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RADIO AND SOCIETY

FOR a time after radio was born its sheer novelty was enough to win and keep the attention of listeners. People sat tied to their receivers by the earphone cords, spellbound for no other reason than that there was something to hear.

The number of listeners swelled to millions, and the number of broadcasting stations grew to thousands; the variety and pretensions of programmes spread beyond the bounds of our imagination. It is with that development, its consequences and its prospects, that this Monthly Letter will deal.

Conflict has arisen in the radio field on many points, from the type of programme to the means of broadcasting. Some listeners are completely satisfied with radio as it is; others believe the structure to be unsound.

Then there is the producers' side. How would you, the listener, like to be responsible for filling 18 hours a day with a different show every 15 minutes? To gain an appreciation of the station's difficulty, just write down the titles or nature of 72 programmes — one every quarter hour from 6 a.m. to 12 midnight, every one fitted to the audience that will be listening at that particular time of day.

Control of Radio

Behind the programme worries is another: who is to own, operate, or control the stations? In Great Britain the British Broadcasting Corporation operates under a Royal Charter which comes up for renewal every five years; in the United States the Federal Communications Commission reminds radio companies that they have responsibilities to the public as well as to their programme sponsors; in Canada, the operations of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation come up annually for review by a parliamentary committee.

Canada's system is designed to overcome the problems posed by great distances, a scattered population, two official languages, six of the world's 24 time zones and an extra time division in Newfoundland.

Those who attempt a comparison of programmes here and in the United States are comparing incomparable things.

Consider the matter of cost. Our 13½ million consumers compare poorly as prospects for advertisers with the United States 140 million. This huge market makes possible the high salaries paid artists: Arthur Godfrey, the comedian, received \$440,500 last year; Lowell Thomas, the commentator, \$420,300 and Tom Howard, comedian, \$219,000. Place alongside these the fact that there are fewer than 100 persons in all walks of life in Canada receiving incomes of \$100,000 or more.

The Canadian System

Canada's capacity for compromise, so often commented upon in connection with her foreign affairs, evidenced itself when the original agreement on radio divided Canada's ether into spheres of influence allocated to the CBC and local private commercial stations.

The networks and some stations are operated by the CBC, with the result that radio is carried to parts of the country where commercial exploitation would not be feasible; on the other hand, private stations provide variety and competition. The middle-of-the-road plan has been upheld by every successive Parliamentary Committee on radio.

The principal argument of those opposed to public operation and control of broadcasting appears to be that the CBC is in competition with private stations and at the same time makes the rules of the competition.

A brief submitted by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters last year asked for a board (perhaps similar to the Board of Transport Commissioners) which would have power to grant and cancel licences and regulate the licensees, including the CBC. The brief suggested continuation of the CBC as a national broadcasting system without power to regulate its competitors.

The Parliamentary Committee, after considering this brief, reported: "The functions of the two types of radio service are different; one, the private stations, being designed to serve community interests, and the other, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, designed

to serve the whole of Canada by chain broadcasting; and these two types of radio service should be complementary to each other."

Advertising

An expert on the subject has said that there is a direct conflict between the desires of the listeners and the sponsors. The listeners, he says, are not interested in advertising, while the sponsors are interested in entertainment only insofar as it attracts people to hear the advertising message. This is only a part truth. People are alert for advertising, as was evidenced in the case of a big Canadian newspaper whose circulation dropped alarmingly when a dispute with a department store led to withholding of the store's advertisements.

The time given to advertising is not, in fact, very extensive. Canadian rules of the air say that the advertising content of any programme shall not exceed in time ten per cent of the programme period. In the operating year 1947-48 the CBC networks carried only 17.7 per cent commercial programmes, compared with 82.3 per cent sustaining programmes.

If the criticism of radio advertising does not arise from the amount of it, then the cause must be sought in the nature of it, and here, perhaps, is where commercial sponsors fail to get their money's worth.

