

Desert Island Discs

Component 1: Exploring the media

Focus areas:

- **Media industries**
- **Audiences**
- **Media contexts**

INTRODUCTION

Desert Island Discs is a radio show on **BBC Radio 4**. It was first recorded in 1942, making it one of radio's longest running shows. It is aired on Sunday mornings and generally repeated five days afterwards. It is also available as a **podcast**; during Kirsty Young's tenure as presenter, the 'listen again' function became available online. According to YouGov, it is popular with 44 percent of the British public, and known by 69 percent ([Desert Island Discs popularity & fame | YouGov](#)). The premise of the show is that guests imagine that they are cast away on a desert island. They are given a copy of the Bible, or another chosen religious or philosophical text, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, then asked to choose eight audio recordings, one book and one luxury. This provides an opportunity for a retrospective of the guest's life.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – MEDIA INDUSTRIES

Learners must develop their knowledge and understanding of the following aspects (content taken from the specification):

- **The nature of media production, including by large organisations, who own the products they produce, and by individuals and groups.**
- **The impact of production processes, personnel and technologies on the**

final product, including similarities and differences between media products in terms of when and where they are produced.

- **The effect of ownership and control of media organisations, including conglomerate ownership, diversification and vertical integration.**
- **The importance of different funding models, including government funded, not-for-profit and commercial models.**

The BBC

BBC Radio 4 is a national radio station produced and run by the BBC. The BBC as a media organisation produce a variety of television programmes for national and regional UK audiences. In addition, the BBC produce several national and local radio programmes for audiences in the UK, including both music and speech broadcasting. *Desert Island Discs* is an example that blends these two aspects.

The BBC is an established **global media organisation**. BBC World Service television, radio and digital content can be accessed in over forty languages and the BBC's online content is available to users around the world through, for example, the BBC website (www.bbc.com).

Public service broadcasting

The BBC describes itself as 'the world's leading **public service broadcaster**' (www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc). Its remit is "to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which **inform, educate and entertain**". *Desert Island Discs* is clearly an example of entertainment, but it could also be seen as

informing and educating listeners through the cultural texts referred to and the issues raised by the guests' life stories.

The BBC's Public Purposes as stated in its Royal Charter are:

1. To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them.
2. To support learning for people of all ages.
3. To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services.
4. To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom.
5. To reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world'.

Desert Island Discs could be seen as fulfilling these criteria in several ways. In 2019, a panel of industry experts voted it the greatest radio programme of all time ([Desert Island Discs 'greatest radio show of all time' - BBC News](#)), illustrating its perceived quality and creativity. The programme is iconic and distinctive, recognisably part of the **Radio 4 brand**. 'Castaways' are automatically given a copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and popular choices of authors include Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, which all contribute to reflecting UK culture and values. The current presenter, Lauren Laverne, is from Sunderland, and the previous presenter, Kirsty Young, is Scottish, representing 'the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions'. The format also allows for a diverse range of guests from different nations and regions within the UK.

Desert Island Discs can be seen as a typical Radio 4 programme as the channel is described by the BBC as 'the home of intelligent speech, journalism, comedy and drama' (www.bbc.com).

Funding

In terms of funding, the BBC, and therefore *Desert Island Discs*, is financed predominantly through **public funding** in the form of the **licence fee**. This must be paid by all households in the UK for access to all television channels, as well as services such as streaming and downloading via, for example, BBC iPlayer. This funding model supports the BBC's Public Service Broadcasting remit, meaning the BBC is not driven by the demands of advertisers or the political agendas of private owners and shareholders.

However, the BBC does also have commercial subsidiaries, one being BBC Studios which is a production company that creates British content to be sold to **global audiences**, often working collaboratively with other commercial organisations. It aims to maximise revenue from existing BBC content by creating, for example, spin-offs from popular shows. In this sense, the BBC could be seen as a **conglomerate**, as it is a **parent company** with **subsidiaries**. It is also a **vertically integrated** company, containing **production, distribution and sales divisions**. From its origins in broadcast radio and television, over time it has also **diversified** into digital and online content.

