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SPHEX CLUB PAPERS

of

MR. POWELL GLASS

Subject: News by Radio and Its Background

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NEWS BY RADIO AND ITS BACKGROUND

Whenever advancing scientific knowledge and its teammate, mechanical ingenuity, give to the world some new thing which ministers to its comfort, its convenience or its pleasure the almost invariable result is commercial conflict. New inventions cause the creation of new industries, and new industries almost inevitably find it necessary, in order to grow, to step upon the toes of one or more old established industries, frequently with fatal results to the latter.

The steam engine applied to transportation spelled death for the stage coach lines, and now in turn the railways are finding the gasoline engine applied to transportation a serious menace to their own financial well being.

Few new industries have so quickly found wide favor with the American public as did radio, and few new industries have trod upon the toes of as many already established industries. Piano manufacturers were the first to feel ill effects from radio. Already once hard hit when the phonograph became popular, the piano business had been slowly coming back as result of an intensive drive to convince Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen that even if they could not afford a new baby in the nursery they could and should afford a new baby grand in the front parlor. Just at this point came radio. Pianos in the medium and lower price ranges were immediately hard hit, and piano manufacturing rapidly lost ground to its new competitor.

Phonograph manufacturing was hit too, but withstood the blow better for two reasons. In the first place phonograph manufacturers

enjoyed a quite considerable export business in both machines and records, and in the second place they were smart enough to begin manufacturing combination radio-phonograph sets, which enabled their purchasers to obtain music when static interfered with radio reception, or to turn on a favorite record when the radio program was not to their liking.

And then there were the composers and publishers of popular music. For Tin Pan Alley the early days of radio was a time of slim rations. In the old days a song hit began with popularity on Broadway and gradually spread over the country, earning profits for publishers and royalties for composers for a considerable period of time. The radio spread a new popular song over the entire country in a few days, and within a few weeks, or a few months at best, most of them had been succeeded by some still newer song hit. It has been suggested that the wave of "Blues" songs at the time was born of the composers' melancholy over their sadly reduced royalties.

The moving pictures did not escape. Exhibitors soon found that many patrons were staying home nights to listen to the radio, and that attendance at their theatres was particularly light on those nights when the most popular radio programs were being broadcast.

While these and other industries were suffering at the hands of radio, newspapers and the broadcasting stations were upon the best of terms. In radio's earlier days broadcasting was not directly commercial. Broadcasting stations were a necessity if receiving sets were to be sold. Manufacturers of receiving sets were compelled to operate or foster broadcasting in order that there be something for the

receiving set to receive; and newspapers were temporarily finding this new industry a source of additional revenue by reason of the advertisements of receiving sets which found their way into newspaper columns.

In fact some of the earlier established broadcasting stations were set up by newspapers. The Chicago Tribune is one instance, and in the South the Atlanta Journal. Very soon after the latter station had been established I asked Major John Cohen, president of the company which publishes The Journal, what his newspaper got out of it. His reply was: "I do not know what we are getting out of it, but I know what we hope to get out of it. At present if you say "newspaper" and mention "Atlanta" to anyone, there immediately flashes into the mind of that person "The Constitution." By our radio programs we hope to change that. We hope to make it so that mention together of the two words "newspaper" and "Atlanta" will cause the listener to think to himself, 'The Journal Covers Dixie Like the Dew.'"

For a time these two types of broadcasting, those stations established by manufacturers of receiving sets as a part of their sales programs, and those established by newspapers and other business concerns for good will purposes, managed fairly well upon a non-commercial basis. You will recall that in the earlier days broadcasting got along with very cheap programs, financially and otherwise speaking. Local talent, at first not paid at all and subsequently paid very little, satisfied the listening public for a time; and for that matter stage and screen celebrities and professional musicians contributed their talents gratis because they felt they were thereby

deriving a desired publicity for themselves. But the novelty wore off. Talent refused to perform for nothing, and the public demanded better entertainment. Soon the broadcasters found that they must get revenue from somewhere to support the constantly increasing costs of programs. They turned to selling time to advertisers.

