere we won't bug people and then we're accused of being cliquish. I think people just like to complain, but I'll celebrate instead' (Post 161, 17.08.07, DaisyViolet). This celebratory mode is maintained (the thread runs to 1727 posts) despite attempts to pour cyber cold water on it by the ironic faction: 'Bluddyhell, if the programme was not inane enough we get more of this cloying hokum (...) and get three simpering contributors all saying "ooohhh he is so lovely"' (Post 179, 20.08.07, Country Squire).

This quotation illustrates how in this context the ironic mode can become an 'anti-fan' position, in contrast with the fans analysed in my earlier work, whose irony towards the programme was always affectionate. The desire to be critical, and even, in some cases, to pour scorn, variously, on the programme, the actors, the characters,

and the scriptwriters is a feature of the BBC boards which is present on some of the other boards and sites analysed, though less sustained¹⁶. It is important, however, to note that what Derek Johnson has called ‘fan-tagonisms’ or clashes between factions are typical of the operation of fan cultures generally (Johnson 2007) and that the ‘anti-fan’ stance can be as indicative of passionate engagement as celebration (Gray 2003, Click 2007). The ‘anti-fan’ posture adopted by some here is perhaps also connected to the high levels of educational capital shared by the participants, for whom the ability to be critical is both a sign of this status and a deeply ingrained habit resulting from their education. The messageboard thus illustrates Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, where ‘taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ (Bourdieu 1984: 6). *The Archers* is a suitable field for this cultural work because of its own reputation for quality. Posters are affirming their cultural position and superiority by discussing *this* soap opera, still more so when they are being critical of it: ‘This is just the sort of junk rubbish you get on the likes of Eastenders. *The Archers* should be above catering to the lower intelligence level in this country (post 72, ‘A Heartbreaking, Satisfying Conclusion’ thread, 13.08.08, moonlight on the Am).

One might, furthermore, speculate as to whether the pleasures of taunting authority, through criticism of a programme which is seen as part of the establishment outweigh those of more celebratory forms of fandom for some posters. However, as we have seen, these tendencies are not shared by all posters, and the resulting conflicts fuel many of the threads, as well as attempts to distinguish other fan sites as ‘more friendly’ or ‘less vitriolic’. In a recent thread entitled ‘A Heartbreaking, Satisfying Conclusion’ 12 positive posts are interrupted by the following more critical intervention: ‘But it was so wretchedly written! OK, I see what the SWs were trying to do, but the poor actors were given a real handful of left-overs to cope with’ (post 13, 11.08.08, DracoM1). A poster then protests, implying that the intellectual combat might for once be relinquished in favour of emotional pleasures: ‘Oh, Draco, do lighten up a bit and let us have a good wallow for once’ (post 15, 11.08.08, jennet_device). A third poster then remarks on the reversion to the critical mode: ‘It was nice on this thread while all those of us who enjoyed the episode were chatting

¹⁶ With the exception of the Archers Anarchists, whose ‘surveys’ are always framed by an anti-fan discourse, such as focusing on the most loathed, rather than the most loved character.

about it - but alas, now the cynics have arrived. Oh well....they're entitled to their views, of course!' (post 29, 12.08.08, Mircalla Karnstein). Despite these complaints, in fact, those intent on enjoying the scene are not prevented from pursuing their discussions, and the two lines – of criticism and praise - continue in parallel, with the latter most numerous. It could be argued that the clash of different modes of fandom on the BBC boards (anti-fan, ironic and celebratory), along with the pleasure of mutual recognition of shared high cultural capitals and their playful deployment is what draws both posters and lurkers to the boards, and makes them flourish. It is also a particular feature of this online space, which because of its direct connection to the programme attracts a range of fans and fandoms, whereas other spaces are more homogeneous. This can also be seen as a way in which the BBC's online provision has changed the fan cultures: whereas previously fans would meet in like-minded groups, in this relatively public arena they are likely to encounter a range of views and performances of fandom.

