

Radio—The Forgotten Medium

ASK ABOUT "THE MEDIA" and people think first of television, then newspapers. Sometimes, though not always, they acknowledge the existence of radio. But it is not uncommon for media critics to ignore radio altogether in their treatment of the larger modern media mix. Although the average American owns multiple radios and lives with this most portable medium in every room in the house, in the office, the car and even in parks, mountain retreats and at the beach, radio is rarely the topic of public discussion, giving it the dubious identity of "the forgotten medium." This, the oldest of the broadcast media and once the king of electronic media, has moved farther and farther back in the media family photo. Occasionally there are references in the press to a radio station sale, a new radio network or a controversy first ignited on radio, but such sightings of radio in the public discourse are cameo appearances, like those of a once-famous leading actor reduced to walk-on or character roles. Radio, however, is much more than a bit player or an aging "maiden aunt," as more than one author in this *Journal* suggest.

A close look at radio demonstrates its vitality, its economic, political and social importance, as well as its staying power in the communication field. A flurry of articles last year about the Federal Communications Commission's concern over broadcasting for children demonstrated how far the radio star had fallen and how invisible the medium had become. In article after article, the term "broadcasting" meant only television—not radio. Radio program listings, once a

staple of American newspapers, have virtually disappeared, save for a few agate-sized mentions, typically about talk shows. Once celebrated for its profound and highly visible role in popular culture, radio has for years now taken a seat far from center stage, seemingly in the shadows of the communications industry. In fact, *Radio Times*, the popular monthly published by the BBC, may be the only mainstream magazine in the world that still honors radio with top billing.

Even New York's Museum of Broadcasting relegated the world's first broadcast medium to the background when it changed its name in 1991 to the Museum of Television and Radio. This prompted radio entertainer Garrison Keillor to implore his favorite medium "work a little harder, struggle a little more" to get its due, a notion that brought a smile to the face of the man who has championed the rights of shy people—and those of what has become a shy medium, pushed out of its once preeminent position by its younger and now dominant sibling, television.

ALL THAT SAID, no one should be deceived into thinking that radio is not alive and well or that it is no longer important on the world stage. Though snubbed by media coverage in the United States, radio remains the world's most ubiquitous medium, certainly the one with the widest reach and greatest penetration. The ease with which radio leaps national boundaries, and its potential power for shaping public opinion are not lost on those who watched the fall of communism, first in Eastern Europe and then in the Soviet Union. In April 1993, without prompting in a venue unrelated to radio, Lech Walesa, the president of Poland, told a Freedom Forum audience that it was free media and "the need for objective information" that finally cracked the Iron Curtain. "Especially radio," he said, which "brought information prohibited in our country. It raised our spirits, strengthened faith and hope. It created a feeling of togetherness and international solidarity of free people." Across the globe, the same could be said of the role of Radio Veritas in the Philippines, which helped solidify opposition to Ferdinand Marcos. And there are many examples in other countries where radio is profoundly important, even in the age of television.

Radio in the United States garners a fraction (6.7 percent) of media advertising expenditures, which totaled \$125.4 billion nationwide in 1991. In comparison, newspapers got 24.1 percent of ad revenues, television 21.7 percent, direct mail 19.3 percent and 28.2 percent for all other media. Most media suffered in the early 1990s, with overall ad spending down 1.7 percent nationally from 1990-91: daily newspapers lost 5.8 percent, magazines 4.1 percent and television 3.5 percent (though cable advertising was up a whopping 15.2 percent); radio, while also losing, declined less than the others for the period, 2.9 percent. Rebounding somewhat since 1991, national radio ad revenues are expected to grow at an annual rate of 6.4 percent, to \$11.5 billion by 1996, predicts the communications industry forecasting firm, Veronis, Suhler and Associates; television is expected to grow at 6.8 percent, to \$32.8 billion by 1996, and newspapers by 6.7 percent to \$59.8 billion. Even in times of economic recession, it is important to note, money spent on radio buys a lot. It is the least expensive and most targeted medium in which to "publish" and new satellite links and various programming networks ensure that radio will remain a vital force in communicating throughout American society and the world.

