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"The Social Impact of the Radio"

By

Douglas S. Stanley

The history of broadcasting in the United States begins in 1920, when the results of the presidential election were transmitted. Even though only a few hundred people heard that actual broadcast, interest in the radio became widespread. In the winter of 1921-1922, the popular interest in the radio led to the establishment of stations throughout the country. In 1922 the demand for radios was so great that many people had to wait in long lines to purchase their sets, only to be told when they reached the head of the line that they had to place their orders and pick their sets up in several weeks.¹

There were many problems in the early days of radio. First, there were no effective regulations, and the federal government had no jurisdiction over radio communications within a state. Then, the fact that a great many people were experimenting with the wireless compounded the difficulty. Amateurs crossed signals with professionals, in many cases resulting in two

¹Charles A. Siepmann, Radio, Television and Society (New York, 1950), p. 4.

programs being on the same frequency.²

By 1922 the situation was so bad that the listening public demanded action. Everyone involved with broadcasting recognized the need for some kind of regulation, but it was difficult to decide on the proper form. Outlook Magazine suggested that "in this, as in other instances, a limited monopoly publicly controlled is preferable to unlimited competition."³ If the radio was to serve the public, it could not be under a private or an uncontrolled monopoly. Yet, even with government control, someone would have a great deal of power.

These first few years of the radio almost proved fatal. The unrestricted competition was bad for radio's development, and it inconvenienced the listeners. In addition, many people bought inexpensive radios of poor quality which were produced by companies interested only in a quick profit. These problems led to the first effective control of broadcasting.

By 1927, with many of these early problems being solved,

²ibid., p. 5.

³"Radio -- The New Social Force," Outlook Magazine, (March 19, 1924), 466.

the radio became a vital social force. It provided unlimited entertainment. Anyone could afford to buy a radio set, and listen to it without any substantial cost.

In 1927, Marshall D. Beuick wrote in the American Journal of Sociology that broadcasting could never compete with other amusements. He admitted that it did have limited social effects, bringing more music, for instance, than any other media. Beuick felt that the most beneficial aspect of the radio was that it brought entertainment and information to those who were most isolated, in hospitals, prisons and other institutions. It also was valuable to the blind.

The rural inhabitant has greatly benefited from the radio. The radio has served as his communication with the city, and with the world. A farmer could learn the highest selling price for his products, and get top dollar. During the winter months, when the roads were impassable, farmers were isolated from society, so they could rely upon the radio for news and entertainment.⁴ As a result of the radio, the farmers' interest in national affairs increased. Also, farm family life became more enjoyable. The family could stay up later

⁴Marshall D. Beuick, "The Limited Social Effect of Radio Broadcasting," American Journal of Sociology, XXXII (January 1927), 615-617.

at night to listen to interesting programming that also was being heard in the city and throughout the nation. Generally, the radio along with the automobile made farm life more tolerable.⁵

Beuick insisted that the radio would never replace human association. He predicted that the radio only would survive if properly financed and regulated, and with careful programming. But he thought that the rural community would benefit most from the radio, while the city people would soon tire of its novelty. He said that most people would rather attend an opera or a ballgame than sit at home and listen to them. Being there is half the fun, but the radio would bring entertainment to those unable to attend.⁶ "Think of all the people in the cities," one supporter of the radio declared, "who cannot afford what the cities have to offer! The new America, the culture of abundance, of quick movements! And the instrument, the supreme interpreter of this new culture is the radio..."⁷

Aside from entertaining, the radio could easily be used for political propaganda. Some people have argued that the radio was the strongest arm of a dictator, because it reduced

⁵Kenneth G. Bartlett, "Social Impact of the Radio," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, CCL (1947), 92.

⁶Beuick, "Limited Social Effect of Radio Broadcasting," American Journal of Sociology, XXXII, 621.

⁷"Both Sides of the Radio Argument," Literary Digest, CIV (January 11, 1930), 26.

entire countries to the size of one room, the broadcasting booth. Many others were made believers on October 30, 1938, when Orson Welles broadcasted his radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds. The result was widespread disorder and terror from coast to coast. As the original version was considered too boring to hold the attention of a radio audience, officials at CBS decided to change the locale to the United States, with Martians destroying the New Jersey countryside.⁸ But CBS had not thought of the possibility that a great many people might tune in after the program had started. It was announced at the beginning that it was fictitious, and three similar announcements were made during the broadcast, but many people either did not hear the warnings or were too hysterical to come to their senses.

Hospitals, police stations and newspaper offices were flooded with telephone calls from people asking how they could get gas masks or escape the disaster. Imaginations went wild as the rumors spread. Some citizens reported that they had heard the "swish" of the Martian visitors; one man insisted that he heard machine-gun fire, and a man with binoculars

⁸"Dialed Hysteria," Newsweek Magazine, November 7, 1938, P. 13.

on a building in Manhattan reportedly saw the flames of battle. In Newark, some people moved their furniture out of their homes, while others put wet towels around their faces to repel any dangerous gas.⁹

By the end of the week, the Federal Communications Commission had received hundreds of protests against Welles and CBS. The press, a competitor of the radio, condemned it as a public outrage. H. G. Wells, the author, was also upset, as it had been agreed that it was to be used as entertainment and not as news. He declared that he never gave any permission to alter it in any way.

