

Audibility of Speech on Television

A Project

on behalf of

Voice of the Listener & Viewer
and
Voice of the Listener Trust
Registered Charity (no. 296297)

Project Directors:

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Audibility of Speech on Television - Project Summary

Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV), together with its registered charity The Voice of the Listener Trust, represent the citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting, and speak for listeners and viewers across the full range of broadcasting issues. We use our independent expertise to champion quality and diversity, respond to consultations, produce policy briefings, run conferences and conduct research.

This project is to identify examples of TV programmes whose:

- **foreground speech has become inaudible because of inappropriate sound effects such as background music,**
- **sound effects have become intrusive**

to the hard of hearing who will tend to be elderly of course – but also on occasion to those who have excellent hearing too.

Part of the problem is that many programme makers and, perhaps even more importantly, programme commissioners take it for granted that background music and sound effects are essential ingredients in almost any programme to achieve its audience potential. The research will be testing this assumption too.

It will involve deploying a large sample of the population **aged 65 & over who do not use the internet** to report on the programmes they see over a fixed period, reporting on the extent to which background music and sound effects of individual programmes create any difficulties in hearing foreground speech.

Three quarters of 65+s do not use the internet. They tend to be older and have poorer quality of hearing than their peers who do use the internet. For elderly people, in particular, deafness can impinge significantly on their quality of life – not least their ability to follow the television programmes they watch.

These results will be merged into a parallel identical exercise amongst a panel of **20,000 internet users aged 16 & over** which the BBC is generously making available to this project – at no charge. However this data source, by definition, will not cover people who do not use the internet. Hence the importance of this component to the enterprise.

An audio analysis of the combined data set will then be carried out of the programme instances where speech intelligibility is found to pose problems for some people:

- type of foreground speech
- type of background sound effects
- the relative volume between the two

across the principal Freeview channels for the elderly: BBC1, BBC2, BBC4, ITV1, Channel 4 and Five.

From this exercise will emerge new, practical and effective **Guidance for Sound Mixing** for programme makers across all broadcasters to deploy.

A total funding of £37,500 (+VAT*) is being sought, this being the competitive tender price of £34,500 (+VAT*) quoted by GfK NOP for the research, plus £1,000 to cover the expenses incurred by the project directors, principally their travel & stationery costs, and £2,000 towards VLV's administrative costs. The directors are not taking any professional fee. The project is simply one of pro bono publico.

The project directors are:

Dick Bates, a past Financial Controller at BBC TV and media advisor to the RNID
Peter Menneer, BBC head of audience research 1979–92, project technical director
David Walker, head of engineering resources at the BBC to 1993 - an audio specialist

Audibility of Speech on Television Project

A. Preamble: Sound Effects in TV Programmes – and Problems of Audibility

For TV producers sound effects such as background music are more often than not an intrinsic element of their programme, just as for an artist a picture is incomplete without its frame. However, there are picture frames that contribute to the beauty of a work of art, and there are picture frames that detract from the composition. So too for television, there is background music that successfully creates the required mood or atmosphere the producer is seeking – or does not.

However, that is the perspective of the professional. How about their audience? Are they responding to the enhancement of the programme in the way the producer had intended? Has it succeeded in “adding value”? If not, how has this happened? Has the music simply washed over the audience at one extreme? Or at the other, has it been too intrusive? Does it distract, and detract from the viewing experience?

Then there is the special case of the hard of hearing. For them, have the sound effects drowned the speech, creating all kinds of problems in comprehending the narrative?

It is well established within the television industry that background sound or music can and often does create problems for the deaf, who can have considerable difficulty in picking up speech against too dominant a background sound track. Their inability to pick up the narrative of the programme – whether this be a drama production, a documentary, natural history programme or whatever – inevitably leads to frustration.

In the words of the BBC’s internal Editorial Guidelines:

“There is no simple explanation of hearing loss. For some it is a decline in the ability to hear across all frequencies, and for others it may be in a particular frequency range.

