

Have You Heard George's Podcast?

– BBC Radio 5 Live podcast



Image from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09w1xd4>

AS Component 1: Investigating the Media

A level Component 1: Media Products, Industries and Audiences

Core study areas:

- **Media Industries**
- **Audiences**
- **Media Contexts**

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* is a podcast recorded by award-winning rapper and spoken word artist, George the Poet, for BBC Radio 5 Live.
- *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* is not a conventionally **scheduled** radio show. It is recorded in 'chapters' (like seasons) and released on BBC Sounds. The show is hosted by George the Poet and produced by Benbrick, with guest contributions. Each episode focuses on a particular theme relevant to its **young, diverse, educated audience**, e.g. 'Flying the Flag' (about celebrity, and US history) and 'Sabrina's Boy' (about exploring trauma through Black art).
- The podcast is acclaimed for its engaging mix of drama, music, poetry and intelligent discussion of social issues. After winning numerous UK podcast awards, in 2019 it won the prestigious **Peabody Award**, the first podcast outside the USA to win the award.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Industries

Historical contexts:

- The BBC is often accused by its critics of being too white and middle-class. In 2017, an **Ofcom report** stated that there was too little diversity at the corporation, both on and off-screen. It also reported that young people and ethnic minorities felt particularly alienated from BBC content.
- In 2021, the BBC launched a **Diversity and Inclusion Plan**, overhauling recruitment and

commissioning content that “authentically and accurately represents diversity in the UK”.

- Part of this strategy is to have a **50:20:12 target**, i.e. 50% of the workforce to be women, 20% people of colour and 12% disabled.

Consider the specialised and institutionalised nature of media production and the significance of economic factors to media industries and their products:

- Explore issues relating to **Public Service Broadcasting (PSB)** and consider the extent to which *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* meets the BBC remit to **inform, educate and entertain**. Consider whether the podcast is typical of products created for the BBC and explore the hallmarks of productions made for this institution.
- Consider the significance of **licence fee** funding and compare this to the financial considerations of commercial radio, e.g. would this podcast be too “niche” for commercial radio? The show has an **unconventional structure**, often jumping from topic to topic and genre to genre (e.g. in 'Flying the Flag' George moves from a discussion of celebrity and audience performed as a couples' argument, to a potted history of the American economy). He also often uses specialised **vocabulary** that mixes 'highbrow' terms with the street dialect of London. Learners might discuss why purely **commercial** institutions would be less likely to produce similar products.
- How significant is the difference between radio broadcast and podcast? How does the **podcast format** enable George to experiment with the conventions of radio? What could this tell us about the changes in the media forms the BBC is producing and the way they distribute them?
- Think about the backgrounds and voices of the people featured on *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* Now consider the themes, content and style. In what ways could this be seen as the BBC trying to meet their diversity targets? In what ways do the stories George tells “**accurately and authentically represent diversity in the UK**”?

Consider recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent media platforms:

- The **podcast** format offers several ways to explore recent changes to the radio industry in relation to digital technology such as the profound changes that have been brought about by **on-demand downloading and streaming**.
- A brief history of radio before the mid-1990s should allow learners to appreciate the significance of podcasting and listening to episodes on digitally **convergent** platforms such as computers and smartphones.
- In November 2018, the BBC launched its BBC Sounds streaming service, featuring live broadcasting, audio on-demand and podcasts. This is a good example of **technological convergence** as Sounds is available on PCs, laptops, tablets and phones.
- Podcasts have soared in popularity in the past decade, with many, like *This American Life*, becoming cultural events. **Minority groups** who have traditionally been excluded from mainstream radio have used podcasts to **find a voice**. George's unique and experimental approach and his evocation of young Black British life might never have found a slot in a conventional radio schedule.
- One element missing from podcasts compared to live radio is the **interactive audience** element in the shape of call-ins, song requests, emails, etc. To add this dimension of interactivity and audience engagement, George has launched a social media/forum called Common Ground (<https://gtpcg.com/>). After signing up, the user can listen to episodes then answer discussion questions after. They can also enter the 'Commons' area to read others' responses and share audio, video, art and music that the episode has inspired.
- Students may wish to consider how this interactive **community** element links with Clay Shirky's ideas about active, creative audiences. In addition, they could look at how Henry Jenkins' ideas about **fandom** could be used

to analyse the community George is creating, and in his portrayal of fandom itself within the podcast especially the episode about Jay-Z (Episode 20 'Young').

Consider how media producers maintain varieties of audiences:

- The **BBC's Charter** requires that content reflect the diverse nature of British culture, including minority groups and niche audiences. Before on-demand services via iPlayer or Sounds, this content was usually scheduled late at night and on a less mainstream channel such as BBC Two or Radio 1Xtra. The on-demand nature of the podcast means it can reach a wider audience.
- George is given complete **creative control** of the podcast's content. This means he can mix styles (storytelling, poetry, full radio drama, music, etc.) and discuss serious social issues, particularly offering space for marginalised voices. Chapter 1 Episode 3, 'A Grenfell Story', offers a narrative about a teacher and her role in the local community who dies in the disaster.
- Students should consider how the podcast presents unusual perspectives on modern, urban UK life especially for younger people. How does this attract a **diverse audience**?

