Radio: The Intimate Medium

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One day during one of our tutoring sessions, sixteen-year-old Kevin, knowing I have a background and interest in radio, asked, "Isn’t a radio station required to let the public know if it is thinking about changing its format?" I knew at once what he was referring to. That day, a local FM radio station had dropped its teen-oriented “new rock” format in favor of country music. He, like many of his contemporaries, had been jolted out of bed by Garth Brooks and Tanya Tucker on "Y-107" instead of Aerosmith and REM on "Z-107." It was like the loss of a friend, an unfair deviation from what should have been a constant.

While records, videotapes, movies, film strips, and other media have been classroom staples, radio has been largely neglected. Its reputation as a “theater of the mind” should attract teachers who all too often let the videotape roll on and do all the thinking while students passively look on. Even MTV, which has become a major factor in pop culture, paid homage to radio by selecting to broadcast as its first music video when it signed on the air in August 1981 with a song by The Buggles called “Video Killed the Radio Star.”

THE INTIMATE MEDIUM

Radio has always had a special power. It has exerted this power from our grandparents gathered in the living room to listen to an FDR fireside chat as it crackled from a big wooden cabinet filled with glass tubes to our own summer nights of making out as Wolfman Jack howled through the dashboard speakers. There is an intimacy, a one-to-one connection that no other medium can match.

Harry Harrison (1995), the morning drive disc jockey on New York’s WCBS-FM (who also starred on such legendary stations as WABC and WMCA), explains the feeling that radio can create:

I’m the guy that gets up with them in the morning. I’m in the shower with them, I go to work with them. It is a very intimate time. It’s amazing how loyal people are. A young girl wrote to me and said she had to give up something she liked for Lent so she was giving me up for Lent!

Innovative radio programmer Rick Sklar (1984) recognized early in his career that the significant aspect of radio is that it reaches people through only one of their senses—hearing. It was this singularity that gave radio the unique ability to entertain, inform, sell, and motivate. Sound, imaginatively used, stimulated the listener to create in his or her mind a picture. . . . Every listener “saw” a different show, but each show was perfect. (xv)

Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, rock and roll radio (on the AM band in those days) provided the soundtrack of my life. In New York my radio heroes were Harrison, Ron Lundy, Dan Ingram, “Cousin” Bruce Morrow, and Chuck Leonard, among others, while around the nation listeners held in the same esteem disc jockeys such as Arnie Ginsburg, Dick Biondi, Joey Reynolds, Robert W. Morgan, and Larry Lujack on such stations as Chicago’s WLS, Boston’s WMEX, and Los Angeles’ KHJ.

As the years go on, the significance of those broadcasts, the jingles, the jocks, the music, waiting for the number one record of the week, even the commercials, becomes more powerful and nostalgic. We all had our ever-present transistor radios whether doing homework, relaxing at the beach, or under the covers with a flashlight, serving as a companion and catharsis. To Morrow (1995), “Radio is a reflector, not a projector. We reflect society. We are not the poetry, we are the amplification of the poetry.” As such, we were not only being entertained, but also informed, even if we did not realize it at the time.

RADIO, 1950–1980

For Baby Boomers, the heyday of rock and roll radio, the late 1950s through the early 1970s, is likely the ultimate radio era. Those decades are flanked by others that also served as shapers and reflectors of pop culture. The pre-World War II “Golden Age of Radio” with Jack Benny, Burns and Allen,
Amos and Andy, Fred Allen, The Shadow, and Gangbusters, forced listeners to create their own images of Benny's hidden vault and Fibber McGee's closet. In an early example of the power of radio, Orson Welles "accidentally terrorized many Americans, young and old, with [his] updated Halloween-night version of H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds—proving the power of radio in a remarkable way" (Bianculli 39).