It is this loss of hearing within a band of frequencies that makes certain passages of music or speech to appear more prominent or reduced depending on the listener. The result is that frequent changes in the volume control are often necessary to obtain a satisfactory balance.

Almost invariably, those suffering from a hearing loss will find it difficult to understand speech overlaid with music (or effects).

One in seven of the population are deaf or hard of hearing. More than 50% of the over 50s suffer from some degree of hearing loss”.

The problem is a practical one of judgement - temperance perhaps from the point of view of the deaf community itself. Judgement is not helped by the probability that the producer is younger and has far more acute hearing than many, if not most, of his or her audience. What is perfectly audible to the creator of the programme can be unintelligible to many viewers, particularly since the sound quality produced by receivers in the average home is generally much inferior to that of the equipment with which producers make their programmes.

The issues of speech comprehension are not just limited, however, to those whose hearing is less than perfect. People with ‘normal’ hearing can equally react negatively to, what they regard as, over-intrusive background music or other sound effects.

B. The Objectives

The objectives of this research are therefore to obtain empirical answers to a wide range of questions about the contribution (or otherwise) that background music makes to the viewing experience – across a wide range of types of TV programme:

- How many viewers encounter programmes in which they have problems in deciphering speech – and how often?
- What sorts of programmes are the principal offenders?
- Do reactions differ between sectors of the TV viewing public – principally in terms of age and socio-economic group?
- How poor does one's hearing have to be to suffer significantly in this way?
- What strategies do the deaf employ in the face of TV speech inaudibility?
- What are the contributions of background music to the viewing experience?
- Do perceptions of the contributions of background music vary by type of programme?
- Is the problem of intrusive background music an issue for the hard of hearing alone?

A large scale sample survey amongst the GB adult population will be conducted, where the respondents report in some detail on:

- A. The ease – or otherwise - with which they are able to hear speech on the TV programmes they choose to view.
- B. Their reaction to background music as contributing to, or detracting from, their enjoyment of the programme

It must, however, be recognised at the outset that Objective B will inevitably encounter a particular methodological problem. A programme may have background music that contributes to an individual's programme enjoyment, but the viewer may be *unaware of this*. Background music can be achieving the programme maker's objectives at the sub-conscious level for many of the audience. This practical research difficulty will for the most part be overcome in this research project by deliberately drawing the attention of respondents to the role and contribution of background music to their TV viewing experience.

Over and above obtaining the above definitive evidence of the contribution of sound effects to programme appreciation, a **second key objective** has been set for this research:

- To establish some **specific guidance for the Television production process** for incorporation in TV training courses: how to fine-tune background music to enhance the programme experience and not detract from the audibility of the spoken word – from the perspective of people with good hearing just as much as those who are hard of hearing.

This will be achieved by an acoustic analysis of viewers' reports on all programmes they see across a seven day period in terms of:

- Foreground subject
- Nature of background
- Relative volume between foreground and background
- Other factors which enhance or detract from the programme experience

C. The Practical Applications of the Findings

The plan is, therefore, that the “outputs” of the research will be specific examples of programmes across the schedules of the major terrestrial TV channels:

BBC1, 2, 4
ITV 1
C4
Five

- Both those programmes whose background music has without doubt added to the audience’s appreciation of the programme
- And others where without doubt the background music has presented problems - but of what kinds and for whom?

The intention is that these particular instances can be made available to all UK TV Companies as:

- “Practical dos and don’ts in the design of incidental music soundtracks”.

The Broadcasters will therefore be invited to provide recordings of all programmes transmitted across these channels across seven days of the week (to coincide with the diary week) between 12 noon and midnight. These will be deployed as audio illustrations of sound tracks that have successfully achieved their purpose, and of those that led to different types of problem and criticism from our research participants.

