

UNIT 6 FEATURES AND DOCUMENTARIES

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6.0 INTRODUCTION

Among the various radio formats, the format of Features and Documentaries is one of the most fascinating ones. Radio broadcasters, over the decades, have made imaginative use of this format and its potential for extending the range of the medium. The term 'feature' is used to indicate both studio-based features and documentaries. There is a very thin line of demarcation between a radio feature and a documentary. The feature is a radio programme, in which emphasis is laid on imaginative presentation of facts, while documentaries are based on actualities.

In the early days of broadcasting, producers believed that in a feature, a subject is dressed up by using two or three voices, interviews and music to present a prepared script in a dramatized way. In fact, initially, radio had only features as they were almost entirely studio-based and written down to be read by professional voices. It was the time when OB recordings were considered cumbersome. With the development of modern equipment, O.B. Vans, availability of tele-communication facilities, satellite up-linkings, mobile phones etc., the problems in the collection of recordings from interior and distant places have been overcome to a great extent.

The idea of radio documentary is essentially a take-off from documentary films developed by **John Grierson** who is considered to be the father of film documentary movement. With the widespread use of portable tape recorders and later with the introduction of ultra portable tape recorders (UPTRs), the radio documentary emerged as a popular radio format. A radio documentary is based on documentary evidence – written records, attributable sources, actual happenings etc. Its purpose is to present a "balanced recorded truthful account of something or someone". What is invented is an imaginative documentation of facts and actualities. The two words associated with documentaries are **variety** and **actuality**.

While 'documentation' or 'actuality' is the mainstay of a radio documentary, the radio feature writer can take a lot of creative freedom. There is also a hybrid form of feature which combines studio material with actuality. There is scope in a feature for imaginative treatment of facts or even abstract concepts, while a documentary would confine itself to facts. For example, an imaginary conversation in heaven between Mahatma Gandhi and Pt. Nehru on what is happening in India today could form the subject matter of a feature. According to **Robert McLeish**, the feature need not be wholly true in the factual sense- it may include folk songs, poetry or drama to help illustrate its theme.

6.1 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- differentiate between features and documentaries;
- plan a feature or documentary;
- prepare the script; and
- select music and other effects for feature and documentary based radio programmes.

6.2 TYPES OF FEATURES AND DOCUMENTARIES

There are mainly two types of features: narrative features and dramatized features.

Narrative Feature: In Narrative Features, the thread of narration runs through the entire programme in which dialogues are avoided. It includes extracts from a variety of sources including books, memoirs, reports, dispatches, library recordings etc. Biographical features belong to this genre. A narrative feature is possible on any subject in which the producer can access material recorded or printed and create a word picture, through appropriate use of the accessed material and suitable narration.

Dramatized Feature: It has the characteristics of drama but unlike plays which deal with fiction, it aims at imaginative presentation of the facts. It is undertaken when OB recording is difficult to obtain or is not found necessary. To quote **Elwyn Evans**, a well known feature producer of the BBC "Invented dialogues in the mouth of invented characters sometimes express the essence of a human situation better than any words one can dig out of real people". A dramatized feature is not merely a talk script read by three or four voices but there is emphasis on dialogues and presentation by drama voices.

Radio Documentary is generally of two types; the informative and investigative.

Informative Documentary: It can be on any subject or theme, person, event, activity or institution undertaken to widen the horizon of the listeners. It tries to involve the audience both emotionally as well as intellectually by presenting a wide spectrum of information. The subject can be an eminent freedom fighter, AIDS awareness, a research institute or the discovery of insulin etc.

Investigative Documentary: As the title itself suggests, Investigative Documentary investigates some issues. It takes up special problems like street children, bride burning, drug addiction, corruption in public life, bogus universities etc.

6.3 PLANNING OF FEATURES AND DOCUMENTARIES

A radio feature or documentary, like any other radio programme, has to seize the attention of the audience. For that, it is crucial that the feature has a strong introduction. The introduction would also depend on the type of radio technique you adopt. Often sound and music, and not necessarily, the spoken-word, that can make the beginning of a programme attractive and compelling. You have to use your creativity and ingenuity to come out with very attractive openings of a radio feature. Conceptualisation is the first stage of planning.

6.3.1 Conceptualisation

You have already read in the preceding units that in order to make any radio programme, one has to have ideas. A radio person has to be on constant search for new ideas for conceptualizing programmes. The same is true while planning radio features and documentaries. The producer has to be very observant and look around for ideas for features and documentaries. While talking to people, interacting with experts, travelling or walking in the streets, bright ideas may flash across his/her mind which may be useful for developing programmes. Ideas are also gathered while attending a lecture, watching a play or a sporting event or even while buying things in the market. Some of the topics may be from your memory, others may stem from an experience or something you strongly feel about.

