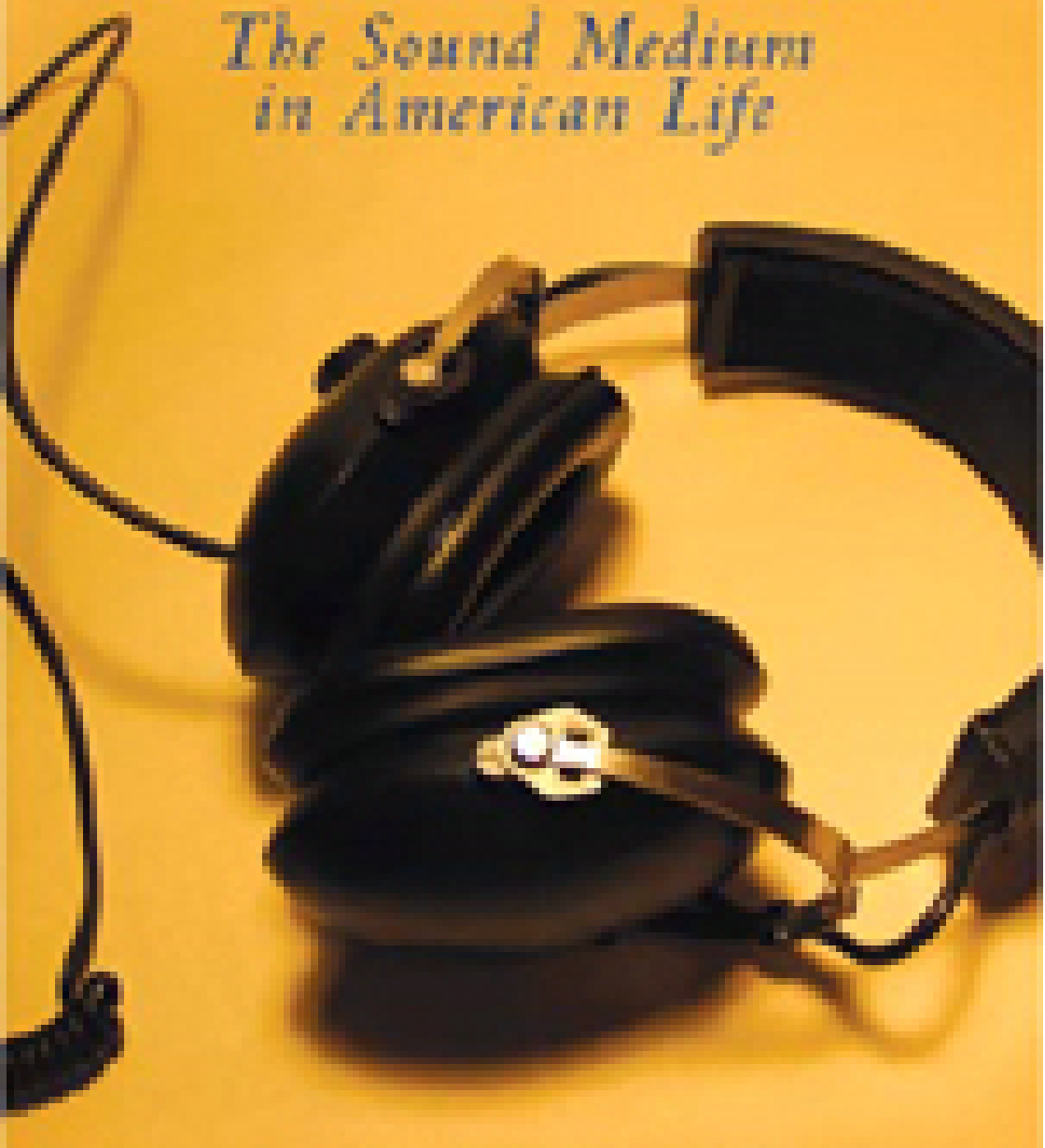


RADIO CULTURES

*The Sound Medium
in American Life*



Michael C. Keith



Introduction

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The launch of radio changed the country in both subtle and profound ways. From its experimental origins before World War I to regular broadcasting after the war, it began to transform how Americans spent their leisure time and acquired information. As radio took over the parlor, it became the principal means for passing the time between work and bed. Indeed, daily life was altered by the transformation of wireless technology into a new household utility.

In the first decade of radio broadcast operations—the 1920s—women and minorities were marginalized by Anglo male dominance, and radio reflected this unfortunate reality. Not surprisingly, women and minorities, namely African Americans, were portrayed according to the prevailing social biases of the time—as radio reflected the cultural status quo. Women were depicted on the air as domestic caregivers—housewives and mothers—and blacks and other minorities were represented as second-class citizens to be ignored or stereotyped (just consider the hugely popular *Amos 'n' Andy* for one obvious example). Yet, paradoxically, the presence of women and minorities on radio (even in stereotypical roles) would ultimately help these maligned groups overcome the limitations imposed on them—albeit not for a very long time. Eventually women and minorities would utilize radio to address their equitable participation in the life of the nation.