D. Design and Execution

Following competitive price tendering involving three research companies, GfK NOP have been invited to undertake this project:

- The main research imperative has been the requirement for a **really large sample size** to achieve the objectives of the enterprise:
 - To generate enough viewers of specific programmes, whose acoustic properties can be analysed, down to an audience size of (say) in excess of 1 million = 2%
 - Secondly, the research objectives require identification of the TV viewing difficulties faced by people with impaired hearing – a minority of the adult population: just under 20% (source MRC)
 - But, thirdly, those with poor hearing are predominantly older people: with 65+s accounting for about a quarter of the adult 16+ population.
- The starting point is the requirement to obtain a representative sample of the adult population of Great Britain - aged 16 & over.
- The BBC have generously offered the use of their 20,000 online panel called ‘Pulse’ for this investigation operated by for them by GfK NOP Media.
- We need, however, to remember that the incidence of poor quality of hearing of course rises with age:

	% with mild/moderate/ severe/profound hearing loss
16-59s	less than 10%
60 & over	approximately 50%

Source: MRC

-but that only one quarter of people aged 65 & over uses the internet:

% of the population
aged 65 & over

Use the internet	25%
Do not use the internet	75%

- It is therefore proposed that a supplementary sample of non-internet 65+s be included in the investigation, with their data being merged with the Pulse online panel data at the analysis stage.
- They will be personally recruited, in their own homes or sheltered accommodation, by GfK trained interviewers within 62/63 sampling points across England.
- Those who agree to take part will be briefed by the interviewer on the Diary to be kept over the following week about all the TV programmes they see on the principal Freeview channels. The Diary will be returned by post.
- The sample size for this supplementary investigation amongst people aged 65 and over who do not use the internet will be :

successfully recruited from face-to-face Omnibus survey 750	leading to reporting sample c.500
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Their data will be merged with the results from the GfK NOP Pulse internet reporting panel of about 6000 per day. Appropriate corrective weighting of the data will be carried out at this point, to obtain a correctly balanced sample by age of the adult population.

- All respondents will in effect keep a diary over a week, reporting programme speech audibility and their appreciation for - or problems with – the background music or other audio effects (if any) for every programme they view over the seven days.
- The information entered in the diary will identify individual programmes transmitted between 12 noon and midnight on:

BBC1/2/4
ITV 1
C4
Five

over the seven days of the diary week:

- Where hearing the speech narrative was to some viewers a challenge
- Where the background audio track contributed significantly to the achievement of programme appreciation – or detracted.

E. The Content of the Diary

The Diary will begin by asking questions about every programme that the diarist sees on BBC1, BBC2, BBC4, ITV1, C4 and Five over the seven days of the diary week:

1.1 Please rate each of the programmes you watched for at least 5 minutes with a mark out of 10, where 10 is the highest score.

The results are shown as a score with a range 0 – 100, and this is known as the Appreciation Index (AI)

1.2 How easy was it to hear what people were saying in this programme?

Very easy
Easy
Sometimes easy, sometimes difficult*
Difficult*
Very difficult*

1.3 IF to a degree "Difficult": What were your difficulties in hearing what people were saying in this programme?

This is an open-ended question for diarists to explain in their own words the problems they encountered. This will be crucial information for David Walker, the Project's Technical Director, and his Engineering colleagues in diagnosing the nature of the sound mixing problem posed by the programme in question.

1.4 To what extent did any background music in this programme add to or reduce its interest/enjoyment for you?

Added a lot
Added a little
Made no difference
Reduced a little
Reduced a lot
There was no background music

For which programmes do we find that a considerable number of their viewers are aware of the contribution of the background music to programme enjoyment? Are there any common features in programmes for which their background music has detracted from its enjoyment?

The Questionnaire will finish with some general questions about the contribution of TV background music to programme enjoyment or otherwise, and some classification questions about the diarists themselves and their quality of hearing:

2. Nowadays many TV programmes include some background music. Generally, to what extent do you usually find that background music adds to or reduces your enjoyment of TV programmes?