In 2023, the BBC announced that *Desert Island Discs* would henceforth be made by BBC Studios, moving from the BBC's public service division to its **for-profit** arm. The intention of this change was to increase revenue from the show by aiming it at listeners outside the UK. This is in the context of a significant drop in listening figures for Radio 4 at the time. ([Desert Island Discs to move to BBC's for-profit division in bid to make money | Desert Island Discs | The Guardian](#))

The BBC needs to justify its public funding and compete with the many commercial broadcasters in the contemporary international **multi-channel environment**. It must aim to cater to both UK and global audiences, whilst still fulfilling its Public Service Broadcasting remit. There has,

therefore, been considerable ongoing debate about the future of the licence fee in the contemporary age of multi-channel, subscription and on-demand services. Opinion polls have shown a lack of public support for this funding model and there have been many high-profile critics and opponents. The existing Royal Charter expires in 2027, and the current Labour Government (2025) are considering replacing the licence fee with an alternative form of funding, as it does not generate enough income to support the BBC and is seen as unfairly affecting poorer people.

In this context, *Desert Island Discs* is an important **flagship programme** for the BBC. Its format makes it relatively cheap and easy to produce, but it generates high listening figures and so is cost effective.

Content taken from the specification:

- **The impact of the increasingly convergent nature of media industries across different platforms and different national settings.**
- **How the media operate as commercial industries on a global scale and reach both large and specialised audiences.**
- **The functions and types of regulation of the media.**

Convergence

The existence of the *Desert Island Discs* page on the BBC website, and the availability of over 2400 previous episodes as podcasts, reflect the **convergent** nature of the radio industry. The BBC has invested heavily in BBC Sounds, its on-demand audio streaming service. The app was launched in 2018, with the aim to 'reinvent the BBC for a new generation' ([BBC Blogs - About the BBC - Introducing the first version of BBC Sounds](#)). This enables *Desert Island Discs* to extend its audience beyond the traditional, **more specialised, Radio 4 audience**, encouraging new, younger listeners to the programme, as well as making it available to **global audiences** in this way, creating greater

overall **reach**.

The importance of this to the BBC as a media organisation is clear: "this [2023] has been another record breaking year for BBC Sounds with the number of plays having grown year by year by almost 50 per cent with some of the most listened-to programmes on BBC Sounds coming from BBC Radio 4, including *Desert Island Discs*." ([I've listened to Desert Island Discs for 80 years - but Lauren Laverne has made me switch off](#))

Regulation

The BBC is **regulated** by **Ofcom** and all its radio programmes are required to meet Ofcom's regulatory requirements. The nature and style of *Desert Island Discs* means it rarely receives complaints that would go to Ofcom. The producers **self-regulate** prior to broadcast to make sure each episode meets Ofcom criteria.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – AUDIENCES

Learners must develop their knowledge and understanding of the following aspects (content taken from the specification):

- **How media organisations categorise audiences.**
- **How and why media products are aimed at a range of audiences, from small, specialised audiences to large, mass audiences.**

Audience

Given the longevity of the programme, it can reasonably be assumed that the core audience is an **older demographic** who have listened to it over a number of years. The *Desert Island Discs* audience is also reflective of the Radio 4 audience, which has been criticised for being overly middle class and White ([Am I bothered that Radio 4 is too middle class? No! | Radio industry | The Guardian, BBC Radio 4 'too middle class and London-centric'](#)). The White, middle class audience for *Desert Island Discs* can be seen through the guests' most popular choices

of music artists from 1942 to 2011, who are all White classical music composers ([BBC Radio 4 - Desert Island Discs - Facts and Figures](#)). Similarly, in a 2011 poll of listeners' choices of music artists, the selections were overwhelmingly White ([BBC Radio 4 - Desert Island Discs - Your Desert Island Discs results](#)).

The format of the show does, however, give it the potential to appeal to a wide audience. It is a simple, easily understood and universally appealing idea. The inclusion of a different 'castaway' each week allows for a variety of guests to be included, from different genders, ages, ethnicities and backgrounds, again broadening its appeal. Some guests are famous or celebrities, whereas others are less well-known but are recognised in their fields of, for example, charity, science, philanthropy, sport, arts, politics or business.

The choice of presenter is a key way of aiming the product at a particular audience. There have been several presenters to date, but the current presenter is Lauren Laverne, a former singer in an alternative rock band and longstanding radio DJ. At forty-six years old, Laverne is younger than the average audience member. This is a clear strategy for aiming the programme at a **younger demographic** in order to build a sustainable audience for the future.

Content taken from the specification:

- **The role of media technologies in reaching and identifying audiences, and in audience consumption and usage.**

Technology

As discussed in the media industries section, *Desert Island Discs* can be accessed in various ways. Older listeners are more likely to listen live via radio as the programme is broadcast, whereas a younger audience would be more inclined to access the podcast through the **BBC Sounds app**, other podcast platforms, or the **BBC website** on mobile phones, laptops or other devices. These **on-demand services** allow audiences to choose how, when and

where they engage with the show, potentially increasing their enjoyment.