The influence of radio far exceeds its relative economic weight in the media market. National Public Radio, for example, is a major presence in the American news media, with clout far beyond what total audience numbers might indicate because of the upscale nature of its listeners. Ronald Reagan (whose communications savvy few question) brought back the presidential radio address, not as a nostalgic nod to Franklin Delano Roosevelt but because radio is a means of reaching millions of Americans not eager to sit passively in front of a television set. This most portable electronic medium also is essential for anyone interested in instant news or popular music. It is still the most immediate and relied-upon emergency medium during times of disaster, with a reach broader than that of television, still serving distant and rural locations that have little or no local television service.

Radio's cultural function is probably best illustrated by the popularity of Garrison Keillor, whose "Prairie Home Companion"—originally a local program on Minnesota Public Radio before going

national—makes creative demands on the senses and encourages listeners to see, smell and feel Keillor's imaginary hometown of Lake Wobegon, "where all the children are above average." In anyone's radio hall of fame, Keillor has first-rank inclusion, so strong is his influence on the character of the medium and its content. More or less alone on the radio drama stage of the 1990s, he does what radio did in the 1930s and 1940s, during medium's so-called golden age.

SOcial ANALYSTS have spent little time in recent years considering radio's changing functions following from its initial metamorphosis after the advent of television. Except for passing references to radio listeners' perceptions that Richard Nixon had won the famed 1960 presidential debates, while TV viewers thought he'd lost badly, not many scholars pay much attention to radio, its reach, impact and influence on life generally and within the media family more specifically. By the same token, media reporters and critics also have largely forgotten about radio, with some notable exceptions.

Radio got some attention in the 1980s, when a resurgence of talk radio, for the most part hosted by conservative talkmeisters, was credited with the defeat of a congressional pay raise. Similarly, during the 1992 presidential campaign, the rise of Rush Limbaugh—the "Doctor of Democracy"—and the continued influence of Larry King reinforced the serious role of radio in American communication. Indeed, a Center study of the media and campaign '92 found that King, in his radio and television roles, was the second most-frequently cited pundit in press coverage of the presidential campaign, behind David Brinkley, doubtless a byproduct of independent candidate Ross Perot's patronage. Less often talked about these days but still a powerful radio force is the commentator Paul Harvey, who was deemed one of the most influential Americans of all time in a 1989 article in this *Journal* by Frank Mankiewicz. In an essay titled "From Lippmann to Letterman: The 10 Most Powerful Voices," the eminent political adviser and communications specialist noted that in lists of the 10 most influential opinion-shapers of each decade since the 1930s, Paul Harvey's name appears most often, found on five of the six lists. Harvey's durability

ty and that of radio are worthy of much more consideration than they have gotten in recent years.

Radio's resilient nature points up the fact that a medium's place in the media family can change without signaling its death. There may be a message here for television as futurists ponder whether 500-channel cable systems will transform television into a medium as fragmented as its older sibling, radio. Books, newspapers and radio, all once confidently marked for extinction by one critic or another, not only live on but have new and refined missions in the world of modern communication.

With this issue, the *Media Studies Journal* acknowledges that radio is not only still with us, but is still a medium of great power and importance. Although television is closing in, radio remains the medium with the greatest reach and impact worldwide. On the domestic scene, the medium's changing role in a volatile and ever-shifting U.S. media market may have obscured its vitality and importance, something we hope will be reversed in the minds of critics, analysts, scholars and, most importantly, the public. Every indication we see—economic, demographic, social and democratic—suggests that far from fading away into the ether, radio is moving back into our consciousness and back into the mainstream. With any luck, the notion of radio as a forgotten medium will itself be soon forgotten.