Many creative writers and producers have said that they hit upon on ideas when they are involved in something else – during travel or in “vacant or in pensive mood” as William Wordsworth put it. Like dreams we, however, tend to forget ideas. So, when an idea strikes, it is important to put it down on paper lest we should forget it. Many writers and producers have a diary or a scribbling pad on which they put down their ideas.

In addition to being observant, cultivation of the reading habit for a media practitioner is also essential. It not only provides information thus adding to ones knowledge, but it gives birth to new ideas needed for programme generation. Constant updating of information helps the producer to plan features and documentaries on new areas of human activity. Clippings from newspapers on strange things happening to ordinary people can also provide rich ideas for programmes.

Government departments, NGOs and some private organisations periodically bring out reports which contain information. A study of these reports and professional journals provides a great deal of information. Our country has a rich cultural heritage. An access to the calendar of special occasions, festivals and anniversaries can help in generating ideas. These occasions can be used for imaginative presentation of events/personalities in a historical perspective.

The tips usually given to new producers are:

- Keep a notebook handy to jot down ideas as and when they strike.
- Be observant while travelling as good programmes originate while travelling.
- Whatever is being read should be read with concentration as any interesting article or news item may give idea for a feature.
- Talking to different people can generate new ideas for features.
- Always have an open mind and be receptive to ideas.

Activity

Think of a place you have visited, an event you have witnessed, a person you have met, a situation or episode in a great man's life you have read recently. Put down on paper as many ideas you have thought of as possible for a radio feature.

6.3.2 Research

At the stage of generating ideas and conceptualizing a programme, you as a producer have to work on your own. You need to understand the subject and come to grips with it. Very often, the information, data or document available may not be adequate, hence, research may be required. Research helps you to cover the relevant and vital aspects or issues involved in their entirety. It enables you to define the scope and sharpen the focus of the programme.

Research comprises both library research and field research. Library research is collecting material from books, periodicals and report. Field research includes consulting persons connected with the subject. In many cases, the producer has to double up as a researcher for collecting and collating information from various sources. However, when specialised subjects are covered, a producer with his/her generalistic background may not be able to do justice to the topic chosen. On such occasions, a researcher with specialised knowledge needs to be hired. For example, if the programme is on nuclear power plant, then you are well advised to engage a researcher with the requisite background.



Researcher gleaming material from books in library

Appropriate agencies and experts need to be contacted for eliciting specialised in-depth information. For example, while doing a feature on growing violence against women it will be appropriate to get research material from a Centre for Women's Studies and Development or an NGOs engaged in fighting violence against women. If a documentary on tax evasion is being planned, then tax experts, lawyers, accountants and tax officials need to be consulted. For a programme on Port Trust, research input will help you to prepare a mental picture of a port trust, its activities, its problems, its contribution to the economy etc. At the time of visiting the port trust for recording you will not have to grope in the dark.

6.3.3 Defining the Scope

A radio programme, as you are aware, essentially seeks to cater to the needs of the listeners. You should ensure that the topic chosen is not only be relevant to the target audience but also be comprehensible to them. For this, it is imperative that you yourself have clarity in ideas about the subject and the treatment you propose to give to the subject. This means defining the objective and the scope of such programmes. If this is not done judiciously, you may end up with a plethora of material which would make production and editing a difficult task. Eventually, you may miss the focus and fail to communicate the essential aspects of the programme.

The scope of the programme is not a detailed write-up. It is a statement of the objectives of the programme. It may contain, at the most about 200 words. It starts with a working title which can be changed later if you come across a better and a more catchy one. If the producer is planning a programme on consumer protection which is a vast subject, outline the scope of the programme after studying the available material. It helps in focussing on the core issues, emphasis to be made, facts to be brought out, persons to be interviewed etc. Such a systematic approach helps in avoiding waste of efforts.

6.3.4 Plan of Action

After defining the objective of the programme and working on its scope, you have to chalk out a plan for production process. For the smooth production of a radio feature documentary, you have to do a lot of paper work. You have to intimate the organisation or individuals concerned about the date and time and schedule of recordings so that the persons are available at the time of his/her visit. Even if you speak to someone personally or over the telephone, it is always advisable to write and confirm the appointments so that there are no last minute glitches.

In radio, deadlines are of great importance. A programme like a feature is generally prepared well in advance. To beat the deadlines, various actions involved in the production of the programme need to be drawn out. You must outline a checklist of all these activities, including the sound effects to be recorded, the interviews to be conducted and the information to be collected.