Many broadcasts are developed on the plan of the old time medicine show, using amusements and tricks to catch attention and then slipping in a sales talk. Others use a lot of money for a show that is up-to-date, full of charm and humour, written by experts and performed by wonderful talent: but when it comes to the commercial announcement they change their technique. The sales message bears no relation to what went before or comes after. It fits into the show, in a phrase used in a *New York Times* article, "the way a riveting machine would fit into a symphony orchestra."

We may assume that advertisers would not continuously spend millions of dollars if the sometimes stupid and almost always unmusical ditties with silly words supplied them by their writers did not attract purchasers by the hundred thousand. But radio is not at its best in the face of such pathetic poverty of imagination, coupled with such a low view of the people's intelligence standard.

Still a Juvenile

Much criticism of radio, in both its advertising and programme aspects, leaves out of account the tolerance that should be accorded its youth.

It is just half a century since the first radiogram crossed the English Channel, and only 47 years since Marconi selected Cape Breton for the first trans-Atlantic wireless station. Canada's first broadcasting station was set up in Montreal in September 1918 by the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, with the call letters XWA. That was just 31 years ago.

Yet radio has been saddled with one of the greatest responsibilities ever assumed by any invention of mankind. Taken at first for a curious toy, broadcasting

has become a vital force in the political, social, economic, religious, educational and cultural patterns of human life.

The gem of prose-poetry delivered by Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg was heard by 15,000 persons. President Roosevelt's "dagger-in-the-back" speech at Charlottesville produced a programme rating of 45.5, which means that about 21,000,000 radio sets were tuned in. No one can count the millions throughout the Empire who listen on Christmas day to the King's greeting.

In Canada alone there are 2,870,000 radio homes, providing a potential listening audience of 11,335,000. These listeners are served by 115 privately owned Canadian stations and 17 CBC stations. The domestic programme of the CBC alone costs \$6½ million a year. (The CBC's funds are derived in this way: Licence fees \$4,798,291; Commercial broadcasting \$1,842,558; Miscellaneous \$95,914. These are figures for the 1947-48 year.)

Choice of Programmes

What do all these listeners want to hear, and what do the stations do to fill their needs?

Radio's answer is the medley of programmes one gets by traversing the dial from end to end, supposed to provide satisfaction for any listener's mood of the moment. There are more than 22,000 different programme offerings in the United States every day: 8 million every year.

There is food for thought in the latest published report of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Musical programmes accounted for 56.6 per cent of the year's sustaining network programmes, with 43.4 per cent devoted to spoken word programmes. The sub-division of these is interesting:

| Musical Programmes | % of hrs. | Spoken Word Programmes | % of hrs. |
|--------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| Opera | 1.3 | Drama & Feature | 4.5 |
| Symphony | 1.7 | Prose & Poetry | .2 |
| Sacred Music | .7 | Talks-Informational | 6.2 |
| Classical | 2.8 | Educational | 2.8 |
| Semi-classical | 11.4 | News Commentaries | .7 |
| Variety | 1.7 | News Events | .9 |
| Light | 25.9 | News Resume | 14.2 |
| Dance | 8.4 | Agriculture | 5.9 |
| Old Time | 1.4 | Stock Quotations | .3 |
| Band | 1.3 | Sports Events | |
| | | Sports Resume | .5 |
| | | Women's | 2.4 |
| | | Children's | 2.4 |
| | | Religious | 2.4 |

One of the great difficulties associated with a survey of radio comes when we start asking "Is that what the public want?" and, still more provoking, "Is that what the public should have?"

In the first place there is no "public" — there are many "publics." Some may like both symphony orchestras and baseball games, but for the most part these programmes appeal to different audiences. Critics say it is the duty of radio to turn one kind of public into another kind of which they approve more highly.

Broadcasters, on the other hand, think this is a responsibility rather startling in its implications, particularly since they are not nearly so sure as the critics are of what the "public" should like.

Filling the Dial

Radio fills up every second of the broadcasting day. The British believe that an occasional interval of silence on the radio is no disgrace; in America the show must go on — and on — and on. This split-second timing becomes a nuisance to discriminative listeners. A song is cut off in mid-stanza because the big studio clock announces it is 7:59:40, and that leaves just time for the station announcement before another song starts on another programme at 8:00:00. Or the last bars of a piece of music composed by a master and played by a superb orchestra are faded out so that the station name and the time may be announced — as if the listener cared about either in the presence of such music!