Adds a lot	Go to Q.3
Adds a little	Go to Q.3
Makes no difference	
Reduces a little	Go to Q.4
Reduces a lot	Go to Q.4

The purpose of this question is to obtain some broad indication of the incidence of the (conscious) contribution of background music to programme appreciation – both positive and negative.

3. Now thinking about different types of programmes, generally, to what extent do you usually find that background music adds to or reduces your enjoyment of...: (scale as Q.2)

- Current affairs & documentaries
- Drama - excluding soaps & movies
- Reality shows - like 'Big Brother'
- Lifestyle programmes - like cooking, gardening, DIY & make-over programmes, travel & motoring
- Arts programmes

This list is intended to contain the principal genres within which background music features.

4. IF “reduces a little/lot” AT Q.2: Is that usually because you find the music:

4.1 Too loud? Yes
No

4.2 Distracting and irritating? Yes
No

4.3 Unnecessary? Yes
No

4.4 It creates problems for you in hearing what people are saying?
Yes
No

5.1 Would you say that the quality of your hearing is:
Very good
Good
Fair
Poor
Very poor
Totally deaf

5.2 IF “Poor or Very poor”: Do you have a hearing aid?
Yes
No

6. How often, if at all, do you use subtitles:
Always (when they are available)
Usually
Sometimes
Very rarely
Never

7. How old is your main TV set:
Up to one year old
1-5 years old
6-10 years old
Older than this

This is intended as a simple way of identifying TV sets that probably are giving a poor sound quality - where any speech inaudibility could well be the fault of sound reproduction rather than any sound mixing issue.

8. Some people have problems from time to time in hearing what people are saying on TV, and others do not. In your case, how often would you say you have problems in hearing what people are saying on TV?

- Never
- Occasionally
- Often
- Always

The purpose of this question is to arrive at some overall estimates of the incidence of TV speech inaudibility – and crucially to cross-analyse the answers to this question against the ‘quality of hearing’ question. Is TV speech inaudibility effectively limited to the heard of hearing – and or does it extend beyond people who admit to a degree of deafness?

F. Taxonomic Analysis of Programme Material.

David Walker, who will lead the acoustic analysis, envisages that the outcome of this research will be examples of programmes which demonstrate the conditions when speech is masked by background music or ambient sound, or where the background results in particular enhancement to the programme. With more detailed analysis it may be possible to provide an indication of the interrelation of the elements which result in these effects.

Whether the programme experience is enhanced by background music, or speech obscured by background music or ambient sound, depends upon a complex psychoacoustic interaction of the audio components. Additionally, for viewers with hearing loss the masking of speech by other sounds will differ according to the type and severity of the hearing loss. In the analysis of programmes identified by the survey it will be necessary to take a holistic approach.

To provide structure to the analysis, he proposes that the programmes be categorised taking into account those factors expected to be relevant. There will be four main categories:

- Foreground subject
- Nature of background
- Relative volume between foreground and background
- Other factors which enhance or detract from the programme experience

with sub-divisions within each.

The object of the analysis will be to obtain a better understanding of the interaction between the audio components and allow for structured guidance for production staff to avoid problems and enhance the viewer experience.

Programme Classification:

1. Foreground subject

- Male speech
- Female speech
- Mixed male/female

These will be sub-divided by other speech characteristics:

- Rapidity of speech
- Accent/ dialect
- Diction
- Other

2. Nature of Background

- Music
 - Classical
 - Popular
 - Instrumental
 - Percussion
 - Strings
 - Orchestral
 - Vocal
 - Male
 - Female
- Ambient noise
 - Continuous
 - Car/traffic/aircraft
 - Human chatter ('crowd noise')
 - Other
 - Intermittent
 - Speech
 - Other

3. Relative volume between foreground and background

- Background quieter than foreground
 - Faded for speech
 - Not faded for speech
- Background at a similar level to foreground
- Background louder than foreground

4. Other factors which detract or enhance the programme experience.

David Walker has deployed an analytic procedure very similar to this in his work on behalf of the international Audiometer Evaluation Group (AMEG) and the UK's RAJAR. He developed and directed tests of the new candidate audiometer technologies for the measurement of Radio and TV audiences. The task there has been to establish whether the meter in question has, or has not, succeeded in identifying the correct station/channel: at varying volumes, and over and above the ambient sounds of passing traffic, human chatter etc.