In the case of studio based features, you have to prepare the list of recordings available in the library, material which is to be recorded in the studios, the artistes to be invited for voicing the script, the date and time of recording etc. For O.B. recording you have to organise the O.B. equipment, tapes, manpower and transport, dates of OBs, persons to be interviewed, dates of recording of narration, editing etc.

Many a time, you may have to act as an interviewer. However, if an interviewer is engaged, the latter has to be briefed so that relevant information can be obtained through interviews. A set of points need to be pulled out for each one of the persons to be interviewed. Many questions stem from the discussion/interview itself. However, to sharpen the focus, and to avoid unnecessary recordings and wastage of tapes, it is essential that you have a set of points ready with you.

Preparations also include arrangements for the recording. As you may have to travel extensively, you should have light equipment so that they do not become a burden. Ordinary cassette recorders of poor quality are avoided, instead, Ultra Portable Tape Recorders (UPTR) are found handy. You must also have sufficient number of good quality blank tapes. If the tapes are not new and have been used earlier, it is better to erase the tapes on a bulk eraser. Before going out for the recording, it is advisable to run all the tapes on the studio tape recorder. In addition, you should have enough stock of dry battery cells as it is possible that you may not have access to regular power supply.

6.3.5 Scripting of Features

Features are generally script-based. The producer writes the script him/herself or engages an experienced script writer to write it. The three cardinal principles of spoken-word namely simplicity, lucidity and euphony are to be kept in view while writing the script. A feature is possible without a single OB recording as 'inset'. If there is no recorded inset in the programme, the script has to be presented by two or three drama voices. The script will then lay emphasis on dialogues. However, as we have already mentioned, a feature script is not a talk script apportioned between two or three voices to be read, each voice establishes a separate identity. The beginning and end of the script must be both attractive as well as appropriate. A good beginning attracts the listeners while a good ending enables the listener to contemplate on the subject which lingers on in his/her mind

Check Your Progress: I

- Notes: 1) Use the space below for your answers.
 2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) List the various stages of planning features and documentaries.

- 2) What do you understand by the scope of a feature/documentary?

- 3) Prepare a check list of the items required for an outdoor documentary.

6.4 PRODUCTION OF FEATURES AND DOCUMENTARIES

Production includes a number of activities ranging from recording to titling the programme. Each activity is important but the emphasis differs in the production of features in comparison to the production of documentaries.

6.4.1 Recording

An important segment of production of features and documentary is the recording. It is as important in the case of documentaries where meticulous planning helps in the successful recording of sound effects and interviews. The soul of a documentary lies in the outdoor recordings while features depend on material including recordings already available supplemented by fresh recordings in the studio or outside. In the case of studio recordings, the procedure for recordings which we have discussed in the unit on Spoken-word has to be followed. In the case of an OB recording, elaborate planning has to be made. For example, if the documentary is on an industrial establishment, you must spend considerable time in studying the various production processes and record the relevant sound effects of different machines. If the programme is on a bird sanctuary, you must visit the sanctuary more than once, contact the people closely associated with the sanctuary and study the bird life in depth. You should stay in the sanctuary for 2 or 3 days so that you are able to catch glimpses of a variety of birds and record their voices at different times of the day.



Recording at location

Punctuality is a prerequisite for any recording. You cannot afford to be behind schedule and late arrival may lead to cancellation of interviews. When you reach the spot, before the actual recording starts, check all your equipment. It is advisable to listen to the recording after a few minutes to identify gaps, if any.

Interviews

Many a time, interviews have to be conducted for features and documentaries. The scope of interviewing for a feature or documentary is different from conducting an interview for a news bulletin or a magazine. In the case of features and documentaries, as distinct from other formats, the producer is an explorer who tries to dig out more and more information from the interviewee. Inquisitiveness and power of observation are essential for a producer. The empathy which the interviewer creates with the interviewee; makes the latter forget the presence of the recording machine placed before him/her.

As a producer doing a documentary with a historical perspective, you may have to undertake the technique of extended interviewing. For that you may have to spend more time or require more tapes/batteries. However, you will be rewarded with more information. There are many ethical issues involved while conducting interviews, for example, on some occasions, the interviewee may even provide information which is confidential in nature. However, it is your responsibility to play back the recording to the person and take consent so that s/he does not resent or feels cheated later. You should not take any part of the interview as a 'scoop' to sensationalise the issue but select only those items which fit into the scope of the programme. You should undertake the editing yourself to ensure that you are fair to the programme on one hand and the person whom you have interviewed on the other.

