The Effects of Technology on Communication (Radio)

Seth So

Since the printing press, radio was the first major advancement in mass communications technology. Building off the telegraph, radio enabled not only long-distance communications, but such to large audiences. Initially, people did not know what to do with the radio, but eventually the implications of the technology dawned on them. Its impact on society was massive, connecting all people from locales to continents. Once society recognized the significance of radio, Americans saw the ability to address mass audiences as a chance at the American Dream, igniting a public speaking craze throughout society.

With the acquisition of *American Marconi* during World War I, post bellum United States was left with a demilitarized piece of technology that had yet to be integrated into society. The formation of the Radio Corporation of America saw early attempts at commercializing radio with the use of AT&T's existing telephone lines. They tried broadcasting a variety of programs, from academic lectures to book narration, but none seemed to quite catch on. In 1924, the *Washington Post* speculated that radio "serves as a redemptive, educative, corrective and creative influence. It is constantly gaining the attention and study of boys who might otherwise become vicious."[1] While radio certainly served as a creative outlet, the paper failed to foresee the more practical and serious effects of radio in its almost satirical analysis. The author saw it as merely a toy with which to distract a youth and keep him out of trouble. However, as time went on, this mere distraction evolved into a full-blown art that saw the rise of many radio-specific celebrities.

This developing perspective is well vocalized by Florida House Representative Ruth Owen. "The listening public is not going to stand very long for the dead quality in a voice reading the written word. It will demand the freshness of extemporaneous speaking,"[2] the *Wall Street Journal* records her saying. This quote reveals that despite no facetime, audiences still have a high demand for the personality of the radio speaker. Therefore, radio was much less impersonal than people had initially thought, but rather personal enough to evoke a celebrity status for some personalities. Merle Thorpe is one such "ethereal authority,"[3] according to the *Washington Post*. The 1931 article by Robert Heinl tells of both the difficulty and glamour of Thorpe's life. Though Thorpe struggled daily with the harsh punctuality demanded by the radio world, he had gained an enormous popularity, "Thorpe's popularity is best attested by the thousands of letters he receives every week from all parts of the United States and foreign countries." In a similar 1932 article, William Cline of the *Los Angeles Times* near hero-worships a certain Dr. Julius Klein as a master of radio.[4] Cline details the precision and artfulness of Dr. Klein's addresses, as well as his exemplary mindfulness and public poise. Anything so little as paper rustling is "like a thunderclap" to Dr. Klein, an example of his mindfulness and sensitivity for the audience. Both Dr. Klein and Mr. Thorpe represent America's growing interest in radio. Men being able to gain both fortune and fame was indicative of the opportunity available in the field. For many, radio recalled to mind the American Dream. With so many Americans clamoring for this new chance, the education system was soon obliged to provide formal training in radio and public speaking.

Radio enjoyed an extended sense of novelty due to society's slow adoption of it. However, after nearly 20 years of commercialization, people finally started to realize the significance of radio. With so many wanting to try it, universities quickly had to start programs. According to a *New York Times'* article, by 1933, there were already 16 formal radio broadcasting courses offered by US colleges and universities, accompanied by over 50 instructional groups.[5] This number had been near zero just several years before, with interest still growing at a rapid rate. A subscriber to the *Washington Post* captured this sentiment in his letter to the editor in 1936, "…our high schools and colleges could well insist upon a course of public speaking."[6] He also re-echoes the importance of the personality of the speaker – that the

speech be told in "the most telling style…. If a manuscript is to be published verbatim in the morning papers, then why bother with the terrible cost of broadcasting?" Because so many people shared this feeling, colleges soon began to make radio an integral part of speaking courses. Just a year after the *Washington Post* article above, Rutgers' University of New Jersey made headlines when it decided to revamp its public speaking course "to prepare the student for radio and public-address systems…."[7] Rutgers invested in voice recording machines to more mimic radio broadcasts and give unbiased feedback, updated old textbooks to include chapters on radio, and offered tuition-free courses. "…[S]tudents of today may expect increasingly frequent occasions to speak before the radio and public-address systems. College courses in public speaking… can do much to prepare them for these activities." That semester, over 200 students officially enrolled in the course, highlighting their desire for public speaking and radio.

Swarthmore college took a different approach, opting rather to integrate radio into their extracurriculars. The Chairman of the Swarthmore debate board hailed the addition of radio debate as the cause for "one of the most successful seasons we have ever had… More interest has been shown in debating this year than ever before."[8] Over the course of the year, Swarthmore debate team took part in 35 formal debates, over half of which were broadcasted over radio nationally. Those not on the debate team also had a chance to compete in radio public speaking. The debate board held an annual debate for the undergraduates over local radio, with the Delta Upsilon Prize awarded to the most eloquent 5 minute speech. Students of all types were invited to participate, with the increasing recognition that all fields and futures would require public speaking. Along the same lines, Syracuse's School of Speech also saw a reinvigoration with the propagation of radio.[9] in addition to providing speech correction clinics, the school set up mock government conferences. It expanded its debate program to include radio debates and even sought to provide full radio training. In close collaboration with national debate fraternity Delta Sigma Rho, Syracuse invested a modern equivalent of $89,000 in a full radio workshop. The workshop was put to good use – it was student run and put on 800 programs in its first year, from news to drama.