Orson Welles defended himself by insisting that he did not intend to scare anyone, and that he changed the script because he thought the original would be too boring. It was estimated that six million people heard the program, and about two million believed it to be true. The episode was a good example of how the radio could be used to spread propaganda to a willing and gullible public.

Despite being able to create panic, the radio could also

⁹ibid.

be used to draw a nation closer together through promoting a general awareness of its citizens' needs. It could be extremely valuable in fighting prejudices because it allowed many people to learn of the problems of others. Radio broadcasts could increase knowledge, break down intolerance and promote understanding, as long as it does not carry the "wrong" voice.¹⁰

To promote understanding between groups, some stations tried to present social problems on the air. H. B. Summers, of the American Broadcasting Company, believed "that by stressing the need for tolerance and understanding in a number of programs of different types, we can exert an influence on a much greater number of listeners than could be reached by a separate program series."¹¹

"New World A-Coming" was outstanding as a promoter of national unity and was winner of eight national awards. For the first year, the contributions of the Negro to American life were dramatized, but the scope of the program was expanded to reveal significant achievements of all minority groups and their contributions to the development of America. The series was described as "meeting a responsibility of removing the skeletons

¹⁰Lyman Bryson and Dorothy Rowden, "Radio as an Agency of National Unity," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, CCXLIV (1946), 137.

¹¹ibid., p. 140.

from our country's closet, of warning the nation of its mightiest problem, the menace of minority persecution and domestic discord."¹²

Although these programs placed an emphasis on the origin, culture and contributions of different groups, people felt that accentuating these differences only widened the social distance between groups instead of drawing them together. Yet, William Robeson's "Open Letter on Race Hatred" was broadcasted by CBS following the bitter race riots during the summer of 1943, and it was considered as one of the radio's most timely efforts to reduce tension.¹³

A code of ethics was adopted with the passage of the Communications Act of 1934, which stated that "No programs shall be conceived or presented for the purpose of deliberately offending the racial, religious, or otherwise socially conscious groups of the community."¹⁴ It also was necessary to guard against inflaming existing prejudices, as was the case in Nazi Germany.

Many network serials were socially significant, in spreading commonly accepted moral values, such as the idea that "crime does not pay." "The Green Hornet" apprehended criminals by knocking

¹²ibid.

¹³ibid., p. 141.

¹⁴ibid., p. 137.

them out or scaring them into submission with a harmless gas. He never killed or permanently injured anyone. "Lamont Cranston, the Shadow," could make himself invisible and he terrified crooks into giving up their lives of crime. He had great powers, but always used them to defend virtue. These programs, and others like them, taught the youthful listener that crime does not pay, but also encouraged them to use their talents for the betterment of society.

Studies have shown that the radio has played an important role in the molding of public opinion, although to a large extent that role has been minimized since 1950 with the widespread use of television. During the peak years of the radio, from 1921 to 1950, the "active" electorate was enlarged from 39 to 62 percent of those eligible.¹⁵ A candidate could broadcast his speeches and gain a large audience without having to spend the time and money traveling and making a great many public appearances. The radio helped give the American people a sense of involvement in the democratic process, by bringing political campaigns right into the house. In addition, the radio reduced the power of the press by allowing a candidate to speak with less fear of editorial censorship.

¹⁵Bartlett, "Social Impact of the Radio," Annals of the American Academy, CCL, 91.

The radio has had its greatest influence in the area of entertainment. The most popular radio programs were always comedies. Some of the best radio comedians—Bob Hope, Jack Benny, and Edgar Bergen, included in their programs messages relating to the sale of war bonds. These were important in maintaining morale during the Second World War, and it was found that bond sales increased if the pitch was made with a joke.¹⁶

In 1941 a man wrote a letter to the New Republic accusing the radio broadcasting corporations of capitalizing on the war by creating hysteria. He listed a series of grievances, such as unnecessary interruptions of scheduled programs to issue unconfirmed bulletins which frightened rather than informed, repetition of the same news, and capitalizing upon disasters by falsely dramatizing many of the serious issues of the war. He suggested that before being broadcast, all items should be officially confirmed by Washington. The author also complained that commentators did not use restraint in expressing their personal opinions.¹⁷

Although accused of scaring people, the radio did an outstanding job of relaying the news during wartime. That was especially true in the case of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor

¹⁶ ibid., p. 93.

¹⁷ Frederic Reeves, "Radio Broadcasting in Wartime," The New Republic, (December 22, 1941), 864.

on December 7, 1941. Minutes after receiving word of the attack, radio stations started interrupting programs and broadcasters worked 24 hours a day to inform their listeners about the war. Then, members of the radio industry volunteered their facilities and services to the war effort.¹⁸ After the war, individual stations tried to bring more and better news to their communities, by gathering and editing it themselves, rather than taking material off the teletype.

In summary, the radio has been an effective socializing tool. It has been used to mold public opinion, and to break down racial and cultural differences. It has had a significant effect on family life, especially in rural, isolated areas. Recently, television has taken over some of the roles played earlier by radio, but radio provided a great service to a growing America.

¹⁸"Radio's Role," Newsweek Magazine, December 15, 1941, p. 35.