At first newspapers were not alarmed by this, but entirely aside from whatever merits radio possesses as an advertising medium - and upon that point I confess my bias - the very novelty of radio advertising quickly gained it much support and newspapers soon found that radio was no longer an industry with which they could co-operate but a very active and dangerous competitor. The volume of radio advertising speedily went high up into the millions, and practically every cent of it represented a loss to newspapers, since national advertisers did not as a rule increase their advertising appropriations, but merely spent less in the newspapers than formerly. In short the radio came to occupy the same relation to newspapers that the bus lines occupy to railways. Under any circumstances this would have led to strained relations between the two industries, but the strained relations were intensified by the fact that the newspapers had been in no small part instrumental in popularizing radio and because the broadcasters undertook to convince the public that it was still the duty of newspapers to print their programs and otherwise publicize radio without charge. The newspaper point of view of course was, now that radio had gone into active competition with newspapers, that it was no part of a newspaper's duty to build up audiencies for radio broadcasters to sell to advertisers in competition with newspaper circulations; not any more

than it was the duty of railways to use their funds to promote bus-line travel. That, I think, is a sound position.

With newspapers and radio thus at odds, the question of news broadcasting came up to intensify their hostile feelings, and strangely enough this additional controversy was largely contributed to by a press association which made its living out of selling news to newspapers. The Associated Press is a co-operative, non-profit making organization. Its members can use its news report only for publication in their own newspapers, with the additional privilege of putting brief bulletins of news upon boards in front of their own offices. The United Press, which is a commercial news-gathering and selling corporation, was well aware of this and sought to profit at its rival's expense by giving news to the radio for broadcasting, in return getting a radio boost for the United Press. This broadcasting of news proving popular, members of the Associated Press got very much worked up, all hot and bothered, as the slang expression has it, and at an annual meeting the A. P. members authorized their officers to give Associated Press news to the broadcasters. This extremely silly fight between rival press associations, helped by the divergent views of those newspapers which owned radio stations and those newspapers which did not, went so far that in the last presidential election, returns which had cost the A. P. and its member newspapers many, many thousands of dollars to gather were turned over to broadcasters without even nominal charge and by the latter used to the very considerable disadvantage of newspapers.

Finally the newspapers and the press associations began to come to their senses, and despite some protests from that minority of newspapers which owned broadcasting stations, agreed to quit giving their product away to another industry which was their active business competitor.

When this stage was reached broadcasters undertook to pirate the news of newspapers. News put upon bulletin boards by newspapers for the accommodation of the public was taken for broadcasting by radio. News was taken from early editions of newspapers and radioed to the public before newspapers had an opportunity to reach a considerable portion of that public.

Fortunately for the newspapers the question of property rights in news had already been definitely settled by the Supreme Court which in a suit brought by the Associated Press against the International News Service held that there is a property right in news as long as that news has commercial value. In the early part of 1933 several injunction cases got into the courts seeking to restrain broadcasting companies from pirating the news matter of newspapers. In most instances the contentions of the newspapers were upheld in the lower courts and then the big broadcasting chains threatened to establish their own news gathering organizations and go into competition with newspapers in the news field as actively as they already were in competition in the advertising field. This threat alarmed many newspaper publishers, and both the newspapers and the broadcasters managed to manoeuver themselves into positions which were unpleasant. On their side the newspapers did not want the radio in the news field; while

upon the other side the broadcasters did not want to organize news gathering machinery which unquestionably would cost them many millions of dollars annually. Having thus arrived at a situation satisfactory to neither, both newspapers and broadcasters began to pay more attention to the dictates of common sense and less to mutual dislikes born of competition: and in December of 1933 a series of conferences was held in New York at which were represented the broadcasters, the newspapers and the press associations. As a result of those conferences an agreement was reached between the various conflicting interests, which is, I think, a matter of some interest to the American public.