This is summer, and the same number of hours turn up every day to be filled to the brim with radio broadcasts.

Sure to turn up in the hot weather is a vocalist who will rocket to radio fame with an inane verse about a choo-choo, an ill-rhymed quatrain about how "She wasn't at the dance Saturday", each set to a nursery arrangement of four or five notes. There will be "Give-away" shows, too. Last year the four major United States networks distributed a total of \$4,297,557 worth of prizes. Singing mice, preaching parrots and syncopating coyotes; sneezing contests for hay fever sufferers and yowling tests for hog-callers — all these will bludgeon our ears.

But for every bad programme that's been on the air for years there are, according to Henry Morgan, the radio debunker of radio, five good ones that had to be taken off because nobody listened to them, or, if they did, they didn't write to the studio saying so.

News and Commentary

News reports get a high radio rating. Women seem to prefer hearing the news read to reading it for themselves. But persons who have a deep interest in events continue to read the newspaper because there they get the whole story and not a fifty-word highlight version.

The stream poured out in a fifteen minute newscast discourages a pulling-together of events from past time into a whole for contemplation, though as everyone knows the past is needed to interpret the present.

How strong is the suggestive power of the radio has been shown in several instances. The Orson Welles tid-bit about an invasion from Mars is well-remembered. It was repeated recently by a South American station. Troops had to be mobilized to quell the mob that marched out to meet the imaginary invaders. When it realized it had been hoaxed, the mob wrecked the radio building.

It is not only in deliberate hoax broadcasts that the power of suggestion is seen: at the time of the Nova Scotia mine cave-in which buried three eminent men alive for several days, a broadcaster played "Nearer My God to Thee" as a fill-in between news bulletins. It was after midnight, but almost instantly every light on the switchboard went on, because listeners associated the hymn with the *Titanic*, and assumed that there was news of the death of the buried men.

"Highbrow" Programmes

This suggestibility of radio audiences raises the thought that broadcasters might, by little and by little, lead listeners into appreciation of better than today's run-of-mill programmes. As Mr. J. W. Barnes, who is chief instructor in radio arts at the Ryerson Institute of Technology, said not long ago: "Give the people what they want to the extent that they'll keep listening with interest; but slip in some things that they wouldn't immediately choose to hear, in an effort to open new vistas of experience and enjoyment."

Response to the CBC pioneer effort in broadcasting Handel's *The Messiah* and *The St. Matthew Passion* by Bach demonstrated beyond doubt that there is a worthwhile number in Canada interested in such things. The CBC Opera Company won so high praise from listeners that another five operas will be presented next season. The Sunday night "Stages" of the CBC were five years old in January. During that time they presented 169 different plays, of which 119 were new original works. "Forgotten Footsteps", woven around Canadian historical episodes, won an immense number of complimentary letters.

Latest addition is "CBC Wednesday Night." This new venture in North American radio is designed to give Canadian listeners programmes of unusual interest in the realms of drama, music, talks and readings, with works by Canadian composers high on the list. An article in the *New York Times* gave this programme high praise, and remarked that it is attracting attention of United States listeners.

Television

Television is the most dramatic of the wireless inventions. It adds motion to the pictorial content of facsimile, and vision to the immediacy and intimacy of sound broadcasting. Having extended his voice and hearing to the ends of the earth, man seems about to make his eyesight all-embracing.

Announcement was made this spring that Canada is to have a television system of its own. Montreal and Toronto will be the producing and transmitting centres. Although this first effort is to be a CBC project, financed by a loan of \$4 million from the government, independent stations are eligible for licence and have been preparing for years.

Television shows are expensive. Of the 55 stations operating in the United States in spring, only 3 had broken even on the cost of operation, and these had not yet started to get back their capital outlay.