6.4.2 Listening and Transcription of Recordings

Once the recordings have been made, on your return to the studios, you should listen carefully to ensure that you have all the recordings required. The interviews, statements, speeches, poems have to be carefully listened to. The actual excerpts to be included in the programme and the additional recordings required have to be made either in the studios or outside, have to be identified. The benefits of listening to the recordings are:

- It helps in finding out whether there is any flaw, technical or otherwise in the recordings and taking corrective measures;
- It helps you to know what exactly you have in stock. If sound effects are not adequate or upto expectations, you can think of creating the effects either in the studio or outside or get them from library;
- It helps in writing the script.



Production team listening to recorded material

Transcription means rendering of speech in writing. It is advantageous if the recordings are transcribed as it becomes easier for the producer to do the editing in the transcript itself thus saving a lot of studio time. If the entire footage is transcribed, it helps in preparing the script as you would know what exactly someone has said. Accuracy can be maintained while writing the linking narration or the script. Transcription also helps in minimising the time of editing in the studio. It is called 'paper editing' when you decide on your excerpts from the transcription of the interviews. This can also help in deciding the exact duration of the programme while deciding the cuts.

6.4.3 Scripting of Documentary

Once you have listened to the entire footage, it is the time to write the script of the documentary. Scripting for a documentary includes a concise introduction of the subject, narration which serves a 'lead-in' to taped statements/interviews/sound and an appropriate conclusion. Producers usually script their documentaries themselves, though, some prefer to have a professional script-writer. If a writer is engaged, s/he is generally involved in the process of recording also. While a good introduction helps to attract and hold the attention of listeners, the narration tells the story in a cogent way. A good narration adds a sparkle to the taped 'actuality'. A strong introduction helps to draw the listener. Often sound and music and not necessarily the spoken-word make the beginning compelling and interesting. The body of the script comes out as a smooth flowing story which is easily understood by the listener.

6.4.4 Narration

Once the script has been finalised, the appropriate voice for narration has to be selected. Narration helps to drive the programme forward in a logical way; it helps to preface the voiced passages and recorded insets. It brings different elements together and mould them in an organic whole. You should try to make the narration short, pointed and avoid verbose language and clichés. The narration may be done by a single voice or two or more voices. The pioneer of radio documentaries, **Melville D'Mellow**, used to write the script himself which he used to narrate with telling effect. He always maintained that in a radio documentary there is need only for one voice to tell a story. However, depending upon the theme of the documentary, more than one voice can be used to infuse variety and reduce monotony. This decision needs to be taken by the producer. If the producer has a rich radio-genic voice, s/he can act as the narrator, otherwise, one or more drama voices are engaged.

6.4.5 Titling the Programme

Titling is defined as 'the interface between the programme and the audience'. Title of a programme unfolds the content to the listeners and constitutes a major selling point. The titling must be done in such a way that it is able to project the programme content as well as arouse the audience interest. In newspapers, correspondents file their stories and it is the sub-editor who gives the titles.

When a correspondent reported that arsonists burnt the 'set' material of the film 'Water', the sub editor titled the story- "Arsonists Fish in Troubled Water.' The producer of the radio feature Vande Matram titled it; 'The song that become a mantra'. It would be an ideal situation that a documentary feature is produced first and then scheduled for broadcast. This enables the producer to consider titling the programme after the production process has reached an advanced stage. The producer notes down a number of titles and finally chooses the one that is the most appropriate, catchy and sounds pleasant.

Activity

Give a title to this feature, whose opening paragraph is detailed below:-

"Today we are living on the threshold of Information Technology where many social scientists speak of the dawn of the information age. The right to expression along with information, is the basic need of man. The need is urgent when change is a way of life, breaking away from old traditions and beliefs. Media, a powerful tool, is the voice of people, which make people subjects rather than objects. The women in media face the challenge of giving voice to their fellow women to project them as agents of change rather than as silent victims."

6.5 POST PRODUCTION

Post production involves the inter-weaving of the title music, background music, dialogues, narration, sound effects and other recorded insets into an organic whole. Editing of the recorded material is an important segment of post production. Editing eliminates the portion which is not relevant, unnecessary or technically not good. It helps to prepare 'clean cuts' of what is good and essential. There are often occasions, when, in a long interview, only a few portions are required which the producer transposes and knits together. However, s/he has to ensure that the pitch and the recording levels of the cuts chosen merge naturally and do not sound patchy. Content-wise, editing makes the programme a compact mosaic of ideas, views and comments.