However, perhaps greater than monetary commitment was Georgetown University's decision to make public speaking courses mandatory. Reported by the *Washington Post*, vice-president Dr. Walsh railed against the deteriorating quality of student speech, "The average high school student on entering college is too often found to be woefully undisciplined, slovenly and poverty stricken in the use of the barest essentials of the spoken language."[10] In order to fix this, the school purchased recording facilities to correct every aspect of one's speech, as well as radios to practice broadcasting to large audiences. Dr. Walsh stated that the loss of the mother tongue, especially with its then-current prevalence, was truly pitiful. "If the tree may be judged by its fruit and if education in the United States be fairly judged by its product, it must be admitted that one of the major weaknesses of our public and private school systems is a lamentable neglect of the mother tongue." He saw radio as a means to fix this, and thus set out on his crusade to save the English language in all of its glory, a decision that has altered Georgetown's course to where it is today and earned it international political acclaim.

Radio presented an opportunity to far more than just college students. People all around recognized the growing importance of public speaking due to radio and tried to become a part of it. People from all different parts of the nations were joining in on the craze. In 1935 Philadelphia newspapers were full of speaking and radio related advertisements. The *Jewish Exponent* advertised public speaking courses to anyone interested for $5 per session and launched a radio program showcasing the various talents of community youth.[11, 12] On the other side of the country in California, a young girl named Thelma won an opportunity to partake in a full radio seminar program. The *Los Angeles Times* article also used this opportunity to advertise its new book "Public Speaking Self-Taught" after giving some simple tips on improving speech.[13] It used sensational, exciting language to feed into the speaking frenzy, "You, too, can cultivate a speaking voice that brings you opportunities and new contacts."

And now for those most impacted by change to public speaking that radio caused. At the center of the entire public speaking craze was of course those who spoke most often to the public – politicians. If radio was a novelty to the general public, it was revolutionary to politicians. Simply increasing audience size magnified their sphere of influence by orders of magnitude, as their voices suddenly could reach

millions of ears at a time. At this point, politicians became pseudo-celebrities, as the public was now able to scrutinize their every action. Naturally, while some could not adjust, others rose to the occasion, becoming sorts of superstars to the public. The obvious example of this is Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In a *New York Times* article, Dr. James Bender carried out an extremely in-depth analysis of Roosevelt and his then candidate-rival Dewey.[14] Dr. Bender goes on to talk about everything discernable from each candidates' radio voice: ease, direction, tone, formality, intonation, dialect, pronunciation, enunciation, and pace. All of these add up to what Bender describes as the epitome of public speaking. Such intense thought, details, and planning is put into delivery that one should be able to understand the speech without even hearing the words. Most importantly, Dr. Bender says that master orators know their audience and how best to convey their message to them; from choosing a particular speech pattern to speaking at a certain number of words per minute to take advantage of short term memory, orators know how to speak effectively.

The most legendary of Roosevelt's oratorical exploits were his Fireside Chats. These were a series of national addresses to update the public on his work as president. Communications Ph.D. David Ryfe writes about these "conversations," highlighting the genius of FDR. Ryfe says that Roosevelt found the solution to the paradox of radio: how to develop a sense of intimacy despite the growing distance, audience size, and less personalized addresses – what Ryfe calls the "idioms of mass culture."[15] These idioms were non-verbal pop-culture cues that society operated under: stardom, fellowship and domesticity. Stardom was the ability to take on different roles in his speeches, from advisor to confidante, to exposer. In doing this regularly with mass publicity, much like a movie actor, Roosevelt was able to captivate his audience by making his information valuable. The idiom of Fellowship has to do with his familiarity and congeniality with all people. By use of personal pronouns, requests for comments and advice, and consumer psychology, Roosevelt was able to appeal to all audiences and demographics. He created a familiarity of a close friend worth listening to and kept the conversation as personal and mutual as possible. The final idiom of Domesticity refers to the intimacy that Roosevelt developed with his audience. Though speaking to millions at a time, he wrote to each of his audience members individually. His speeches were reminiscent of phone calls from old friends, and broadcast timing was carefully planned for when most listeners would be at home. In addition, he introduced new ideas and explained old ones through anecdotes to strengthen the feeling of familiarity and commonality. Use of these three tools helped Roosevelt conquer the double-edged sword of radio. He managed to keep the intimacy of a personal, face to face conversation to millions of people at a time through solely the use of his voice. As Ryfe says, Roosevelt's success was due to the dramatization and depoliticization of politics afforded to him by the use of radio. The effects were miraculous, "[L]etter writers referred to Roosevelt variously as a gift from God and a 'friend-next-door,' a supreme being and a real fellow who did not talk down to the public."

Public speaking and mass communications is taken for granted in society today. However, there was a time somehow forgotten when there was no way to talk further than one's voice reached. With the advent of radio, millions were connected, propelling cultural, political, and technological progress to breakneck speeds. In particular, public speaking evolved, and this perhaps has been the most revolutionary change to society. And of course, all of this was enabled by the radio, the first step in mass communications. Just several decades ago, radio seemed to be at the center of it all, integral to many of society's functions. It was the technology on the golden pedestal but has since been almost long forgotten. While today many see radio as an antiquated music box sitting in a car, it should not be forgotten that radio was the key to opening the floodgates of mass connection, making it a cornerstone of all modern-day media.

**Note*: The relevance of this writing pertains mostly to the finding and analysis of sources that point explain the unexpected impact and far reaching consequences that can come from any single event or invention. Radio, by simply extending the reach of one's voice, affected all aspects of life for the individual and propelled the world in the direction of globalism. Whether this be a massive

political/military event or new invention, it is necessary to gauge the possible ramifications in lieu of impacts on both culture and security, both directly and in the resulting network infrastructure.

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