Consider theoretical approaches:

Power and media industries – Curran and Seaton:

- It could be argued that *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* challenges the idea that media is controlled by a small number of companies driven by the **logic of profit and power**.
- Whilst the BBC is inarguably a large, significant company, the nature of **PSB** (discussed above) and the content of the broadcast is at odds with the "logic of profit and power". Consider the **funding** of the BBC in comparison with commercial organisations. Candidates might explore the extent to which the licence fee frees BBC producers from the pressure to generate profit and the way in which this impacts content.
- The unique and fluid format of *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* might also be used to support Curran and Seaton's idea that **socially diverse**

patterns of ownership help create conditions for varied and adventurous productions.

- Candidates might consider the proliferation of podcasts across a wide range of topics and genres in recent years. How does the relative **low production costs** of this medium and the inexpensive hosting/**digital distribution** costs, offer producers (and often **prosumers**) opportunities to take risks and develop adventurous content? In what ways do they still manage to reach diverse, often international audiences?

Regulation – Livingston and Lunt:

- As a PSB, the BBC has quite strict **guidelines** about what content can be broadcast or published. BBC One, for instance, rarely features sex, nudity or swearing and all the broadcast channels (TV and radio) follow the ‘**watershed**’.
- As an unscheduled podcast, *Have You Heard George’s Podcast?* does not follow the watershed. It also has written and verbal warnings that there may be adult language and other mature content.
- This challenges Livingston and Lunt’s assumption that ‘new media’ is harder to regulate. The BBC has considered the access of potential audiences and regulated within the institution.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

Social and cultural contexts:

- Issues of **diversity and inclusion** have become significant in recent years, especially after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.
- There have been numerous investigations into racial discrimination in a range of institutions from the Metropolitan Police to UK schools.
- The Grenfell Tower disaster of 2017 became a focal point for debates about how society treats vulnerable and under-privileged social groups. Some referred to the disaster as a “Hurricane Katrina moment”, comparing Grenfell to the

2005 New Orleans disaster that exposed class division and economic disparity in the USA.

- *Have You Heard George’s Podcast?* dedicated two episodes in the first chapter to exploring the lives of people in the community and how the disaster affected them. Other episodes have looked at economic disparity, lack of opportunity and the impact of drug crime on Black, Asian and other minority communities.

Consider how audiences are grouped and categorised by media industries, including by age, gender, and social class, as well as by lifestyle and taste:

- *Have You Heard George’s Podcast?* offers clear examples of audience grouping and content being developed for specific (possibly **niche**) audiences.
- Radio 5 Live’s target audience are **middle-aged ABC1/C2DE**. The majority are male, over 40 and affluent. What in the content/style of *Have You Heard George’s Podcast?* might appeal to this audience?
- Consider how the podcast might be an attempt to diversify Radio 5 Live’s audience and attract younger listeners.
- Students should also consider the similarities and differences of *Have You Heard George’s Podcast?* and other Radio 5 Live content, especially the ‘talk radio’ elements.

Consider how audiences interpret the media, including how and why audiences may interpret the same media in different ways:

- *Have You Heard George’s Podcast?* offers several ways to explore **audience interpretation**. What do you think might be the response of the typical Radio 5 Live demographic: white, male, mid-40s and affluent?
- Candidates could use Stuart Hall’s **reception theory** (see below) to analyse interpretations.
- Consider the Common Ground website and the way it invites audiences to record and share their personal responses to each episode. How does it encourage audiences to form their own

interpretation? How does it attempt to inspire further **creativity** from the audience, e.g. producing and sharing music, video and art?

- How does the Common Ground website encourage audiences to express themselves creatively?

Consider how media organisations reflect the diverse needs of mass and specialised audiences, including through targeting:

- A return to the remit of **PSB** here could invite discussion about the BBC and attempts to produce content for all audience **demographics**. Candidates might ask whether the broadcast has been designed to explicitly appeal to a specialised (under-30, urban, minority groups) audience as part of the remit of the organisation itself.
- An extension of this discussion might explore whether there are any other media products that appeal to this specific target audience on the radio (BBC or otherwise).
- To what extent do you feel the BBC is meeting its targets as set out in their 2021 Diversity and Inclusion Plan?

Consider theoretical approaches:

Reception theory – Stuart Hall:

- Discuss possible different readings of the podcast. What is the **intended** meaning? What might be a **negotiated** meaning (e.g. from a white, middle-class audience member)? What might be an **oppositional** response (e.g. from a conservative, right-wing or even racist listener)?

Feminist theory – Van Zoonen:

- To what extent does *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* achieve Van Zoonen's suggestion that **gender and racial stereotypes** in the media can only change if there is more diversity in media institutions and their products. How does the podcast challenge stereotype? What alternative voices does it offer?

Fandom – Henry Jenkins:

- Consider how *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* encourages audiences to **creatively engage** with the content. How does some of the content reflect on the importance of entertainment stars and the way they inspire under-privileged communities?