But there are great possibilities. Business men and dreamers alike agree on the large-screen programme as a winner, when it comes. Theatres will be crowded, they say, with people watching events, transmitted instantaneously from all parts of the world. Six West End London theatres are being equipped. A New Jersey theatre has added a television lounge, where a projector throws a clear picture six feet by eight feet. In Canada, plans have been shaped for utilizing a system which involves the recording of the television image on film. The picture can be picked out of the air, processed within 60 seconds, and screened immediately.

The Power of Radio

History is not only written in words, it is made with words. Witnesses could be called readily from the ranks of great and good men, but let us look first at what was said by a vicious man who nearly brought our world down in ruins around us: "The power which set sliding the greatest historical avalanches of political and religious nature was, from the beginning of time, the magic force of the spoken word alone." That is Adolf Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*.

If evil men recognize the power in words, the good that can be done by words is also amply demonstrated. A competent leadership well expressed has often raised group thinking and actions to a high level. When Winston Churchill told the British people: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat," he aroused a seemingly defeated nation to fight on. That speech was one of the resources of the British Empire, along with its men, guns, planes and ships.

One of the greatest benefits to mankind, and one essential to democracy, is to teach people to think — which is the opposite of passive acceptance — and to reason, which is far removed from being led supinely toward someone else's objective.

Perhaps another subject should be added to the school curriculum: teach children to demand evidence. Teach them to ask their parents "Why?" when they are told spinach is good for them and late nights bad. Teach them to challenge advertisers to say plump and plain how good their goods are, adding emotional appeal if they like, but never omitting the basic truths. Teach them to challenge what they hear on the radio in the way of news, comment, analysis, and information: is it objective, or is it loaded?

Our Brains are Buzzing

Our brains are buzzing more than the brains of men ever buzzed before, and the scale of events around us has assumed a gigantic size. The buffer area between individuals and between nations has shrunk, every man feels called upon to react to the total environment and to every incident that affects his neighbours at the far side of the earth.

The radio enters this picture as an additional complicating force, because it distorts further our picture of the world by diminishing our opportunity to select and isolate the things to which we shall give

attention. We grow accustomed to the weirdest of juxtapositions: the serious and the trivial, the comic and the tragic. The idyllic report of a princess holidaying on Capri is followed in a split second by a twenty-word record of the fall of Shanghai. Here is a collapse of values, a fantasia of effects that resembles the debris left by a storm.

We do not blame radio for it all, because much of our inability to comprehend is caused by failure of our mental capacity to keep up with our physical progress, but we do, surely, need all the help radio can give toward simplifying for us the chaos to which it, itself, contributes so much.

One way of assistance might be by placing emphasis upon the facts which underlie the problems of the day. Another effort might be directed toward raising standards of criticism and choice.

Shadows on the Wall

We are not discharging an undoubted responsibility by adopting a scornful-eyed attitude. Educators who organize radio programmes have told us that there is nothing more difficult than to persuade people who are fully qualified by background, education, experience and standing in the community to speak constructively on subjects which others, less qualified but more vocal and energetic, are attacking destructively.

The radio is a tool, one of man's latest inventions. Just as the first tool, a digging stick, was so readily converted into a club with which to fight, so radio is in danger of being perverted from its possibly high purpose.

This is not a time for watching and waiting in ivory towers. A day may come when man can go back into silence again and be no less great on that account; think more, bear his own company better, settle his problems more honestly and more wisely. But just now he must make his contribution toward building a state of affairs in which such an existence will be possible.

Everything that any man can do in managing radio or in using radio to clarify the thinking of people is such a contribution.

We recall the celebrated figure of the cave given by Plato. There were prisoners in the cave, chained with their backs to the entrance so that they could not turn around. Upon the wall before them were cast the shadows of persons and animals passing the mouth of the cave, lit in daytime by sunshine and at night by a huge fire. All they knew of life was gathered from the flitting distorted shadows.

The function of educated, experienced people, surely, is to interpret the shadows if they cannot turn the audience around. It could be one of the great functions of radio to supply complete, accurate and uncoloured information about what is happening to cast the shadows upon the wall; to discriminate between what is a significant movement and what is trivial; to show that the distorted shadow world is not precisely a reflection of the real world.