The importance of radio as social instrument and catalyst became amply evident in the 1930s and 1940s on two fronts in particular. When the Depression placed the nation in the quicksand of financial despair, President Roosevelt turned to radio to galvanize people behind his administration's plans to reverse the harrowing descent. On some 30 occasions, FDR spoke directly to America's citizens over the airwaves. The overwhelming response demonstrated the power of broadcasting at crucial moments in history. So did the unintended panic created by Orson Welle's infamous *The War of the Worlds* broadcast in late 1938. Just two years later, Edward R. Murrow broadcast courageous reports from a bombed-out London,

tuning America to its own fast-approaching war. Never before had Americans been instantaneously transported to battlefronts from the comfort of their own parlors. Radio became the first and primary source of news during World War II, an indispensable means for staying abreast of world, national, and local events. In a few short years, radio became a vital part of the American experience.

As television steadily usurped radio's status as home entertainer after 1948, the audio medium struggled until it developed an enthusiastic audience among young people who cherished the portable receivers that brought them the latest pop music and hip deejays. Top 40 radio's impact on the youth culture was immense on several levels. Radio empowered teens in ways hitherto unimaginable—and perhaps, for adults, undesirable—by instilling in them a sense of connection, exclusivity, and entitlement. Radio spoke to young people in their own language and influenced their attitudes and behavior in lasting ways.

As the public's consciousness about civil rights was raised in the late 1950s and through the 1960s, radio was seen as one means of vocalizing needs by marginalized segments of the population. One of the most extraordinary examples of radio's new value in addressing social inequities is the story of Native American radio. By the late 1960s, the nation's indigenous community had been watching the Black Power movement with keen interest and decided to emulate its strategy for addressing social wrongs. One positive way to reverse the negative influence of mainstream culture (and media) on its languages and traditions was to build its own radio stations on reservations. Today nearly three dozen radio stations are licensed to Native Americans and they help maintain the legacy and heritage of their listeners as well as promote their social and economic well-being. There is arguably no greater example of how a public medium can be used as a force for necessary change. Native American radio is a growing force and offers a strong case for why the radio medium deserves scholarly examination as an instrument of change.

Radio made its presence known in another way in the 1960s through the signals of stations standing in opposition to the status quo in the radio industry itself as well as in society. Essentially, the radio programming phenomenon known variously as underground, progressive, alternative, and freeform was spawned by two key factors: a disdain for formula radio (specifically Top 40) among a handful of young and rebellious broadcasters and the cultural upheaval over Vietnam and civil rights that characterized the period. In the first instance, the highly formulaic hit music radio sound—featuring two-and-a-half-minute doo-wop tunes and frenetic deejays—that dominated the AM airwaves had finally driven some radio aficionados and practitioners to chart a different course. This powerful though short-lived revolution in radio found sustenance in and gained inspiration from the

counterculture movement that was sweeping the country's colleges. Rock music began to reflect the antiestablishment sentiments of the nation's young people, thus further fanning the flame of discontent that gave rise to commercial underground radio. This was radio designed and oriented "for the people" that gave the new programming genre its uniqueness and cachet. Stations promoting an anticorporate and antigovernment mindset were rare in commercial radio. Audiences were not accustomed to hearing deejays speak out against the military-industrial complex, big business, and social inequality while advocating love and sometimes even the use of mind-altering drugs. Nor were listeners acquainted with commercial radio that aired a broad spectrum of music (albeit rock and roll) in thoughtful and evocative sets emphasizing quality and substance over quantity and banality.

Noncommercial stations (mainly affiliated with colleges) offered programming that contrasted with mainstream commercial outlets and the gestalt that informed them, but their audiences were tiny compared with those of their commercial counterparts. Indeed, as underground radio sought to reflect deeper social issues, educational stations on the lower end of the FM band attempted to address civil inequities through programs for marginalized groups, such as gays and lesbians. As noted in *Queer Airwaves*, "The story of gay and lesbian broadcasting is only beginning to be told ... The 60s and 70s gave way to several radio shows, mainly on non-commercial radio stations that engaged in a dialogue with the gay community." (Johnson/Keith, p. 8) This was not happening on television or in the commercial part of the broadcast radio dial. Indeed, "[q]ueer radio would push forward and feverishly combat the stereotypical attitudes and hate propaganda targeted toward gays and lesbians into the present." (p. 9).

Sadly, hate broadcasts found a place on radio in the 1980s and 1990s with shock jocks (who found it great sport to denigrate women, gays, and minorities) and right-wing extremists (who spewed virulent racist and homophobic rhetoric). In this sense, radio again reflected society in providing both good and evil. From the 1930s national broadcasts of the anti-Semitic Catholic priest Charles Coughlin to the racist ranting of neo-Nazis and white supremacists, such as David Duke and Ernst Zundel (recently incarcerated in Germany for his denial of the Holocaust), in the last decade of the 20th century, radio has been exploited for malevolent purposes. Fortunately, the positive service of radio has far outweighed the iniquity. However, the potential of the medium to shape views of a vast audience appeals to those with agendas that strike the mainstream as harmful and even dangerous.

