

THE BLOG

## “Happy What?” Why Happy Valley’s Sound Problems May Run Deeper Than You Think

02/06/2016 15:05 | Updated 02 June 2016



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You cannot have failed to spot the media and public backlash against the BBC for the latest run of its flagship series Happy Valley. Viewers of the second season, which aired in spring, have complained that the show was impossible to follow due to sound issues and mumbling. BBC director general Tony Hall has weighed into the debate, saying that executives must look into audibility issues for future programmes and Richard Madeley even became involved in the furore.

What are we really talking about here? What is the cause of these problems? Does Happy Valley really have an audibility problem at all - or is the issue actually a lot closer to home?

To give you a background on my credentials to answer this question, I have worked in sound for TV, radio and film for almost all of my adult life (over 30 years). In 1994, I founded Grand Central Recording Studios (GCRS), and, since then, I am proud to say GCRS has been responsible for bringing audio excellence to many critically acclaimed hits, such as recent favourites Raised By Wolves, Marcella, Line of Duty, Call the Midwife and Mr Selfridge.

I also count myself an avid viewer of TV drama and love nothing more than an evening spent in front of the box with the latest period drama or gripping police thriller - but more of that later ...

Firstly, how do you record sound on a TV programme? In two ways: via lapel mic - a small microphone attached to an actor's clothing, and a boom mic - the big furry thing that is held by a boom operator and manually angled towards the actors.

Each of these methods has pros and cons. Lapel mics are easily hidden and are fine for capturing the sound of a sit down interview but are not very reliable at picking up sound in scenes where there is lots of movement. For instance, they may pick up the rustle of clothing.

Boom mics do not suffer as much from the muffled clothing problem but they are big cumbersome things that need to be held above the actors' heads and stay out of shot. Today's directors and production companies are under increased pressure to deliver the goods as quickly as possible and for as low a budget as possible. This means there may not be time for re-shooting a scene if the shot has been impaired with the accidental appearance of the boom mic. Less experienced directors may be wary of using a boom mic for sound in order to avoid the potential of the shot not being framed correctly and the boom mic looming into view.

In an ideal world, these two options should be used together. That means that the director can pick and choose from the two recordings to ensure that they have captured the sound accurately and gives options on perspective. This should then alleviate the need for a third recording option: ADR.

Put simply, ADR is the term used for the process of re-recording the voices of actors, in a studio, after a TV show has been shot.

What happens when this process breaks down? Another drama that has recently fallen foul of critics complaining about inaudibility was Jamaica Inn (also from the BBC). As a big Daphne du Maurier fan, I was really looking forward to this series but ended up

switching off after twenty minutes because I could not understand a single word the actors were saying. I think that the problem here was that the dialogue had been recorded solely using lapel mics. Without the use of a boom, or (it would seem) the additional process of ADR, the result was less 'atmospheric angst' and more 'general plot confusion'.

I also think that the team were so close to the project and knew the dialogue so well that they could hear the sound even though the viewer could not.

I do not know whether there was a screening before the series went to air, because the issues should have been picked up then and I really do not understand how the BBC's QC process failed so miserably.

What a shame for a big budget, highly anticipated drama.

However, in the case of Happy Valley, we are talking about something completely different. Here, the issue is not a failing of audio recording, again IMHO. It is more a case of Oldham-born Sarah Lancashire and Forres-born Shirley Henderson giving nuanced and subtle performances in something approaching their native accents.

Henderson's characterisation of Frances Drummond benefited from the whispered speech that was actually very unnerving and disturbing and full of menace.

In scenes where Lancashire has chosen a quiet, low key delivery, it gives gravitas to her portrayal of police officer Cath Cawood - moments which requires the audience to pay attention and listen to what she is saying.

All of this may be difficult for a London-centric audience to comprehend. However, do we really want to be served up a homogenised diet of RP (received pronunciation) in our programming?

At this point it is also worth sharing that Happy Valley has been aired to much success in the US, via Netflix. If someone living over 3,000 miles away in, say, New York can understand Sarah Lancashire's northern accent you would think a London viewer (a meager 200 miles away) should not have a problem.

US audiences famously needed subtitles to tackle Edinburgh based film Trainspotting, so if they can cope Happy Valley, then we have no excuse.

So, if all of that makes you slightly less unhappy with Happy Valley, please seek it out on BBC iPlayer or Sky Box Sets - it will be worth it. I promise.

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