

THE BREAKFAST CLUB

The breakfast show is arguably the biggest gig for a radio personality – but what do the BBC’s choices of host reveal about their approach to audience positioning? Jo Dunne explains.

Dotty uses social media to create a sense of community around her show

It may be surprising to some that despite the rise in popularity of podcasts and on-demand platforms, radio is still the medium of choice when it comes to our morning routine in the UK. In fact, 88% of the British population listen to the radio each week. The flagship breakfast show is so embedded in the cultural heritage that presenters become like friends; welcomed into our kitchens and cars each morning, helping us get ready to face the day ahead. For the BBC, the personality of the presenter becomes key in shaping the audience’s perception of each station as a whole, making it a prestigious and much-discussed appointment.

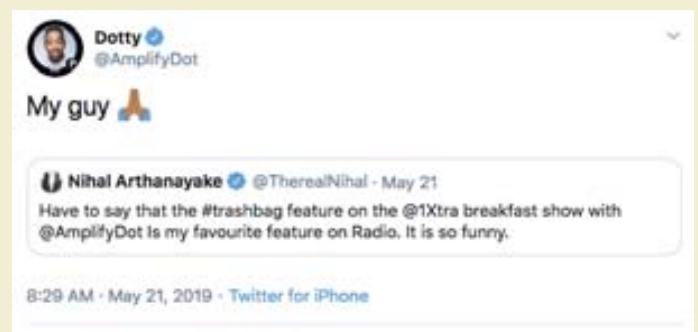
Why Personality Matters

Amplify Dot, Dotty or A.Dot (born Ashley Charles) is the youngest and most successful morning host in BBC 1Xtra’s history. Her brand of honest, ‘anti-presenter’ commentary has earned record-breaking listening figures for the station, perhaps reflecting her young audience’s postmodern thirst for authenticity. Alongside the music, Dotty discusses issues of gender, race, sexuality and whatever else comes up, for as she herself puts it ‘I represent a triple jeopardy intersection; a black, gay, woman’. Consequently, what other stations might shy away from becomes a crucial part of Dotty’s appeal. The concept of audiences wanting to see, or in this case hear, a version of themselves reflected back to them, is one she’s very familiar with

for me the responsibility is in hopefully being a great role model to those people that didn’t necessarily have one from my walk of life.

Dotty also regularly retweets listener feedback on her Twitter page (@AmplifyDot), engaging in a back-and-forth dialogue that adds to the sense of community that radio can provide for its audience.

Over at the UK’s biggest digital-only radio station, BBC 6Music, Lauren Laverne became the station’s first female presenter in the breakfast time-slot in January, replacing fan-favourite Shaun Keaveny, who moved to the afternoon show. Laverne’s public persona is one of a quirky indie icon who rejects traditional norms of femininity with her rock band, Kenickie, and her satirical take on today’s issues (Laverne co-presented Channel 4’s short-lived current affairs show *10 O’Clock Live* alongside a trio of male presenters including Charlie Brooker, from 2011 to 2013), offering an





Amplify Dot, the highly successful presenter of *The 1Xtra Breakfast Show with Dotty*

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alternative to the 'still-surprisingly-blokey world of early morning radio.' As the host of BBC Radio 4's *Late Night Woman's Hour*, Laverne has carved a niche for herself as the articulate, liberal voice of women of her generation. Laverne's regular features such as the 'People's Playlist' hint at a conceit that she is handing some of the power back to the listeners, understanding that they are tuning in for the music as much as, if not more than, her personality. In doing so she is surprisingly unique, which only adds to her apparent musical expertise and alternative persona – one that fits with the station's 'cutting edge' identity. Gauntlett's identity theory would suggest that in the appointment of presenters like Dotty and Laverne, the BBC are ushering in a new era of a more contemporary

Lauren Laverne, presenter of the breakfast show on BBC Radio 6 Music



roster of presenters, challenging attitudes towards diversity and inclusivity and thus fulfilling their public service remit more effectively by mirroring the evolving media landscape and the audience that engage with it.