The relationship with the BBC is complex in these contexts, and the liberal ethos I found, again, in some previous research on *Archers* fans (Thomas 2002, chapter 5) is expressed here through resistance to anything even remotely resembling censorship. At the same time, the posters are sometimes nervous about the boards being closed down, and speculate that the host Keri Davies is trying to warn them about the hidden intentions of some higher authority in the BBC. This does not prevent conflicts ensuing with the host (known, rather affectionately, as 'Mr Keri'¹⁷), when he intervenes to rein in the 'anti-fan' mode:

'This – and similar comments in this thread and elsewhere – is exactly the sort of rubbish passing for criticism that I have been talking about. It demeans the writer and this messageboard and I would like it to stop, please. Please base your comments on what actually happens in the programme'. (Post 31, 12.02.08, Keri Davies).

¹⁷ When I use 'Mr Keri' in this report, I do so in order to distinguish between Keri Davies and his online persona, which like those of the other posters, is constructed.

‘Right it’s now official. This posting from the host tells us in no uncertain terms that ML as we have known it is dead and buried’ (Post 33, 12.02.08, KT, Powerpoint Presentation thread).

The notion that the board is being censored inspires many posts in this 1134 post thread, and the discussion goes on for several weeks. Here, the posters become heroic defenders of freedom of speech, as well as rallying round the individual whose original post (asking whether one of the main characters, David Archer, would be intelligent enough to do a Powerpoint presentation), had caused ‘Mr Keri’s’ alarm. In this we can again see the construction of a community – which is to be defended against the intrusions of its host, the BBC. In reality, this negotiation of the space with the BBC in the form of ‘Mr Keri’ (who is well known and liked through his attendance at meets and presence on the boards) may add to the attractions of Mustardland, in that there is both a sense of connection with the BBC and the programme-makers, and the pleasure of performing autonomy and a form of cultural dissidence in the face of authority.

However, ‘Mr Keri’ does not operate as an authoritarian figure. After much speculation on the boards about a line in the synopsis where Emma smashes a jar over another character (Will’s) head, and the absence of any corresponding sound effect in the programme itself, he intervenes:

‘If you have read the synopsis for last Friday night's episode, you might have found the reference to Emma smashing a jar over Will's head somewhat at odds with what you heard on air.

While it would be tempting to say that it was a silent jar of silent jam made by silent Freda Fry, this is actually what happened:

The script originally called for the jar/head interface, but it was changed in studio to Emma dragging Will away from the choking Ed.

Unfortunately the change didn't find its way into the synopsis. We're getting it changed. Sorry for any confusion’ (Post 1, 4.08.08, Keri_Davies, ‘The Silent Jar’ thread).

Thus, despite the impression one might form that the board is dominated by posters who dislike the programme, and are in conflict with the BBC and its producers, in reality a class habitus shared by producers and fans, and a corresponding ethos of 'liberal' values and ironic humour ensure that communication thrives in this space. We can also, in this way, differentiate between what we have found on the Archers messageboards and Bethany Klein's report on the Radio 1 and 2 boards. The posters here benefit from a direct line to the production team via the boards' host, Keri Davies, and the personal relationship that he offers to them means that the feelings of frustration in terms of communication with the BBC and lack of engagement by the programme-makers which Klein reports on are not generally in play here. Whilst the posters may be critical of the programme, or even of Mr Keri's interventions on the boards, they clearly do feel a strong sense of connection with both. Furthermore, confusion about what the boards are for (communication with the BBC or with each other) is not a feature here, and one could argue that the two aspects co-exist successfully. The posters are strongly engaged with each other, and clearly derive great pleasure from their online community; in this sense, they are autonomous. At the same time, the fact that this is a BBC board and that Mr Keri occasionally intervenes provides a generally valued and respected framework and springboard for their creativity.