Before mixing is done, 'clean cuts' of the recorded materials are kept. Different cuts have to be faded-in and faded-out. Background music has to be faded-in at low level. Duration is another important aspect which the producer keeps in mind at the stage of scripting, recording of voices and selection of cuts. If required, footage is edited to adhere to the duration specified. Editing, however should not be mistaken for censorship. It should be done with a high sense of responsibility and the producer needs to ensure that nothing is edited to dilute what is contained in the recordings.

6.5.1 Selection of Music

Music is an important element of features and documentaries which can add colour to a spoken-word programme. Music is also used:

- as a theme of a programme;
- as a bridge between two scenes or segments;
- to break monotony; and
- to accentuate action.

While using music, the producer has to ask him/herself whether there is any need for that music? Does it serve any of the functions enumerated above or is it just an add on? Is it coming in the way of listening? Title and background music are selected with great care. The programme usually ends with the same instrumental or orchestral music used at the beginning which is known as title music. The title music is generally an orchestral piece, short and catchy. The producer has to ensure that the title music supports and is compatible with the content of the programme. A title music based on a western tune will be inappropriate for a documentary on the Ganges. The producer may choose the title music from the recordings available or opt for a fresh composition.

Background music is used whenever there is need to portray the moods or environment. The joyous or a sad mood in a feature can be highlighted by the use of instrumental music of the appropriate raga. It would be of interest to the listeners if the programme begins and ends with lilting music. The producer selects a piece of instrumental music available or s/he may produce one specially for the programme.

In the use of effects and music, it must be ensured that they are authentic. It is always better to use specially composed music if resources and facilities permit. While using music from a CD, you have to ensure that you do not violate copyright. It takes time and experience to select the right type of music. You would read more about this in the next unit on Music Programmes.

6.5.2 Selection of Sound Effects

To create the atmosphere in which the happenings outlined in the script take place, sound effects are required. The impact of the features and documentaries is enhanced by the use of sound effects and music. If the feature is on the topic: 'pleasure of reading while travelling', then the effect of a running train may be required. Every producer keeps a number of pre-recorded sound effects known as 'stock effects'. Nowadays sound effects are available on CDs also. However, as far as possible you should select sound effects which are local and sound genuine. If you need the sound effect of a crying child you must record the effect yourself and avoid using recorded or stock effects to provide an authentic touch. While using sound effects, you should use your imagination to innovate and experiment.



Sound recordist collecting sound effects

The post production process for features, magazines and documentaries is similar in nature. It is essentially mixing of various cuts in such a way that a well-knit programme emerges.

Check Your Progress: 2

- Notes:
- 1) Use the space below for your answers.
 - 2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the role of narration in producing features and documentaries?

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2) Why is transcribing important while producing features and documentaries?

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6.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt about the techniques of producing a Radio Feature and Radio Documentary. We can define a documentary as "radio dramatic presentation of actuality". Features make artistic or imaginative presentation of facts or even a concept. In a feature, a specific topic is chosen and dealt with from all angles. Interviews with people from relevant fields are added to enhance the credibility of programme.

Production of features and documentaries requires a great deal of research. The inclusion of music and sound effects is crucial in the production. Listeners would be able to appreciate the ambience or the setting where action takes place with reference to the sound effects used in the programme. Production also includes using title music appropriate to the programme. It is equally important that the language used is easily understandable and there is a natural flow. The title and opening line should be able to attract the listener giving out the listener some ideas of what is coming in the next 30 minutes. Closing of the feature is equally important, enabling the programme to linger in the minds of listeners "long after it is heard no more".

6.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress: 1

- 1) The various stages of planning features and documentaries include, conceptualisation of the programme, securing extensive background information through research, deciding on the scope of the programme, working out a detailed plan of getting the required recordings and preparing the framework of the script.
- 2) The scope of the programme is a statement of objectives pinpointing the core issues and the facts to be brought out, the focus and emphasis to be made and the proposed title of the programme.
- 3) The items required for an outdoor documentary include an UPTR, a high quality cassette recorder, battery pack, enough stock of magnetic tapes which are already run through and bulk erased.

Check Your Progress: 2

- 1) Narration helps to drive the programme forward in a logical way; it helps to preface the voiced passages and recorded insets. It brings different element together and mould them in an organic whole. The narration may be done by a single voice or two or more voices to infuse variety.
- 2) Transcription means rendering of speech in writing. It is advantageous if the recordings are transcribed as it becomes easier for the producer to do the editing in the transcript itself thus saving a lot of studio time. If the entire footage is transcribed, it helps in preparing the script as you would know what exactly someone has said. Accuracy can be maintained while writing the linking narration or the script. Transcription also helps in minimising the time of editing in the studio. This can also help in deciding the exact duration of the programme while deciding the cuts.