By the late 1970s into the 1980s, as music programming moved largely to the FM band's clearer signal, AM stations rapidly filled their schedules with talk programming and call-in shows. Author William Bunch during a research trip decided, "I might relax by locating WLS 890 on the AM dial—the great clear-channel Top 40 station where I had first heard so many summer jukebox selections.... But the only sound on AM 890 was the midday blather of Rush Limbaugh" (41). Even WABC, the most popular music station in the nation, reaching dozens of states, adopted a talk format in 1982. While the presence of the genre proliferated, success was not necessarily as quick in coming. As Dan Ingram explains:

I felt they were making a major mistake, and for over fifteen years, WABC had ratings around one-point-something, until the conservative, fascist talk shows began to draw the same kind of audience that must have turned out for the spectacle of seeing someone stoned to death in Biblical times. (1995, letter to author)

In any case, by the 1990s talk radio had become an integral part of America's popular culture:

Talk radio may be designed merely to produce revenue for broadcasters, it may be conducted by a coterie of questionably trained misfits, it may spew out misinformation, but . . . there can be no question that talk radio has developed into a cultural force of consequence in America. (Laufer 9)

**THE ASSIGNMENTS**

The use of radio in the classroom can take many forms. Assignments can be used as stand alone exercises, as enrichment for a variety of fields of study, or as a major radio unit.

1. **Radio Diary.** Have students keep a diary of their radio listening for a week to become aware of how big a role radio plays in their lives. Have them analyze when and why they listen and what effect it has on them at various times.

2. **Talk Radio.** The assignment is to listen to an hour of a radio talk show (recording will help) and study the objectivity of the host, guests, and callers. Use this to discuss credibility, political slant, and hidden agendas. Follow up activity: discuss and debate censorship, free speech, and the First Amendment.

3. **Dial Scan.** Students should begin at one end of the AM band and go toward the other, stopping at each station that comes in. This should be done after sundown when local stations on shared frequencies are required to sign off and clear-channel stations can be heard from around the nation. Spend a few minutes at each station. List the cities, call letters, and programming from the various regions. See if any patterns or trends develop. Compare vocal deliveries, formats, newscasts, commercials.

4. **Radio Autobiography.** Write a first-person piece about your radio experiences. What memories do certain stations, disc jockeys, and programs bring back? Teachers should share their memories. (For example, I can still recall sitting in my college dorm room talking to my future wife on the phone when late-night disc jockey Dean Anthony announced John Lennon's death over long gone WTFM.)

5. **Aircheck Analysis.** Individually or as a class, analyze an aircheck from a previous era. Think about the connection between the station and the community it served and the things happening in society at that time. Study the delivery of the announcers, the commercials, the program content. Good sources for airchecks of legendary stations and personalities include Tom Konard's Aircheck Factory (Aircheck Acres, Wild Rose, WI 54984) and Ed Brouder's Man from Mars Productions (159 Orange Street, Manchester, NH 03104). Follow-up project: create on tape an hour of programming representing a certain year. Appropriate music, commercials, and newscasts should be included.

6. **Old Time Radio.** Listen to tapes of classic radio shows like "The Lone Ranger" and "The Cisco Kid" and compare the images different listeners get. A good source for old...
time radio shows is Collectors’ Choice Music (P.O. Box 838, Itasca, IL 60143-0838). Follow-up project: create and perform a radio show complete with sound effects.

7. **Format Clock.** Have each student write down all of the elements (music, commercials, talk, weather, news, traffic, etc.) broadcast by their favorite stations, then assemble a format clock and analyze when and why different elements are presented.


**CONCLUSION**

It is at the very least ironic that television, perhaps the most maligned of the mass media by parents and teachers alike, is likely the most extensively used in the classroom as well. I cannot recall radio being referred to as a “vast wasteland” nor can I recall anyone saying in reference to radio, “There’s nothing on.”

Radio has the power to individualize its presentation within the mind of each and every listener. There is an intimacy and shared vision that it creates. Wölfin Jack (1995), the bearded, scowling alter ego of Bob Smith, who blanketed the nation after dark over Mexican border-blaster XERF with its quarter-million watts of power explains:

> Being the Wolfman is more than just spinning records and making a funky, beastly sound of joy come out of a human throat. It’s being a mouthpiece for the possibility of happiness, it’s about the great connection to humanity that you can find in just spreading love around and being your own true self. (Jack 362)

It was radio’s potential to be that “great connection to humanity” that helped rock and roll radio become the zenith of radio history. Bruce Morrow, who still draws high ratings with his broadcasts over WCBS-FM, feels that “People listen because somewhere along the line, Top Forty radio became the closest thing we ever had to a national personality. Rock ‘n’ Roll became the nearest thing we’ve had to an American voice” (Morrow 253).

**Works Cited**


Konard, Tom. 1996. Telephone interview. 5 July.


Morrow, Bruce. 1995. Telephone interview. 30 March.


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