The 'Archers Addicts' Board

The 'Archers Addicts' are the programme's official BBC fan club, which was established in 1990 and is run by a member of the cast, Hedli Niklaus. After many years of organising fan conventions, Archers events and even cruises, the fan club went online in 1995. The Club still circulates a newsletter – 'The Village Voice' to members and occasionally organises events. Currently the fan club numbers 5000 members and a small and intimate group of about 20 'addicts' regularly discuss the programme on the Archers Addicts messageboard.

The messageboard posters clearly know each other well, and the tone is intimate, warm and friendly, with exchanges of personal information as well as discussion of the programme. The posters move between discussion of the characters in 'as if they were real' mode, references to their own personal experience and eulogies of the programme:

‘Great to see the Archers having a storyline showing how much of a strain growing up can be for teenager and parents. My heart went out to Ruth having to almost let her little girl go as she went out to meet the mystery boyfriend at the gate’ (...)
(post 1, 18.02.08, daisams, ‘Pip growing pains’ thread).

‘Mrs Thermal and I had three boys and worried enough about them. We didn’t have the pleasure of a daughter. So we missed all the dramas of boyfriends. We have two grand-daughters and will watch with interest. Very good episode I thought’ (post 2, 18.02.08, thermal).

The Addicts also make critical comments on storylines and characters, but in a more neutral tone than that adopted by some posters on the BBC board. In one instance, there is an interestingly spontaneous feminist response to Lillian Archer consoling herself for her troubles with her partner Matt by going shopping, with several female posters finding this implausible:

‘This doesn’t ring true to me either. I don’t believe that Lillian needs a new bag. Why? What on earth for? I’m sure she’s plenty of them. Do women still use bags? I’ve managed for years without one. Doesn’t she wear trousers like the rest of us?’
(Post 2, 18.02.08, Denny, ‘Lillian’s spending spree’ thread).

A male poster then interjects ‘Isn’t this supposed to be a woman’s answer to sadness to go on a spending spree?’, but two female posters take up Denny’s theme:

‘How very outdated to ‘get back’ by spending a man’s money. We must have an old-fashioned, unreconstructed SW on this one’. (Post 5, 19.02.08, Ella)

‘I must be a strange woman then because I’ve never understood the concept of “retail therapy”. If that’s what cheers them up though, fine – I just don’t understand why she was using Matt’s money. I have to admit I find it an outdated concept to “get back” at a man in this way, but then perhaps it says a lot about Lillian and Jenny’s idea of a relationship?’ (Post 6, 19.02.08, Brittany Addict).

The question of realism – which is ubiquitous in talk about media texts (Thomas 2002, Buckingham 1987) – is the main issue here, and in many other threads on this

board. The discussion of how realistic a character's response is allows the posters to reveal something of their own beliefs, in this case on the subject of gender. As in previous research on *The Archers* we find feminism associated with modernity, and considered to be almost a 'given' in the contemporary conjuncture. In previous research with fan club members female respondents commented on the strong women characters of the soap opera (Thomas 2002). It is interesting that these online fan club members, ten years later, find these women characters rather old-fashioned in their devotion to their 'behaving badly' male partners.

There is, also, an awareness of the constructed nature of the realism being discussed (in the reference to the scriptwriter, or SW), and language such as 'unreconstructed' and 'concept' indicates that on this board too, a middle-class, educated habitus is on display. However, here this is combined with a version of 'common-sense' knowledge of human relationships (seen in the quotations above from the Pip's growing pains thread) which relies less on educated cultural capital, and more on a feminine ethos shared mainly by female but also to some extent by male contributors. As a result, the expression of emotion involves less struggle here than on the BBC DTA board, and exchange of personal information is welcomed: 'My eldest lad has just told me I'm about to be a granddad for the first time. Boy or girl if I've anything to do with it we will have a poster here to carry on the good work. Now back to the snooker, beer and crisps' (plumber, 4.05.07). This post receives five congratulatory and humorous replies, to which 'plumber' then responds: 'thanks for the congrats chums'. The warmth of this interchange among posters who clearly know each other well is striking, and 'plumber' basks in it, while simultaneously reaffirming his masculinity through recourse to 'snooker, beer and crisps'. The Addicts board offers an unusually supportive space where posters are able both to praise and criticise the programme and to speculate on storylines and characters whilst offering each other high levels of affirmation: 'I love your idea Vicky. I think that would work beautifully for Lilian' (Denny, 12.01.08).