In entering these conferences with the broadcasters, the representatives of the newspapers and press associations realized two things: first, that the radio had a perfect right to broadcast news which it gathered itself at its own expense, or which it might be able to buy; and, second, that in news dissemination there are certain things the radio can do which, in the very nature of the case, are impossible for newspapers. The first is a question of business ethics; the second is a matter of public need or desire.

Every day in the year the radio can perform these services for the public, which are not and cannot be performed by newspapers.

There are thousands of citizens who, because of blindness or seriously impaired sight, can not read. To these news by radio is a boon.

There are other thousands of citizens who because they were denied or failed to take advantage of opportunity for schooling can not depend directly upon newspapers for current information. Such illiterates can

listen to news by radio.

During vacation months - and it is vacation time somewhere in the United States the year around - there are thousands of citizens who have gone to secluded spots, out of reach of newspapers, telephone or telegraph, in order to rest nerves unstrung by civilization's uproar. Doubtless such vacationists, or most of them, want a vacation from newspaper reading as well as from the other things which form a part of their normal every day lives, but they can take radio receiving sets along and listen to the high spots in the days news with pleasure.

Perhaps larger than all three groups which I have mentioned is that very considerable number of persons who live remote from the cities and towns in which newspapers are published and who on that account can not receive newspapers until many hours after they are published. It is a service to this large group if they can receive briefly by radio each day the essential facts of the day's news.

In addition to these services which the radio can render day in and day out through news dissemination, there are special occasions when the radio broadcasting stations can render a service to the entire public. When there is a happening of extraordinary importance, say the assassination of a ruler, or an event of extreme interest, such as the jury's decision in the Hauptmann case, the essential facts can be gotten to practically the entire public by radio in very short time - in much shorter time than newspapers can get it to the public by extra editions.

This I think covers most if not all the things that radio can perform in the field of news dissemination which is not performed by

newspapers, or which radio can perform better than can newspapers. I could add a much longer list of things newspapers can do which radio can not, or of things newspapers can do in this field much better than can radio, but that is not essential to this paper.

Returning now to those conferences in New York. Their result was a gentleman's agreement known as the Press-Radio Plan, the essential features of which when established were:

That all the news of the newspapers and press associations was to be made available to the Press-Radio bureau in New York city. From this mass of newsmatter a staff of employed editors was to prepare news bulletins, not to exceed thirty words each, in sufficient number to fill two five minute broadcasts, one morning and one evening. In addition, the bureau was to send to all participating broadcasters brief bulletins on all news of an extraordinary character immediately upon receipt.

On their part the broadcasters agreed to broadcast these news bulletins exactly as received or not at all; never to use them as part of any advertising program or sponsorship by any advertiser; and to restrict their own news commentators to discussions of the backgrounds of current news.

The expense of getting this mass of news matter to the Press-Radio Bureau in New York falls upon the press associations and newspapers; the expense of getting the new bulletins from the bureau to the participating radio stations falls upon the broadcasters. These bulletins are sent from New York collect to the individual stations by the teletype service of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company and by the telegraph services of the Western Union and the Postal companies.

A few stations in New York can get them by messenger.

To supervise this arrangement a board was set up to consist of one member each from the American Newspaper Publishers' Association, the Associated Press, the United Press, the International News Service, the National Broadcasting Company, the Columbia Broadcasting System and the National Association of Broadcasters, or "independents" as these last are sometimes called. Each representative has one vote, except the representative of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, who acts as chairman and has two votes because he also represents the Publishers' National Radio Committee.

The National Association of Broadcasters took no part in the negotiations leading to this agreement, but had an "official observer" present at them just as the United States has at the League of Nations meetings; and while the "independents" as a group have never ratified the agreement a few independent radio stations have ratified it as individuals. A seat on the governing body awaits the National Association of Broadcasters when, as and if they care to come into the arrangement.

