

Dave Gray, senior producer, BBC Radio Orkney*, in conversation with Ute

Dave has been the public face of Radio Orkney for more than 30 years. He was happy with me calling him “the radio man” even though that is not his official title. He is now just a few weeks away from retirement.

Tell me about the local BBC radio stations. There used to be more of them, didn't they? Radio Orkney was founded in 1977 together with 5 other local BBC radio stations in Scotland. Only those in Orkney and Shetland still exist as separate entities. The others, e.g., in Aberdeen or Inverness, have all been subsumed into Radio Scotland. It is not as if they had been closed, but in the islands, it is easier to define the area that you serve, so you can make a local radio station to serve local interests specifically. There is a stronger sense of identity. Here [and in Shetland], the people are very protective of their local stations. In the 90s, it had been suggested that we should fuse, but the people here put up a fight and this is why we continue.

What is your role at the radio? I am the public face and voice of Radio Orkney, make programmes, see to the day-to-day running of the station, contact people, plan the staffing and make editorial decisions.

And you are going to retire soon? Yes, in April. A successor has been found and he is also Orcadian, currently in Edinburgh but originally from Tankerness, and he wants to come home.

Does he have an Orkney accent? Yes, but not a strong one.

And do you have plans for afterwards? Yes, I notice when I talk to the people that they are increasingly interested in archive material. This building [Radio Orkney in Kirkwall] contains huge amounts of historical recordings. For example, as a new radio reporter, I interviewed people who were witnesses to the Longhope lifeboat disaster, all very interesting, and most of those who were there are now dead. There is tons of material which is all very relevant, but when somebody suggests that it should be digitised and made available, there is never any money for doing it. I want to get involved.

How do you know what to put on the radio? We talk to people. Not now, of course, but in normal times, if some WRI invites me or there is a local event, I go and chat. I ask the people what they like to hear about and what they are not so interested in. Often, they don't want to say at first, but what they are less interested in I find even more revealing. The public has become a lot more interested in archive materials. Look, all the isles now have archive photo-sharing websites, and then there is Orkney Past and Present on Facebook, and it just shows how interested many are in historical materials.

We need to provide the very local news, the lost cats and all that. It is easy to make fun of that but ever so often somebody thanks us with tears in their eyes because our message helped them to find their cat, so it is important.

When we came to Orkney it took us a while to learn about the radio. I think it was only when our kids were the only ones to trudge to school through the snow and everybody else had heard on the radio that the schools were closed. Yes, we can do this here. Orkney is not that small, we are about 1000 square kilometres, but it is quite close-knit and weather is important.

I am, of course, particularly interested in how you keep in the loop with the North Isles? I heard you are the voice on the ferries? Yes, I did this.

It is not as simple as that Mainlanders don't know the Isles all that well. Many people really only know their own area and the rest of Orkney remains a bit of a mystery. I have a number of relations in the Isles, in Westray, Sanday and Rousay. In normal years, I did a tour of the Isles in the summer.

Some of the islands have now very interesting internal media projects. Every one has their own newsletter now and there are also podcasts** and archive material exchanges online.

If something blows up in the Isles, we don't rely on Facebook, but there are people everywhere who I can call and ask "What about this or that?" **You have your informers everywhere?** More like friends. People I know from before. There is little substitute for actually meeting people. These conversations via Zoom are just not the same.

You mention Facebook. How important has this become? For a couple of years, we tried running our Facebook page as a news page. It does not work. If you allow people to comment, there will be inappropriate comments, like who was involved in an accident. You have to constantly monitor and delete and then explain why you have deleted.

If you look at Facebook, people will write things they would never say to each other's faces. They get carried away and upset and it is only a small section of the public who is into Facebook anyway. Any information that comes to light via Facebook has to be followed up by phone, actually talking to people.

Now the Facebook site mostly links to our podcasts. You see, while you can listen to Radio Orkney only locally, there are people all over the place who are interested and they can download it. It is a local radio station after all.

After this, the conversation drifted more to the general behaviour of Orkney Island Councils over past decades and the current one in particular, the existence or otherwise of moles and cabals, the learning or failure to learn of lessons, and the influence and paygrades of top officials, and other topics every politically-thinking person has an opinion on but which would break the limitations of this information gathering mission.

We parted pleasantly, and I wish Dave a fruitful retirement.

* on weekdays 7:30 to 8:00 *Around Orkney* (a general news magazine programme inserted into the BBC Radio Scotland schedule) and 17:00 to 18:00 a variety of cultural programmes.

** my search found *Wireless Westray*