The 'Mumsnet' Archers Threads

As might be expected, since many of the posters are at home looking after small children or combining childcare with paid work, the Mumsnet threads about *The Archers* are particularly characterised by the programme's association with

domesticity, noted above and in previous research. Discussions of listening while cooking, doing other domestic chores or childcare are peppered with Mumsnet specific, mildly ironic references to the family context – DH (darling husband), DD (darling daughter) and DS (darling son):

‘I just got dragged in much to DH’s disgust because it was on radio at the time I would be cooking. And now I’m addicted and have the synopsis emailed to me when I can’t listen live’ (Othersideofthe channel, 29.08.07, CultureVultures: The Archers).

‘Oh dear..am 22, 23 in two weeks. The radio in the kitchen is the only thing that goes loud enough to hear over DSs shouts while he is eating. Very bad I know but I have to have background noise on if it’s just me and ds I go mad’ (Anoush, 31.05.07, ‘Admit it..someone else must listen to *The Archers*’ thread).

‘Hi Anoush I’m a fan too but wouldn’t say addicted! Certain storylines are better than others, I think, very moving at the mo with Siobhan etc...Find it very relaxing of a Sunday morning, doing the ironing and listening to the omnibus (my kids think it’s the pits but then I loathe Eastenders!)’ (happystory, 31.05.07, ‘Admit it..someone else must listen to *The Archers*’ thread)

However powerful the image of the radio in the kitchen may be for these and other Archers fans, it is often far from the reality of how people listen, and the Mumsnet posters are no exception, greeting new modes of availability of the programme with enthusiasm, and again emphasising how it is enmeshed in the domestic and everyday routine:

‘REALLY????? Archers as a podcast???? I am SO excited (...)’ (seeker, 12.10.07, ‘Culture Vultures: The Archers’ thread)

‘I had lost touch with The Archers for years because of general domestic chaos at Archers time. But now I will be able to follow it while out with dog. Glee’ (ThreadyKrueger, 12.10.07, ‘Culture Vultures: The Archers’ thread).

This enthusiasm over technical developments is accompanied by the pleasure of discovering other Archers fans online and of ‘coming out’ as a fan: ‘Also glee that people post about The Archers on mnet. I had toyed with the idea but lacked nerve because of fear of ridicule’. This comment and the title of the ‘Admit it’ thread quoted above are indicators of the continuing low status of soap opera fandom generally, and of the perhaps slightly ‘uncool’ image of *The Archers* for these young women. Like older Archers fans in other spaces, the Mumsnet posters employ self-directed irony to show that though they may be fans, they are not mindless fans. The term ‘sad’ is frequently used in this way: ‘Just reviving this thread to let everyone know that you can now PODCAST The Archers – how exciting is that?!? Or how sad am I for being excited (wink)’ (emsiewill, 12.10.07); ‘I was thrilled out of proportion when I read this on the BBC. Very sad woman’ (lilibet, 12.10.07, , CV: The Archers). This need to distance oneself from being a fan in any straightforward way may contribute to the creation of a thread on the most boring characters, which demonstrates that the critical aspect of Archers fandom is far from being confined to the BBC boards: ‘Pip is shaping up to be really annoying and dull – another eco-warrior’ (snice, 8.01.08). However, several characters receive more positive reviews, even in this thread: ‘I LOVE the racy Lilian’ (orangina, 08.01.08); ‘I lurve Brian (and Charles Collingwood’s not bad either)’ (WendyWeber, 09.01.08), and one poster undermines the ‘boring’ theme by emphasising the ‘comforting’ aspects of *The Archers*, already noted in this research: ‘Actually they are all dull but that’s what I like about it. It is quite soothing to hear ruth and david mithering on about badgers on a Sunday morning. I hate it when it gets all sensational’ (The GoatofBitterness, 08.01.08).