One other feature of the arrangement should be mentioned. The cost of maintaining the bureau at which the news bulletins are made up from the press association reports falls upon the broadcasters, just as the cost of collecting the news falls upon the newspapers and press associations, but the selection of the personnel for the bureau is left entirely in the hands of the three press associations. The employed editors, therefore, do not look to the broadcasters for their jobs.

Like every new arrangement time has made changes in this one. The original thirty-word limitation was found to be far too restricting. At present there is no limitation on the amount of time to be devoted to any particular piece of news, but only the limitation that the entire broadcast not exceed five minutes at either morning or evening period.

It soon became apparent that the cost of transmitting news from the bureau in New York to radio stations on the Pacific coast was excessive, and furthermore that news interests of the Far West differed from the news interest of the Middle West and the Atlantic seaboard. Consequently a separate bureau, operating exactly as does the one in New York, was set up at Los Angeles. It is under a separate committee of management but the same interests are represented on that committee.

At first it was contemplated that all news sandwiched in between the regular five minute broadcast periods should be news of transcendent importance. As a matter of fact these special bulletins have not been restricted to events of historical interest, but have been made to include any news in which the public seemed to be or might likely be especially interested. Forty four such bulletins were sent out on the Morrow Castle disaster, and 252 on the Congressional elections of last Fall.

This Press-Radio Plan has been in operation a little over a year. To be exact it was started on March 1, 1934. It performs, at least to some degree, every one of those things which radio can do and which newspapers can not, and every one of those things which radio can do better than newspapers because radio can do them more speedily. Not a single one of the participants makes a red, copper cent out of the

arrangement, although the costs involved are, in the aggregate, a small fortune. It is a free service to the public, satisfactory alike to the participating newspaper and radio interest and the only criticism which has been received from the public so far is that the news broadcast periods are too brief and that there are not enough special bulletins sent out between the two regular broadcast periods.

This last complaint will have to be met, if met at all, by the broadcasters. Less than half the special bulletins made available to them were used, not always because the broadcasters did not think them of sufficient interest or importance, but because nearly all of radio time has been sold to advertisers, who strenuously object to having their own programs interrupted for the broadcast of any news no matter how important. I have no doubt that the broadcasters, if they think there is sufficient public demand, will arrange this somehow.

As for lengthening the regular periods of sending news by radio, I shall be surprised if the newspapers make any very strenuous objections if the broadcasters desire to extend them say to ten minutes each, to fifteen. The fears entertained by the more timid members of the press have been proved groundless. News by radio in brief form so far from injuring newspaper circulations, has increased them because it has made the public more news-conscious. In view of the fact that newspapers had for years been posting on their bulletin boards the essential facts of important news, not alone as a service to the public but also because such bulletins helped to sell the paper, it is surprising that publishers did not realize that broadcasting news briefly would tend in the same direction.

It is, I think, fairly certain that if this Press-Radio Plan is continued, it will be further developed until it takes care of every legitimate public need, while at the same time assuring the newspapers against having the same sort of radio competition in news dissemination that they have in the field of advertising, and also guaranteeing the broadcasters against being pushed into the highly expensive business of news gathering.

There is, however, no certainty that this arrangement will continue. No participant has signed on the dotted line. It is purely a gentlemen's agreement. And it is vulnerable at two points. First, the fact that the National Association of Broadcasters has not yet seen fit to enter the arrangement constitutes a threat that the "independents" may enter the news field on a competitive basis. Second, no broadcaster has agreed to prevent any advertiser from entering that field, and there are some indications that advertisers may soon attempt it. Should either of these things happen there would no longer be even the slightest incentive for the newspapers and press associations to continue the existing arrangements.

I think it may be assumed, however, that if the public needs or wants news by radio very badly, news by radio it will have. I further think it is a matter of considerable public concern whether news broadcasts are sent out by the present arrangement, modified as time may show expedient, or by any of the three other methods by which radio news can be made available to the public. If this present arrangement falls through and nothing similar is erected in its place, then if the public wants news over the air it can be gotten in any one of three ways.