Sign of the Times

Nothing lasts forever, and perhaps no one knows that better than the breakfast show DJ. Leaving aside the grueling early morning routine, these presenters are faced with the responsibility of knowing that theirs is the most listened to show of the day. Indeed, Ofcom research reveals that radio listening peaks between 7am and 9.30 am, before steadily falling for the rest of the day. In such a high scrutiny slot, if your show sucks, listeners (and bosses) won't be afraid to tell you so.

As the most popular radio station in the country, BBC Radio 2 is perhaps open to the most scrutiny. The late Sir Terry Wogan, who fronted the enduringly popular, and eponymous *Wake Up to Wogan* from 1993 to 2009, once commented that

**they'll use you as long as you're popular.
You shouldn't wait until it starts to wane,**

hinting at the BBC's ruthlessness when it comes to chasing the zeitgeist. Presenter George Lamb had first-hand experience of this in 2010, when listeners started an online petition calling for him to be sacked from his mid-morning slot on BBC 6Music. The petition and subsequent Facebook group stated that Lamb's 'laddish' sense of humour was against what they believed 6Music stood for.

Lamb quit the station later that year, replaced by the aforementioned Laverne, leading critics and audiences alike to speculate over whether it was a case of jump-before-you're-pushed.

Case studies such as this demonstrate the extent to which radio stations are able to cultivate an identity over time, honing their content and delivery style to match the tastes of their intended audience.

Audience Engagement in the Digital Age

As Clay Shirky's 'end of audience' theory would attest to, the advent of catch-up platforms such as the recently launched app, BBC Sounds, means that getting listeners to tune in live is a bigger challenge than ever. One approach that has proven successful is to double-down on the sense of real-time audience participation. On *The Radio 1 Breakfast Show*, Greg James has cultivated a breakfast club of listeners whose loyalty has proved to stand up against the trickiest of tests. Since he took over from Nick Grimshaw last year, James has seemingly delighted in getting

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**Greg James, presenter
of *The Radio 1
Breakfast Show***

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the listeners involved from the very beginning, stating during his first show in August 2018 that 'This show is all about you.' Perhaps echoing the sentiment of YouTubers who build their fanbase through openly acknowledging and involving their fans in their journey towards success.

Radio 1 took this to new heights in February this year as James was locked in an escape room with only his listeners to help him figure out the 6-digit code that would release him. This media stunt gripped the 'Regulars', who took no hesitation in rushing to his aid, tweeting and texting ideas that ranged from the banal to the absurd. A live video stream from the studio allowed the audience to watch as James tried to decipher the hidden codes and messages in an increasingly desperate quest for freedom.

After 31 hours, James eventually uncovered the correct code, after one super-sharp listener made a link between one of the clues and a previous call-in guest from several months prior. Hundreds of thousands of listeners reportedly participated in this event, discussing theories and trading trivia on social media in an attempt to crack the code. An undeniable success for the station, this event caused a furore on an unprecedented scale for a radio station, and suggested that radio as a medium may need to start thinking outside the box if it intends to maintain its relevance.

Will YouTube Kill the Radio Star?

Clearly, radio is still popular with audiences, for now at least. But there is potential for trouble on the horizon. Listening figures suggest that the number of listeners in the critical 15-24 age bracket have reduced by 40% since 2010, and continues to fall. As platforms such as YouTube offer an increasingly bespoke experience for the audience, the BBC finds itself in a quandary: to chase after Generation Z, or remain loyal to those who already listen? Time will tell whether BBC radio adapts or dies in this new fragmented landscape, but either way it will probably be worth listening to.

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Follow it up

A Dot profile: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/25/black-gay-woman-selective-outrage-hashtag-protest-social-media>

A Dot Interview: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-41900593>

RAJAR statistics about radio listenership: https://www.rajar.co.uk/docs/news/RAJAR_DataRelease_InfographicQ32019.pdf



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