The main content of the threads, however, is speculation about dramatic storylines, such as Siobhàn’s death, Betty Tucker’s death or the rape of Kathy Perks. Interestingly the storylines highlighted all foreground women characters and the themes of sexuality, marriage and love. Like the Addicts’ board, a predominantly feminine culture is developed on Mumsnet, but a younger demographic (indicated by the use of more internet and texting features such as capital letters, exclamation and question marks, smileys and so on) and the fact that the participants here are all women lead to different concerns. A mirroring game with younger women characters who are also mothers is a feature specific to Mumsnet: ‘For years Siobhan’s storylines have mirrored my RL’ (yeahinminute, 31.05.07); ‘Oh dear yeahinminute, sorry to

hear that but well done for avoiding Brian. ds was born a week after emma had george but fortunately we don't have brotherly paternity issues' (fishie, 31.05.07). For Mumsnet posters, Archers fandom is one of many areas of discussion and is linked to the complex cultural negotiation of the demands made on modern mothers. Humour about the programme or one's own fandom is part of a generally ironic self-presentation, as exemplified by screen names such as: yeahinamminute, Elasticwoman, QueenofBleach, flyingmum, coffeecrazed Mama. Here, *The Archers* appears as a relaxing interlude and distraction from the pressures of domestic life.

The Facebook Archers Appreciation Group

This Facebook group, like Mumnsnet, is considerably younger than the BBC Messageboard and Archers Addicts posters. There are some older posters (some of whom also post a University affiliation), but a 20s / 30s atmosphere dominates. While the majority of regular posters are women, there is a substantial number of men; analysis of a sample of three threads suggested that the ratio is approximately 60% women to 40% men. A thread where posters imagine an 'Archers Appreciation Fancy Dress get together' was particularly revelatory in terms of age and class cultures and the playful performance of identity in the group. Two female posters debated the nuances of young women's fashion styles:

Melanie¹⁸: 'I would love to be Fallon. Push up bra, short skirt, tons of eyeliner and permanently plugged into my ipod. Pretty much like normal then' (F, 6.12.07, 3.14pm).

Roisìn: That's interesting cos I always imagine Fallon to be a girl-next-door and the type who wouldn't have the confidence to wear a push-up bra and mini skirt. She seems a bit meek, almost unaware of how attractive she is. I'll come as Emma and we can scrap – full on Jerry Springer style (F, 7.12.07, 3.13am).

Melanie: She'd add biker boots to the outfit, I think. Maybe not the push up bra, actually, maybe just a hoodie, with a short skirt and biker boots. The right side of cute and funky. We'll need an Ed to fight over!! What would Emma wear?

Elizabeth Duke? :) xxx (F, 7.12.07, 4.23am).

¹⁸ Posters' names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Roisìn: Gosh – Primark’s finest with a bit of H&M cos it’s a special occasion. Probably not that slutty but bright and loads of jewellery including huge hooped or heart shaped earring – I hate those! ...

(...)

I’ve decided Annie should be Lilian sans cigarette. She’s good looking, young at heart, bit of a wild streak and a glamorous style so us girlies will have to think again.

I really should have been a dictator (F, 7.12.07, 5.31am)