IN THE INTRODUCTORY section of "Radio—The Forgotten Medium," four authors combine to remind us of radio's social context, past, present and future. In her essay, "Resilient Radio," telecommunications scholar Marilyn J. Matelski of Boston College reviews radio's glory days and argues that the glory is not all in the past. "Once the marvel of the age, the glue that held a nation together through war and economic depression, radio is now perceived as occupying a corner chair at media family gatherings—a maiden aunt, beloved but past her prime. Not so," she contends, radio is as vital today as it was 50 years ago.

B. Eric Rhoads, publisher of *Radio Ink* magazine, illustrates in "Looking Back at Radio's Future" how and why this is so. "If nothing else, radio has proven itself able to adapt, Phoenix-like, to whatever

comes—television, format wars, contests and worse,” he observes. So satellites, digital broadcasting and other new technology don’t mean a thing—challenges have always meant opportunity for radio. Many of those opportunities for radio have been political, as Barnard College political scientist Michael X. Delli Carpini describes in “Radio’s Political Past.” The first radio broadcast was political—returns of the 1920 presidential election. “The history of radio is suffused with politics,” he writes, a tradition that continues.

Another of radio’s prime functions always has been to serve the public in times of catastrophe, as David Bartlett, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association recounts. In “News Radio—More Than Masters of Disaster,” Bartlett observes that radio has played a central role in disasters from the *Titanic* on, and in everyday life. “When hurricanes hit, when traffic is snarled, when the World Trade Center is bombed, when the Orioles are in town—give radio 22 minutes (or less) and get the world.”

WITH THESE PERSPECTIVES as prologue, we then move into a tour of radio formats in a collection of six essays headed “Radio as Cultural Expression.” Leading this section are two pieces examining what is surely the hottest thing on radio in the 1990s—talk radio. In the first, radio historian, educator and author Tom Lewis takes on a heavyweight of the air in “Triumph of the Idol—Rush Limbaugh and a Hot Medium.” Is talk radio really the expression of democracy in the electronic age? he muses. “Who does the ‘Doctor of Democracy’ really serve? Is this really a victory for electronic democracy, or is this glut of hot air more along the lines of Pyrrhus’ sentiment: ‘Another victory like that and we’re done for?’”

But talk show host Diane Rehm, whose program airs daily on WAMU in Washington, D.C., has a more optimistic perspective. In “Talking Over America’s Electronic Backyard Fence,” Rehm argues that talk radio has replaced the social tradition of exchanging views with neighbors. “Now talk shows have expanded the nation’s backyard” and contribute to the social discourse, she says.

From talk to rock to news, the airwaves are a smorgasbord for

the ear and the mind, suggests longtime radio connoisseur and Center fellow Adam Clayton Powell III in "You Are What You Hear." "Just as our physical bodies are the sum of the meals we have eaten, our minds are a sum of what we have heard, read and thought," he observes. Radio is rich fare, indeed.

In case there was any question of that, "Ear on America" offers a sampling of on-air tidbits from eight stations across the country. Al Stavitsky, a journalism professor at the University of Oregon, provides a tour from Alaskan bush radio to all-sports in New York to contemporary Christian in Waco, Texas. In the process, this sounding of American radio illustrates the industry's diversity, idiosyncrasies, quality and quirkiness.

Of all that radio is, music is never far from its core. Sean Ross, a record company executive and longtime radio writer, examines "Music Radio—The Fickleness of Fragmentation" in a critical look at trends in the industry. It's not merely a question of niche marketing, he contends: "If music radio were truly fragmented, Miami would still have an easy-listening station, Seattle would still have commercial jazz, and Detroit would still have R&B oldies."

For many, growing up with radio meant that constant companion, an AM transistor portable. Once the giant of the radio dial, AM radio today is a sickly shadow of its former self, observes broadcast historian Michael C. Keith in "Whither (Or Wither?) AM?" Will embattled AM radio survive? "In the broadcasting marketplace, as in other jungles, it comes down to survival of the fittest," Keith writes. "AM radio is not exactly a finely tuned athlete, so its slow fade may simply be Darwinism at work."

