

During the 1930s moviegoing settled into a form familiar to us today. The movie, not the place, and comfort and convenience, not luxury, were the attractions. At the same time it had transcended its tawdry early reputation and had become acceptable entertainment to the middle class. It became an activity predominantly of children and young adults. Behavior too had settled into a familiar pattern. Talking and other noises became annoyances to adults in the audience, while youth continued to challenge the rules of decorum at Saturday matinee, drive-ins, and other youthful gatherings.⁴¹



Voices from the Ether: Early Radio Listening

Only two decades after movies created a historic juncture from live to recorded entertainment, radio instituted another great transformation, bringing into the home entertainment previously available only in public theaters. Broadcasting changed the collective dimension of public audiences, dispersing them to their homes. The phonograph had this potential, but it spread very slowly. For decades it was expensive and severely limited as a music instrument.¹ The phonograph was quickly overshadowed by the much less expensive, more versatile, and fascinating technology of radio.

Radio broadcasting was born in the 1920s, a decade that, in many ways, divided the nineteenth century from the twentieth. Technologies such as the automobile, telephone, and household electrification took hold. Changes in sexual mores, gender roles, and child-rearing practices that had been brewing for some time gelled into “modern” middle-class culture. Reactions to radio can be appreciated within this context.²

Radio's first incarnation, however, was not as entertainment broadcasting, and radio listening was not the first leisure use of radio. Radio began as a wireless telegraph, transmitting dots and dashes through the air. The signals were broadcast, rather than transmitted point to point, but the purpose was two-way communication, as with wire telegraphy. In the early 1900s a hobby of amateur wireless operators sprang up, mostly middle-class schoolboys. Local clubs and a larger informal network of amateurs quickly evolved into a national organization, the American Radio Relay League, to promote communication among amateurs. The hobby by its very nature lent itself to enthusiasts discussing their common interests and forming activist groups nationally as well as locally. It is not surprising then that radio hobbyists, particularly amateur broadcasters committed to greater skill development and investment, formed a strong opposition to forces threatening to change radio.³

During World War I amateurs were prohibited from transmitting, to avoid interference with military communications. At the end of the war they began again, with new equipment developed during the war that made voice transmission more feasible, which stimulated interest in the amateur hobby. By 1920 over 6,000 licensed amateurs were active. Moreover, voice transmission provided the basis for radio to move from hobby to entertainment, with a considerable push from radio manufacturers.⁴

The Euphoria of 1922

Some amateurs not only used the wireless to talk to each other but also to make announcements and play music recordings for anyone listening. Commercial broadcasting began in November 1920 when Westinghouse executives recognized an opportunity to foster a broader market for their radio equipment. People not interested in *talking* via radio might be interested in *listening* to something more entertaining. Frank Conrad, an amateur employed by Westinghouse, was broadcasting music regularly from his own radio transmitter. Local Pittsburgh newspapers even began to announce his broadcast schedule. Westinghouse directed Conrad to establish the first commercial radio station, KDKA. Numerous others soon followed. Broadcasting mushroomed in 1922. *Wireless Age* wrote, "Churches, high schools, newspapers, theaters, garages, music stores, department stores, electric shops installed sending sets" and began broadcasting

phonograph music, talk, and anything else. The number of licensed stations rose from 77 in March to 524 by September 1922.⁵

This blossoming of broadcasting spawned a craze among people previously uninterested in radio that was called the "euphoria of 1922." People were amazed at this new phenomenon of "pulling voices from out of the air" as they termed it. Broadcasts were something entirely new, far more strange and mysterious in the early 1920s than the first regular television broadcasts in the late 1940s. Radio was hailed as a triumph of science. At the same time, radio was referred to as unnatural. Listeners accused radiowaves of hitting and killing birds, causing rain and drought, vibrating metal springs of a mattress, making floorboards creak, causing a child to vomit, and conjuring ghosts.⁶

Broadcasting changed radio suddenly from a hobby of a few thousand operators to a fad of hundreds of thousands of listeners. With something to listen to, other than amateurs talking to each other, radio sales soared. Retailers and manufacturers could not meet the demand for radios and parts. A letter to *Radio News* called it a "popular craze"; another to *Radio Broadcast* used the term "epidemic."⁷

Saturating the Market⁸

Estimates of radios in use vary, but all sources agree on the overall trends: the diffusion of radio was far more rapid than the growth of telephone or automobile during the same period. *Radio Retailing* estimated a twenty-five-fold increase from 60,000 sets in January 1922 to 1.5 million in January 1923. In 1924 the balance of sales shifted from parts for home-made sets to factory-built sets. By 1926, 18 percent of U.S. homes had a radio; by 1931, over half had a radio⁹ (see Table 12.1).