The youth of the protagonists – ‘us girlies’ - is clear from this exchange, and various other indications. They make a distinction between a style they might aspire too – ‘the right side of cute and funky’ and a working-class style which they describe as verging on ‘slutty’ and involving cheap clothes and jewellery. They associate the positive pole of these style distinctions and themselves with Fallon, a popular young female character (about whom we found no negative posts in all of the samples we looked at across the sites). Fallon combines ‘love interest’ through her (failed) relationship with Ed, with a burgeoning career as a singer. Her rival Emma is a single mother who works as a cleaner and in a café; in relation to Emma, on the contrary, there is a great deal of ridicule on and across the boards, beginning with her nickname here, Emmur. Although Roisìn volunteers to come to the ‘party’ as Emma, it is clear that both girls are attributing a negative female working-class identity (single mother, hooped earrings) to the character and distancing themselves from that. Whilst Fallon cannot be described as middle-class (her mother is an amateur country and western singer renowned for her *décolleté*), she is on an upward trajectory in class terms, in that she is pursuing her education and a career in music. She is more attractive to these two well educated young women on Facebook, who are applying seminar skills (‘That’s interesting cos ...’) to debate the nuances of style, and through this play, affirming their own class positions. The extent to which the younger characters in *The Archers* have succeeded in interesting these younger listeners (and this extract is in that sense typical of the discussions of this group) is a significant success for the programme. The online discussion intensifies the pleasure of these storylines and permits a playful but nonetheless socially constructed expression of class and gender identity.

Another significant feature here is the supportive and friendly nature of the exchange, indicated by the ‘xxx’ ending of Roisin’s second message, and her offer to be Emma, which seems in part motivated by a desire to ‘play with’ her friend Melanie – ‘we’ll need an Ed to fight over’. An older female poster is also in absentia included in the play, as the two younger women recognise her claim on one of the ‘cooler’ older women characters, Lilian, the wealthy wild child of the Archers family. In this way, the posters show this group to be an inclusive one in terms of age. A certain fascination with older versions of femininity is expressed in another post in this thread:

Sally: I would go as either Peggy or Jill in order to indulge my frumpy tweed aspirations. Old ladies are so much fun to dress up as. (...)

Jill – polyester trousers, a jolly patterned sweater with the sleeves rolled up, and a gilet worn over it. On my feet would be those comfy, wide, shoes made by Clarks many moons ago. My hair would be white (of course) and worn a bit shorter than Peggy’s, but still waved. I would probably wear a hair clip on one side to keep it out of my eyes. I would be wearing a home made badge that Ben made at school last year saying ‘world’s best gran’.

This post, like its predecessor, demonstrates an ability to make very precise cultural and social distinctions on the basis of clothes and appearance, and could be read as a contemporary, feminine and lay version of the reading of social hierarchies through taste in food, art and music that Bourdieu carried out in France in the 1960s (Bourdieu 1984). This poster’s very precise placing of Jill and Peggy in cultural and social terms is affectionate in tone, with just a hint of identification: ‘my frumpy tweed aspirations’. The post (and others we have analysed) suggests that the older characters are important and far from unsympathetic to these younger listeners.

The post also illustrates the quite extraordinary levels of detail in listeners’ visualisations of characters, and how messageboards provide a space in which these visualisations can be developed, shared and compared. In this sense, the messageboards add a new, shared dimension to the pleasures of the imagination which a radio programme, unlike visual media, can provide (see Thomas 2002). Comparing imagined versions of characters or scenes permits multiple interpretations,

in contrast to the threatening closure of photographs of actors (which in the case of *The Archers*, listeners frequently refuse to look at). In this way, the messageboard extends the openness and polysemy of radio, by providing a space where new meanings and stories can be generated by listeners, and where the imaginative work of listening can in some measure, be shared and captured:

'I like the characters and I can relate to them all. And I think because it's actually on radio you can use your imagination more and you can actually imagine what the characters look like. And it becomes a bit of a disappointment when you actually see the actors that play them because they are not how you imagine them from listening to their voices. But because it is on the radio you have to use your imagination. Not only to imagine what they look like, but they become like friends.'
(F, 30-39, full-time mother, former office worker, I)