It is planned that he will personally fine-tune and apply this analysis procedure to the principal programmes identified by this research – those with the highest incidence of programme enhancement/detraction. Should broadcasters require analysis of every instance of a programme cited as affected positively or negatively by its background music, he would offer his services to train and supervise broadcaster research staff from the sponsoring broadcasters to carry out and complete this analytic procedure across the test period of the five terrestrial channels from noon to midnight.

G. The Project Directors

Peter Menneer – Research Technical Director

Peter Menneer began his research career in 1960, initially at BMRB where he was appointed a Director in 1974 - followed by RSGB as Joint Managing Director from 1977 to 1979. He was head of broadcasting research at the BBC from 1979 to 1992. He is a member of VLV (The Voice of the Viewer & Listener).

In 1992 he set up his independent consultancy, Peter Menneer Research. He is the author of "Towards Global Guidelines for Television Audience Measurement" (GGTAM, 1999), and in recent years has acted as technical adviser for a wide range of national TV and Radio JICS (joint industry committees) across Europe. He was founder and coordinator of the worldwide Radiometer Evaluation Group.

Since 2004 in his local village in Somerset, he has acted as chairman of the management committee for a grade 11* listed medieval building: Church House, Crowcombe. The building has charitable status. The committee recently completed a major refurbishment of its facilities. This required raising £20,000 from the local community and £55,000 from grant foundations, appointment of an architect and builder, and subsequent project management. The project was completed within budget and on schedule. Church House reopened for business in May 2007: www.churchhousecrowcombe.org.uk.

He would take on the Client Management function for this research, including responsibility for direction of and liaison with the Research Company appointed to carry out the data collection and analysis.

Richard Bates

Richard Bates is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants who worked for the BBC for almost 30 years, retiring early in 1995 when Financial Controller, Regional Broadcasting.

Subsequently, on behalf of the National Film and Television School, he produced business skills courses for independent television producers, and then worked in developing countries teaching basic business skills to the managers of television and radio stations. He served as a member of council of the Royal Television Society and continues to take an interest in broadcasting.

Suffering from deteriorating hearing in his latter days at the BBC he was drawn into voluntary work on behalf of the deaf and hard of hearing, and was until recently chairman of RNID's Media Access Group. The group's twin concerns are the quantity and quality of subtitles, and the clarity of soundtracks in television and radio programmes.

David Walker

David Walker worked as an engineer in the BBC from 1961 until 1993, initially as an electronics designer and in the later part of his career as a Head of Engineering Resources. In the 1980s he was the BBC engineering advisor to BARB on the meters used to determine the television audience. He was a specialist on loudspeakers, sound reproduction and monitoring and chaired the committee that determined aural listening policy in the BBC.

On leaving the BBC he became co-director of Ethos Acoustics Ltd., a company that specialises in the development of high quality loudspeakers and acoustic treatment for noise reduction. From 1996 to 2007 he worked with Peter Menneer Research and RAJAR assisting the development of personal meters for radio audience measurement.

H. Early Media Publicity: The Independent, 1 – 23 June 2009

Monday, 1 June 2009

Great drama – but can you hear a single word they are saying?

Study will investigate whether viewers are turned off TV because the dialogue is inaudible

By Ian Burrell, Media Editor

Whether it's the street corner drug-dealing culture of Baltimore, as seen in *The Wire*, or the Bristol teen life witnessed in episodes of *Skins*, modern television drama production prides itself on transporting its audience to the very heart of the action. A genre that at first simply introduced a camera to the familiar dramatic procedures of the theatre has evolved with the demand for ever-greater reality, an increasing use of cinema verite, wobbling camera techniques and all-around sound.