- **The ways in which people's media practices are connected to their identity, including their sense of actual and desired self. The social, cultural and political significance of media products, including the themes or issues they address, the fulfilment of needs and desires and the functions they serve in everyday life and society.**

Pleasures

Desert Island Discs offers listeners a range of pleasures, **fulfilling various needs and desires**. Some listeners may enjoy hearing guests' music choices, whereas others may be more interested in finding out about their life stories. Guests often disclose quite personal or private information about themselves and their backgrounds, which allows audiences to feel a privileged sense of connection, sympathy or admiration. The actor Jamie Dornan, for example, discussed with clear emotion the impact on him after his mother's death, a life event to which listeners could relate to and which many found very affecting. The programme can make listeners laugh or cry but is uplifting. Although the guests change for each episode, the presenter remains consistent, creating a rapport with the audience.

Radio as a medium is often thought of as having a soothing effect. It is listened to rather than watched and can therefore form a background to people's daily lives, perhaps in the kitchen whilst cooking, at bedtime, or in the garden. For some listeners, it is a form of company. Older listeners, who have aged alongside the programme, may feel a great affinity with *Desert Island Discs* and find it comforting in its familiarity and warm, friendly tone.

- **How audiences may respond to and interpret media products and why these interpretations may change over time.**

Audience response

A younger demographic is clearly likely to respond differently to *Desert Island Discs* from audience members that have been loyal listeners for some time. It may be perceived by younger audiences as boring and staid, rather than comfortable and familiar. Ethnicity and class may also affect audience response, with some disliking the programme's perceived middle class, White, London-centric feel, as previously mentioned.

Content taken from the specification:

- **Theoretical perspectives on audiences, including active and passive audiences; audience response and audience interpretation.**
- **Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratifications theory.**

Uses and gratifications

Audiences may be actively involved with *Desert Island Discs* by, for example, **interacting** with the programme's webpage or social media, discussing it with friends and family, or participating in polls. In terms of Blumler and Katz's **uses and gratifications theory**, we could suggest audience members listen for various reasons:

- for **entertainment/diversion** from their everyday lives – the programme often includes humour and highlights lives quite different from those of the audience
- to be **informed or educated** about issues raised by the guests and their histories
- for **social interaction**, discussing episodes with family or friends or by contributing to the conversation on Twitter or Facebook
- for **personal identity**, to compare their life experiences with those of the 'castaways'.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – MEDIA CONTEXTS

Historical contexts

Historical contexts have affected the broadcasting of *Desert Island Discs*. The first episode was recorded during World War 2 and aired on the Forces Programme. It was removed from the airwaves after the war in 1946 but returned in 1951 to the Home Service in time for the Festival of Britain. In 1967, it transferred to the newly formed Radio 4 and has continued there ever since, becoming a **"heritage" show** and national institution.

Social, cultural and political contexts

Although the format of the programme has not fundamentally changed over its lifetime, there have been some changes that reflect the **contexts** in which it is made. For its first forty-six years, *Desert Island Discs* was presented by men, reflecting the dominance of men in society and culture at the time. Subsequently, there have been three female presenters, including the current one. This illustrates **changing gender roles** in society and the increased visibility of women in the media after several waves of **feminism**. There is now a section within the *Desert Island Discs* Collection on the website entitled *Motivational Women*, further supporting this idea.

Similarly, more Black and ethnic minority guests, such as the footballer Ian Wright and the poet Claudia Rankine, are now featured on the programme in comparison to the almost exclusively White guests of earlier years. This reflects contemporary **multiculturalism** and the greater awareness and recognition of the contributions of people of colour to culture and society.

The issues raised in the programme have arguably become more controversial over time, with Norman Mailer requesting marijuana as his luxury item in 1979, Sue Lawler asking Gordon Brown if he was gay in 1996, Yoko Ono mentioning abortion in 2007 and Morrissey discussing suicide in 2009. These controversial episodes have often become talking points, illustrating the impact of *Desert Island Discs* on society and culture.

Although the programme is not explicitly political, it does reflect **political contexts** by featuring politicians of the time, such as Boris Johnson, Theresa May, Nicola Sturgeon and Keir Starmer.

Finally, the **cultural influence** of *Desert Island Discs* can also be seen in the production of *The Island*, a six-part Radio 4 comedy set on the fictional island featured in *Desert Island Discs*, where celebrities are cast away, aired on Radio 4 from February 2025.