Summary and Conclusions

The research confirmed that the BBC *Archers* website is used by large numbers of listeners and is very successful. The fact that over 200 people replied to our request for interviewees (posted on the 'backstage' section of the site) in just 2 days is a measure of commitment to the site and the programme. Our sample – who can be characterised as online fans of the programme – is predominantly female (76%), white British (81%) and aged 40-59 (62%). The level of education is very high indeed with 74% having been through Higher Education. These tendencies – particularly in terms of gender and education - are present in the broader *Archers* audience, but they are more marked among online listeners. *The Archers* is unique among British soap operas in attracting this demographic, and the website has clearly reinforced this effect – providing a space for keen listeners to keep up with the programme and exchange views with others. Catching up with the programme via Listen Again, podcasts or synopses is the most popular use of the site. The weekly vote is also popular, and for some, the website provides a visual accompaniment to the programme. Most respondents are happy with the website as it is, though a small group with strong web orientations thought it could be updated. A redesign and a new

'look' may attract more of the younger listeners, and cause them to linger longer on the site.

Only a third of our respondents said they used the BBC Archers messageboards, which nonetheless are the most active of all the *Archers* fan sites we mapped. The second most active board is the Facebook Archers Appreciation group, which is growing rapidly and has over 2000 members. New generations of listeners in their 20s and 30s, and some older listeners are discussing the programme on social networking sites such as Facebook and to a lesser extent Mumsnet. With the notable exception of the 'umra' group, most of the independent fan sites are now used by very small groups. The official fan club site, the 'Archers Addicts' has a faithful group of around 20 posters on its messageboards.

For some, the BBC messageboards are an important social network, and they can be a lifeline. They can also intensify the pleasures of the programme by providing a 'double dose soap' in the form of the messageboard 'characters' and their exchanges. There is some evidence of the BBC Archers website (including the messageboards) becoming a visual accompaniment to the radio broadcast. For some respondents, the 'anti-fan' and ironic fan postures adopted by some posters on the BBC boards are off-putting, and in these cases other spaces, such as the Archers Addicts and the Facebook Archers Appreciation group are sought out. However, the clash of different versions of fandom found on the BBC boards makes the discussion very lively, and stimulates participation. The presence of the BBC host 'Mr Keri' and the sense of connection with the programme and the producers that this provides make the posters feel at home and 'listened to'. This contrasts with Klein's findings in relation to the Radio 1 and 2 messageboards, where feelings of confusion and alienation were reported. Here passionate engagement, however critical, is the order of the day, and a marker and contributor to the programme's and the website's success.

The Archers has a unique relationship with its audience because of its longevity, and the fact that many have been listening since childhood. Words such as 'comforting', 'security', and 'domesticity' are associated with *The Archers*. One of the scriptwriters spoke of a bond with the audience, which consisted of not allowing

anything ‘too terrible’ to happen.¹⁹ This research suggests that this is an important aspect of the programme’s success and of the complicity between producers and listeners on which it is based. Both producers and listeners are mainly middle-class, white British, highly educated women, who range from middle-aged to younger age groups (20s and 30s). The culture of the programme and of many of the online spaces we analysed is one of femininity, which of course does not prevent a minority of men from participating. However, for the mainly female fans, narratives emphasising the capacity to repair relationships and the role of community in supporting vulnerable individuals are likely to be pleasurable.

These qualities of commitment to relational work are also found in some of the online spaces, alongside, particularly in the case of the BBC boards, a middle-class highly educated habitus which values critique. The ‘anti-fan’ and ironic fan postures adopted by some posters can lead to a strongly critical tone which those involved in the programme’s production may, quite understandably, find undermining at times. However, our research shows both that the messageboard posters are a minority, even among online fans, and that these kinds of engagements are typical of fan cultures more broadly, particularly in online spaces. We would recommend that these discussions, like the website as a whole, be seen as a successful adjunct to the programme – a broadening of its cultural wings and a sign of passionate investment in the programme by some listeners. They also indicate that *The Archers* is part of a changing context where new technologies are blurring the boundaries between cultural producers and consumers. Fan cultures, as the independent development of the Facebook site attests, have their own modalities and conventions, and cannot be predicted or indeed controlled.

¹⁹ Mary Cutler - interview with Lyn Thomas, 11 August, 2008.

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