(1) By having the government take over and operate the broadcasting stations as is done in many other countries.

(2) By having advertisers collect or buy news and broadcast it as a part of their advertising programs.

(3) By having the radio stations collect or buy news and broadcast it divorced from any advertising program.

To the first of these, government operation of radio, there lie all the objections that lie to government in business in any field; and there is this added objection, if government owns and operates the radio stations any news that is broadcast is subject to being filled with administration propaganda. The administration, whatever its political complection, may have no interest in suppressing or coloring news of a disastrous fire, unless it should occur in a government building; but in the latter event, if the fire were to cause the loss of many lives because government had not provided adequate fire escapes, you may feel very sure that no government news broadcasts would mention that fact. Particularly in the field of political news would a government controlled news broadcast be not merely liable but almost certain to be propaganda pure and simple.

Consider next the advisability of having news broadcasted as a part of radio advertisers' programs. The advertiser is buying time for his own purposes. He has not duty to the public in the matter of news dissemination. He would be sorely tempted to color the news where he could thereby benefit himself, and, if he resisted that temptation, he could hardly be expected to broadcast news which would be positively harmful to his own product or business. If we had such

news broadcasting today and it were sponsored by the power companies of the United States, how much could they be expected to give the public of arguments in favor of the pending legislation seeking to curb holding companies? The answer is that they would give just exactly as much on that side of the question as the present administration at Washington would give on the other side were radio government owned and its news broadcasts edited by the administration's paid press agents, practically none.

Or suppose that radio news broadcasts were sponsored by manufacturers of proprietary medicines; in that case how much news or comment favorable to enacting pure food and drug laws of a restrictive nature would find its way into such programs?

I do not wish to be understood as advocating the administration's legislation directed at holding companies, or as advocating the so-called Tugwell bill. I do wish to point out that whatever may be the opinion of an individual newspaper man or the editorial policy of an individual newspaper, it does so happen that news and comment on both sides of every public question finds its way into practically every newspaper, and that there is slight if any reason to suppose that an equally fair presentation of both sides of the case would be had in radio news and comment were they controlled either by government or by advertisers.

But how about having news disseminated by radio stations entirely at their own expense and separated from any advertising program. If radio stations were free of government regulation, as are newspapers, there would, at least in theory, be no more reason why they could not broadcast news just as free from propaganda as can newspapers. They

might arrange for a co-operative news gathering organization similar to the Associated Press. The fact remains, however, that radio is government licensed, and that every radio station has to have its license renewed periodically. Any radio station which in its own broadcasts indulges in giving out news or comment displeasing to the national administration is endangering its license, and every broadcaster knows it. Furthermore, every broadcaster knows that if he were to permit advertisers to put on programs, either of news or of comment upon current affairs, which continued to displease the administration, renewal of his license would be endangered.

The presidential election of 1932 was held to be a sweeping democratic victory. So it was in terms of electoral votes. The congressional elections of last November were held to be a sweeping New Deal victory. So they were in terms of House and Senate seats. But neither victory was so very, very sweeping in terms of popular votes. In the presidential election of 1932, the losing side cast about 44 percent of the total votes. In the elections of last Fall, the New Dealers votes as contrasted with the anti votes were in about the ratio of 18 to 15.

That the dissenting opinions of a minority of the American people so large as election statistics clearly prove the anti-New Deal minority to be, should be denied expression, is abhorrent to everything we of this nation have been taught is fundamental. Those dissenting opinions, together with news events supporting them, have found place in the news columns even of those newspapers which are ardent champions of New Deal innovations and experimentation. But what expression did

radio give to the dissenting opinion? So far as I know absolutely none and certainly so little as to be for all practical purposes none. It is true that Will Rogers did one night poke a bit of fun at New Dealism, and opponents of the Roosevelt philosophy of government flocked to their radios the next time Will was on the air, only to hear what was in effect an abject apology. Thereafter Will went off the air. It was explained that he had to go to Siberia for his health, - or was it to Argentina to collect polo ponies?