The only problem with all this, it seems, is that a sizeable proportion of the audience can no longer hear what's actually being said by the actors.

And the concerns are now so great that Jay Hunt, the controller of BBC1, has agreed to co-operate with a major independent study that will attempt to evaluate how many people find it difficult to discern the basic dialogue in programmes shown on British television.

"There are particular issues with background music that makes certain programmes difficult for older viewers," said Hunt. "It's massively important to that audience and is something we are taking seriously. It's clearly not just a few people that struggle with this, it's a big issue and what the BBC should be doing is listening to audiences."

Although *The Wire*, which is shown on BBC2, and other productions by the writing team of David Simon and Ed Burns, such as the Iraq war series *Generation Kill*, have been acclaimed by critics and held up as a model for aspiring programme makers, the lifelike ambient audio makes it hard for some viewers to hear what all the fuss is about.

Others have problems with programmes which deploy music heavily to help give a sense of time to the action, such as the 1950s-based *Mad Men*, or the BBC's *Ashes To Ashes*, which is based in the early 1980s and features songs from the likes of *The Stranglers*, *Ultravox* and *Visage*.

The problem does not only relate to television. The increasing use of ambient sound in cinemas, a feature widely used as a marketing tool, is also ruining the experience for some patrons. John Cleese said recently that he stopped going to the cinema because sound editors were giving too much prominence to sound effects.

"No older person goes (to the movies) any more," he complained. "It's harder for me to hear the dialogue than it was 20 or 30 years ago. Your hearing starts to go in your early 30s and it's hard to pick out the voices from the ambient sound. The problem is that when they [sound editors] mix movies now, they forget that the audiences have not heard the dialogue. They've all heard the dialogue hundreds of times and take it for granted."

Hunt became aware of the sound issue after it was brought to her attention at a conference of Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) last year. Richard Lindley, the chairman of the VLV and a former current affairs presenter on Panorama and at ITN, said the research would establish whether problems with background noise were also being experienced by younger viewers.

"It really does go right across a range of programmes," he said. "Sometimes the background music is so loud that it drowns out what is being said. At other times it's just that the background noise is obtrusive. There is a problem here because producers want things to be realistic. It's quite difficult to say what is acceptable and what isn't; it does need more research. That's why we are so happy Jay Hunt has taken this up."

Lindley says of *The Wire*: "It's the kind of programme that makes us stop when we say British broadcasting is the best in the world and makes us think that, well, there are one or two other good things. But a lot of people have difficulty in following it because they can't always hear what's being said."

In his view there has been a profound change of production values in recent decades as the demand for realism has increased. "There's a danger that naturalistic filming and production will ignore the fact that important bits of dialogue are going to get lost or not have the impact they should, so that people will not always appreciate the production as they would want to."

Monday, 1 June 2009

Leading article: Tune in. Turn it up?

Is television drama getting more difficult to understand? Or are we all getting older? Our report today on the concerns of the respected Voice of the Listener & Viewer (VLV) pressure group suggests it might be the box, rather than our deteriorating hearing, which is at fault.

The VLV has complained to the controller of BBC1 Jay Hunt that the extensive use of ambient noise and background music in many modern television dramas is leaving an increasing number of us unable to follow what is going on.

Some might be tempted to dismiss such complaints as springing from the same reactionary mentality that powered Mary Whitehouse's "clean up TV" campaign in the 1960s. It is certainly true that sound design in television drama has evolved considerably in recent decades. The manner in which innovative programmes such as *The Wire* and *The Office* use background sound is integral to the artistic vision of their creators. Who would want to see such programmes subject to stifling bureaucratic restrictions on sound?