FROM THE STRAITS OF AM, the next section, "The Global Airwaves," offers a glimpse of the powerful position of radio around the world. To provide an authoritative look at what is arguably the world's standard for radio, the BBC, we turn to Lord Asa Briggs, the world's preeminent broadcasting historian and "The BBC—From Maiden Aunt to Sexy Upstart." The onslaught of television in the 1950s backed radio against a wall, forcing the BBC to argue on behalf of the "maiden aunt of broadcasting," Briggs

recalls. But by the 1960s, people were “panting” to start up radio stations in Britain.

As one illustration of the central importance of the BBC to British life, Suzanne Levy, a BBC producer and Center research fellow, describes why her countrymen are “Devoted to Auntie Beeb.” When the BBC’s Radio 4 announced plans to reschedule and rename the popular magazine program, “Women’s Hour,” “The British public got its knickers in a twist,” Levy recounts. “The calming inevitability of Life As We Know It was under attack.”

Finally, broadcasting scholar Lawrence Soley of Marquette University brings this section to a close with a report on “Clandestine Radio and the End of the Cold War.” During the Cold War, clandestine radio stations were one tool in the global struggle between East and West, but the easing of U.S.-Soviet tensions has not meant an end to radio’s role in political struggle, Soley observes. “Ironically, the easing of Cold War tensions and the spread of democracy have not meant fewer clandestine radio operations but more.”

FROM FORMATS AND PROGRAMMING, the *Journal* moves to an examination of “The Structures of Radio”—economic, regulatory, social and technological—with five essays by authors intimately familiar with their assignments. As an opener, Andrew C. Barrett, a commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission, offers a primer on regulation and radio in “Public Policy and Radio—A Regulator’s View.” In a consolidating market and confronted by new political, economic and technological realities, he writes, serving local interests and diversity is a challenge both to the radio industry and those charged with its regulation.

Describing the major new technological realities and peering ahead to new opportunities is the theme of “Riding Radio’s Technological Wave,” by Richard V. Ducey, an executive officer of the National Association of Broadcasters. Digital compression, satellite feeds, improvements to AM, digital audio broadcasting and other developments make the 1990s and beyond a brave new world for radio, he says.

Maybe so, writes Richard J. MacDonald, a Center fellow and media financial analyst, but financial markets will need some convincing. In "On the Business Side, an End to Radio Romance," MacDonald says bankers have tuned radio out. "For most financial analysts, the days when the radio industry stood center stage have long passed."

Concluding this section are two essays examining the role of public radio in the overall radio mix. Although just 1,592 of the nation's 11,338 radio stations are noncommercial, public radio's future is assured by the high quality of its programming. Anna Kosof, general manager of public radio station WBGO-FM/Jazz 88 in Newark, N.J., traces the history of public broadcasting in "Public Radio—Americans Want More" and argues that by failing to serve audiences, commercial radio creates niches for progressive and alternative public stations. "People want more from radio than top 40, Limbaugh, the same news and endless ads," she contends. "That's where America—and public radio—live."

And Stephen L. Salyer, president of Minnesota-based American Public Radio, celebrates the 10th anniversary of "the other" public radio system in "Monopoly to Marketplace—Competition Comes to Public Radio." Now a leading distributor of high-quality public radio cultural programming, APR's competition has enriched a public radio market previously dominated by National Public Radio, to the benefit of both.

This *Journal* concludes with a review of seven key books on radio that is really a *tour de force* of the industry—its history, its richness and diversity, its potential. In "Seems Radio Is Here to Stay," telecommunications Professor Mary Ann Watson of Eastern Michigan University examines radio's multiple roles in American society. It's time to recognize radio, that "dependable companion and friend," she writes. "To overlook radio is to miss the big picture."