

Lend me your ears

In Our Time producer Victoria Brignell speaks to [Lewis Hill](#) about the show's past success, its present vigour and its future in universities

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Image: John McCafferty

How do you decide on the topic for each episode of In Our Time?

Subjects for the show are suggested not only by members of the production team but also by guests, other academics and listeners. We currently have more than 600 subjects on our ideas list so we're not short of topics! We have regular meetings with Melvyn in which we consider what topics will be covered in the next tranche of programmes. In Our Time covers science, history, philosophy, culture, religion and classics, and when we are deciding what topics to cover, we try to choose a roughly equal number of subjects from each of these six areas.

How do you select the academics for each show?

Our guests are chosen because they are leading authorities in their field, engaging communicators and passionate about their knowledge. When In Our Time began, journalists and writers were often included in the panel. Today, however, we only book people who hold positions at universities or leading museums because it is felt that this gives them extra authority and credibility. To date, our guests have been drawn from more than 50 academic institutions. Guests may be recommended to us by other academics or we may discover their work through internet research. We aim to include at least one person in each edition who has taken part in the programme before.

A number of University of York academics have been guests on In Our Time including Jeanne Nuechterlein, Senior Lecturer in the Department of History of Art; David Wootton, Professor of History and Tom Stoneham, Professor of Philosophy. Along with academics from the University, other well-known figures who have appeared on In Our Time are Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal; Steve Jones, Emeritus Professor of Genetics at University College London and Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at the University

of Cambridge. In Our Time is also known for giving a voice to women. In the last five years alone, we have had fourteen all-female panels of guests who have discussed subjects like the number 'e', the An Lushan Rebellion and the Icelandic Sagas.

Do you have a favourite episode?

I've thought a long time about this and I find it impossible to choose just one! I read Classics at Cambridge University so I always enjoy working on the episodes which deal with history or cultural topics. However, perhaps the programmes I relish the most are the scientific and mathematical ones because the research takes me outside my comfort zone. For example, I've helped to produce programmes on comets, absolute zero, relativity and the number e, as well as many other scientific subjects.

What is the biggest challenge that you have faced as a producer of the show?

Last year, In Our Time was one of the Radio 4 programmes which held a 'Listener Week'. We invited listeners to suggest a topic we should cover and we received 862 ideas. Trying to choose just one idea from that many was a difficult task for the production team! Eventually Kafka's The Trial was chosen (broadcast Nov 27th last year).

Why do you think In Our Time has enjoyed such long term success?

I think In Our Time's longevity is due to three factors. Firstly, we don't underestimate the intelligence of our audience. We cater for a large number of people who want to listen to a challenging and intellectually stimulating programme. Secondly, we tackle a huge diversity of subjects. To give you a taste of what we offer, this year we have examined Jane Eyre, dark matter, the California Gold Rush and Sappho, to name but a few. Our back catalogue even includes programmes on eunuchs and the Kama Sutra. Finally, In Our Time is distinctive because it is not bound by the news agenda. Indeed, we sometimes joke that our motto should be "never knowingly topical". While other programmes will discuss a subject because a celebrity is promoting a new book or film or there is an anniversary to mark, we choose a topic purely because it is interesting in itself (we hope!). This gives In Our Time a refreshing unpredictability.

Do you feel that episodes of In Our Time could be used more as material in university modules?

Yes, definitely. Since In Our Time began on 15th October 1998, more than 680 editions have been broadcast and all of them are available to listen to or download via the In Our Time website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qykl>). Each episode of In Our Time is like a university seminar involving some of the leading experts in their field. Whatever subject a student is studying, there is a strong chance that there's an edition that is relevant to their course. I know that some academics already include In Our Time episodes in the reading lists that they hand out to their students.



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