Yet it would be wrong to dismiss any complaints about comprehensibility levels as narrow-minded conservatism and a desire to turn back the clock to the days when BBC technicians wore white lab coats. The fact that some programmes have used background

noise and music to powerful dramatic effect does not mean that all film makers are equally adept at it. The generous use of ambient noise, whatever its artistic merits, also surely defeats its very purpose if the majority of the audience cannot follow the drama.

These complaints about the noisiness of television drama also feed into broader concerns over the sound levels in other entertainment media. It has been well-chronicled how cinema multiplexes have cranked up the decibels to ear-splitting levels in recent years. And many a hand reaches for the remote control when an advert break comes on in anticipation of the noise level shooting up unbidden.

Like Iain Duncan Smith, entertainment forms seem to have been turning up the volume of late (with equally unappealing results to those of the former Tory leader). So Ms Hunt is right to participate in a study into the extent of the problem in as far as it touches television drama. It would help to have some hard evidence of just how widespread audience disaffection is over this matter.

It would surely not do commercial broadcasters any harm to get involved in this consultation either. After all, the primary purpose of all programme makers is to please viewers. If comprehensibility is indeed a growing problem it would be in the interests of them all to fix it.

Like the dialogue in television dramas, the concerns of audiences surely ought to be more than just so much background noise.

Tuesday, 2 June 2009

What was that?

I was delighted to read (1 June) that a study has been initiated to investigate the problem of background noise and music. As an "older viewer" I often find it impossible to hear what is being said. The latest outrage, as far as I am concerned, has been in the wonderful BBC Poetry Season; beautiful poems made incomprehensible by the background music.

Anthea Holme

Oxford

Wednesday, 3 June 2009

Turn down that noise on TV

RNID welcomes the announcement of an independent study into the extent of the problem of background noise on television ("Great drama – but can you hear a single word they are saying?", 1 June).

Background noise can make it very difficult for people who are hard of hearing to follow speech during a programme. In our 2008 annual survey of members, 87 per cent of respondents said background noise affects their ability to hear speech on television. In a more recent survey, we found more than half of respondents have switched off because of it.

RNID urges all programme-makers to consider the needs of people who are deaf or hard of hearing and, longer-term, we support the development of technology to enable viewers to turn down, or turn off, background noise on television.

Brian Lamb

Executive Director of Advocacy and Policy, Royal National Institute for Deaf People

London EC1

Thank you Anthea Holme, you are far from alone (letter, 2 June). Many of us have wept at the implacable accompaniment of a thousand wailing strings and synthetic hoots, toots and bangs to any TV trip from the rainforest to the arctic - and now they have reached the beloved final frontier, poetry.

I suspect that TV sound editors don't care a hoot or toot about us.

Alison Sutherland

St Ola, Orkney

Thursday, 4 June 2009

Why TV viewers struggle to hear

Like other readers whose letters you have published, I was happy to see that there is to be a review of television sound quality, if not too optimistic about the outcome.

When, in the 1960s and 70s, I was professionally involved in making television documentaries for Granada TV and others, a great deal of time, effort and argument went into trying to achieve the best pictures with the best sound. The camera operator and sound recordist were often at odds on location, where the needs of one often made life difficult for the other.

The arguments went on in the dubbing suite, where picture, voices, ambient sound and music were blended together. The sound was played through very hi-fi amplifiers and speakers to achieve the best results – but then played back through domestic speakers to see what the sound would be like when it arrived in the living room.

My guess would be that today, when the camera operator and sound recordist are often the same person and when production budgets are pared to the bone, there's neither the time nor the money to be bothered with all that stuff. The result is that the overload of the soundtrack's volume and frequencies overwhelms the less expensive TV set, with its squeaky speakers, so that programmes often sound as if they were recorded underwater, somewhere near Niagara Falls.

The viewer can have it good or can have it cheap; having both won't be an option.

Brian Trueman

Bramhall, Cheshire

It is not only the older viewer (Letters, 2 June) who finds the use of music supposedly to enhance the spoken word objectionable. To the musically trained ear there is no such thing as "background" music: all music, regardless of its quality, nature or volume, demands the listener's attention and hence detracts from the experience of listening to speech (which deserves similar respect) in any form.