If during the first year of New Dealism one had relied solely upon the radio for information one must necessarily have concluded that at least ninety-nine percent of Americans were its ardent champions and that the dissentients were devoid of patriotism and completely filled with rank selfishness. More recently there has been criticism of the administration over radio, but not by either the broadcasters themselves or in programs sponsored by commercial advertisers. A few critics have bought time on the radio and lambasted the administration.

What has been true during a New Deal administration will be equally true during a Newer Deal or a Newest Deal or any other kind of deal. Whether future administrations be reactionary, conservative, liberal or radical, the licensing of radio stations makes it impossible for broadcasters to have a free hand in the matter of news dissemination and comment. The threat constantly hanging over their heads that they will lose their large investments by having licenses taken away is quite sufficient to make them good boys from the administration point of view.

I have said that either the radio stations themselves or radio

advertisers might conceivably organize news gathering associations and give the public news by air on a large scale. It is not probable, however. What they would in all likelihood do - in fact what to a small extent is actually being done - would be to buy news from foreign news agencies, practically every one of which is controlled by its government and is an agency for spreading the propaganda of its government. These are the same agencies which until very recent years supplied news to all the newspapers of Latin-America and which, for the trade and other purposes of their own nations, so colored the news as to keep alive and at boiling point the Latin-American conception of the Collosus of the North. To have a diet of foreign propaganda fed to the American people over radio is hardly desirable. I know that our Department of State was very much concerned over the anti-American propaganda spread in Latin-America by European news agencies; I find it hard to believe that the department would not be even more concerned over any arrangement for broadcasting of news in the U.S. in which there lay the threat of cleverly concealed foreign propaganda inimical to American interests.

That radio dissemination of news, if not a very pressing need, is at least very much desired by a large portion of the American public, is a fact and beyond controversy. The present Press-Radio plan seems to me to fill every possible need, and to go a long way toward fulfilling every reasonable desire, and given time, will go further; and I believe that the abandonment of the present plan will almost inevitably result in some other system of news broadcasting which will be injurious to the public welfare.

In conclusion it may be of some interest to mention briefly how dissemination of news by radio has developed a technic all its own. Whether done by the editors of the Press-Radio bureau, or by others, preparation of news for broadcasting involves a knowledge of certain things not at all necessary in preparation of news to be printed. An involved sentence is not necessarily confusing to a reader, it usually is to a radio listener. In any event, the former, if confused, can re-read and get the meaning. This is impossible for the radio listener. Radio does not repeat. For the same reason in preparing news for broadcasting only the most essential details can be included because the inclusion of a mass of details leaves the listener confused. In short, the dispenser of radio news must be very sharply to the point while at the same time making his facts both interesting and significent. It is not easy to accomplish.

Experience has shown that there are certain groups of words which it is far better to avoid in broadcasting. N O and K N O W sound exactly alike, as do D E E R and D E A R, P R I N C I P L E and P R I N C I P A L. In the printed word the reader immediately gets the meaning from the spelling but the use of such words - and the English language is full of them - frequently is confusing in a news broadcast.

Statistic, too, can be usefully employed in print, but are of much less value in broadcasting. Few listeners have minds which can follow on radio the use of large numbers in addition and subtraction. Newspapers can effectively carry election returns, stating that "Smith received 1,247,435 votes; Jones received only 745,982," but for radio

purposes it is best to say "In a total vote of about two million Smith was leading Jones by approximately 500,000 votes."

A reporter may write "Sister Susie's sewing socks for soldiers" and the reader has no difficulty, but such sentences do not do well upon radio. Experience with them has shown that for radio purposes a succession of sibilants in sentences is seldom satisfactory.

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