Two movements in the past couple of decades again demonstrate how integral radio is to the social and cultural machinations of the country. Political talk radio has influenced some voting decisions, and in the early

1990s it actually influenced the outcome of several state elections and the composition of the U.S. Congress. This is yet another poignant example of radio's role in reflecting society. To the chagrin of liberals, talk radio has been largely dominated by social and political conservatives. Political pundits argue that without talk radio, the leadership of the country might have been significantly different. So should we credit or condemn radio for giving us the politicians we have? Radio has clearly had an influence on the nation's history.

A more recent radio development with potential sociopolitical bearing is low-power FM (LPFM for short), which has its roots in clandestine broadcasts that have appeared from time to time. These unauthorized and thus unlicensed stations provided alternative music and public affairs programs. Starting in the mid-1970s, a long period of deregulation has relieved broadcasters of many former obligations, most notably the Fairness Doctrine (dropped in 1978). The subsequent rise of one-sided right-wing broadcasting was one factor behind the rise of illegal low-power outlets. Micro or pirate stations, as they were initially labeled, were inspired to enter the airwaves to address what they perceived as radio's shortcomings, including a decline in public service content. Their goal was to provide highly local and community-oriented programming, something they felt traditional radio was not providing owing to its bottom-line obsession. Micro stations sought to provide an alternative to profit-obsessed, big business radio and even mainline public stations. These illicit broadcasters felt justified in airing without authorization because they believed they were exercising their constitutional rights of free speech and providing an important public service, which, after all, was the principle behind the issuance of broadcast licenses in the first place. The government saw things differently and in the name of actual or potential interference forced most of these stations off the air. At the start of the new century, the FCC created tiny LPFM licenses to meet the obvious demand for more voices. However, faced with resistance from the odd bedfellows of commercial and public broadcasters, these are issued only in limited numbers and largely in rural regions, mostly to church and civic groups. This action has frustrated the community of micro broadcasters, who, left out of the mix, have in some cases continued their illegal broadcasts.

Beyond the shores and borders of the United States, radio's social and cultural role has been no less notable. In developing countries, the medium has typically served (and continues to serve) as the primary information source, and in some third world countries its use is of singular importance as print media are often unavailable or unreliable. It is hard to calculate the value of radio to NGOs in Tanzania attempting to address gender discrimination (spousal abuse and genital mutilation) or the influence of community radio in Mongolia seeking to increase "opportunities for citizen

participation and encourage social accountability" (Developing Radio Partners, 2007). Radio brings people and cultures together in sparsely populated and remote locales around the globe.

Drawing from the legacy of radio studies pioneers Paul Lazarsfeld, Hadley Cantril, and others, and in keeping with Michele Hilmes's and Jason Loviglio's *Radio Reader* (2002) and Susan Squier's *Communities of the Air* (2003) seeks to examine the many facets of radio's participation in American culture from the perspective of several leading scholars. Distinguishing this particular volume from the formidable works cited above is its focus on the relationship of certain minority or so-called fringe groups with radio at different points in its development and history. To this end, Susan Brinson launches the volume with an assessment of how communication regulators have failed African American station ownership efforts as a consequence of mainstream partisanship. Donald Browne follows with an examination of the ways in which linguistic minorities have utilized radio, Roberto Avant-Mier discusses the medium in terms of its multifaceted influence in the Hispanic community through popular music traditions, Bruce Smith explores the unique mission of radio in remote and often impoverished Native American communities, Donna Halper addresses how radio gave public voice to women, Phylis Johnson tells the affecting story of gay and lesbian radio, and underground radio pioneer Larry Miller reflects on the contribution of 1960s counterculture programmers.

Increasing the volume's scope are Tona Hangen's assessment of religious radio's effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate to broadcast in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity," Elizabeth Fones-Wolf's analysis of the efforts of labor unions to overcome the corporate world's domination of the airwaves, National Public Radio news anchor Corey Flintoff's perspective on the challenges confronting public radio, Louise Benjamin's study of the government's actions and reactions to indecent broadcasts, Robert Hilliard's investigation of hate speech in mainstream and far-right-wing programs, Peter Laufer's evaluation of talk radio's influence on contemporary society, Douglas Craig's overview of the way in which radio provided Americans with a new form of political debate, and Lawrence Soley's disquisition into the passion and plight of unlicensed low-power radio stations.

Rounding out the volume are Cindy Welch's account of the use of radio to inspire young readers, Barbara Calabrese's examination of the existence and value of radio studies in the communication classroom and curriculum, Michael Keith's survey of cultural studies in radio, and Christopher Sterling's perspective on the future of terrestrial radio as new and evolving audio technologies draw listeners from the medium.

Despite the recent spate of laudable scholarly studies of radio, the subject has been slow to gain traction and acceptance in academic circles and curricula. Yet it does seem the tide has turned, and this fact is encouraging

to anyone who recognizes and appreciates the significant role the medium has played in the daily ebb and flow of society and culture since its arrival nearly a century ago. As the great radio dramatist Norman Corwin once wrote, "Sometimes the obvious is the most difficult thing to recognize."

Note

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