Polly Fallows

Manchester

Wednesday, 10 June 2009

Can you hear the television?

You report (1 June) that the BBC has agreed to co-operate with an independent study aimed at evaluating the difficulties that many people have in following dialogue in TV programmes.

We, the directors of this TV Audibility Project (respectively a past BBC financial controller, audience researcher and broadcast audio engineer), are encouraged by the correspondence that your report has stimulated. Part of the problem is that many programme makers and, perhaps even more importantly, programme commissioners, take it for granted that background music and sound effects are essential ingredients in almost any programme, to achieve its highest audience potential. We believe that this is an assumption worth testing.

The enterprise has the enthusiastic support of the Voice of the Listener & Viewer. The BBC's much appreciated co-operation, allowing us to make use of their online panel of viewers, will do much to keep the costs down.

The research will cover all the major broadcasters, and all types of programmes – and not just drama. It will aim to establish to what extent, background music enhances or detracts from viewers' enjoyment of programmes. Analysis of the data by viewers' ages and hearing ability will be crucial to the interpretation of the findings.

Where it is clear that the intelligibility of speech has been a significant problem, the mixing of foreground speech against background audio effects will then be analysed, with the intention of compiling practical dos and don'ts for programme makers. We hope these will be invaluable in an age where, as one of your respondents has already noted, all too often sound recordists and dubbing mixers no longer play the role they once did.

Richard Bates

Peter Menneer

David Walker

Taunton, Somerset

Friday 12 June

The noise of music

My wife and I are frequently irritated and annoyed when words spoken by the actors in TV dramas are drowned by unnecessarily loud background music. One of your correspondents recently suggested that people like us should switch on sub-titles. This is a second-best solution we endure when watching foreign films but why on earth should we need to use sub-titles to watch a drama in our native language? We pleased to read (letters, 10 June) that the TV Audibility Project is studying this problem.

Eric Lund

Biggleswade, Bedfordshire

Saturday 13 June

In praise of subtitles

I agree with Eric Lund (letters, 12 June) that it is unreasonable to expect us to turn on subtitles to watch a TV programme in our native language, but my understanding and enjoyment of *The Wire* was greatly enhanced by subtitles, because the argot of Baltimore police and drug dealers is not my native language. But even the more standard English in *West Wing* also benefits from subtitles, with accents, dialogue speed and characters talking over each other reducing clarity at least as much as background music.

Marilyn Mason

Kingston upon Thames

Tuesday 16 June

Words and music

It is not merely the inaudibility of speech with over-loud background music that is the problem (letters, 3, 4, 6, 12 June). There is also the question of respect for the spoken word. In a recent, and largely admirable, BBC television programme about T S Eliot, the words of "The Waste Land" were accompanied by the prelude from Wagner's *Parsifal*. Eliot's poetry and Wagner's music demand one's undivided attention, and as a musician (who also appreciates poetry) I can't help concentrating my attention on the music. Surely Eliot's words are worthy of more respect than this?

Nick Chadwick

Oxford

Thursday 18 June

Foreground music

Can correspondents on the subject of music on television accompanying speech and or pictures please come up with a more truthful term than "background" music? That suggests that it plays a lesser role, whereas in fact it has equal prominence for the viewer or listener, who receives a two-dimensional palette of music, speech and pictures. In fact would either "palette" or "jigsaw" do?

Peter Green

High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire

Tuesday 23 June

No laughing matter

My wife and I are in full agreement with previous correspondents about the problems of foreground/background music in films and TV programmes. We have lost count of the number of films we have turned off because we could not hear the dialogue. I would suggest adding the abolition of "canned laughter", which ruins most TV comedy programmes. I cannot believe that there is a mobile auditorium which navigates the lanes of Holmfirth.

Robert Hedley

WEYMOUTH, Dorset