Saturation varied significantly by region, race, and rural versus urban areas, all of which reflected differences by income. In 1930 saturation was 51.1 percent in the North, 43.9 percent in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific States, but only 16.2 percent in the South. Rural saturation nationwide was 21.0 percent, compared to 50.0 percent for urban areas; 44 percent of white families had a radio compared to just 7.5 percent of Negro families.¹⁰ Price was an inhibitor. Lower-priced radios had a limited range, presented much greater problems of interference, and required much more skill to operate.¹¹

Table 12.1. Families with Radio Receivers, 1922-1940

Year	Families (1,000s)	Percent of all Homes	Average Price	Percent of Autos with Radio
1922	60		50	
1923	400		60	
1924	1250	11.1	67	
1925	2750	14.6	82	
1926	4500	18.0	114	
1927	6750	23.0	125	
1928	8000	26.3	118	
1929	10250	31.2	133	
1930	13750	40.2	87	0.1
1931	16700	55.2	62	0.4
1932	18450	60.6	48	1.2
1935	21456	67.3	49	8.9
1940	28500	81.1	40	27.4

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of U.S.* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1975), Series R90-98, p. 491; percent of U.S. households from Thomas Eoyang, "An Economic Study of the Radio Industry in the USA" (Ph.D., Columbia University, 1936), 67, and Christopher Sterling and Timothy Haight, *The Mass Media: Aspen Institute Guide to Communication Industry Trends* (New York: Praeger, 1978), 360, 363, 367; auto data from Sterling and Haight. Average radio prices for 1922-32 from Eoyang, 89, 1935 from "Are New Radios Good Enough?" *Radio Retailing* (March 1939), 19; 1940 from *Radio Retailing* (January 1941), 15.

Amateurs, DXers, and Simple Listeners

Radio amateurs felt threatened by the flood of new radio fans. Many broadcast listeners in turn blamed reception interference on the amateur next door. *QST*, the magazine of the amateurs' American Radio Relay League, published an editorial titled "Girding Up Our Loins," expressing the beleaguered feeling and bracing for a fight. The editorial stated, "We hope we're not going to have to scrap to retain a place in the ether for amateur operation.... We amateurs must not let ourselves be crowded out of existence by a horde of listeners-in." It proposed a division of time, giving broadcasters time before 10 P.M., and leaving the night to amateurs.¹²

In October 1922 Hugo Gernsback, editor of *Radio News*, offered a contest, with \$200 for first prize, for essays to answer the question, "Who Will Save the Radio Amateur?" A cartoon accompanying the

explanation of the contest depicted an amateur sitting in a chair listening to his set. He is on a beach, and a large wave labeled "Radiophone Popularity" is about to crash down on him. The contest was introduced by Armstrong Perry, a well-known writer on radio, with an article titled "Is the Radio Amateur Doomed?" Perry claimed that before 1922,

practically one hundred percent of the American radio users, aside from people in government or commercial radio services, were "radio amateurs"... Today the percentage of "radio amateurs" as compared with other radio users has nearly or quite lost its two ciphers, dividing it by 100. The amateur, once alone in his fascinating field, finds himself jostled and trampled upon by a horde of common folks who want to hear a concert or something.

Soon amateurs would have little influence in shaping radio use. The vast majority of Americans listened, at first for the novelty of receiving signals from great distances but increasingly simply for entertainment. The prize essays expressed desires of amateurs to make peace with this new world, offering to help with problems of interference and to provide other community services with their transmitters.¹³

DX Hounds

Early listeners had little to attract them beyond the sheer novelty of "capturing voices out of the air." Broadcast schedules were limited to a few hours a day; most of this was not very entertaining, interference was a chronic problem, and tuning was constant. Even the listener who was not enamored of distance spent much time trying to "capture" any broadcast that offered something entertaining. People commonly listened to stations hundreds of miles away. Even in major cities people supplemented local stations by tuning in distant ones.

Early listeners were therefore often DX fans; they sought to tune in stations from ever-greater distances. Unlike the amateur, who wanted to send as well as receive signals, the DX "hound" was preoccupied only with receiving distant stations and identifying their call letters. DXing was humorously described as an addiction. One writer used heroin as a metaphor; others likened it to alcoholism. Magazines frequently referred to men being "bitten by the radio bug," shamed by their "lust" for DX, and hiding their "addiction."¹⁴

For the benefit of DXers, newspapers printed radio schedules not only for their own city but for stations across the nation. Schedules for

even the largest stations as late as 1926 required no more than two column inches. Many stations broadcast only two or three programs during the evening. Such abbreviated schedules made nationwide listings feasible, requiring about a half page to list the major stations from east to west coast, Canada to Cuba.

As more and better entertainment was broadcast, the interests of the DX hounds and big-city listeners satisfied with their local stations began to diverge. The conflict depended upon the balance in a particular city between what broadcast programs were available locally and what had to be received from a distance. While typically the two pursuits were characterized as separate and opposed, sometimes the same person engaged in both. City DXers were described as men whose first priority was distance and who stayed up all hours after local stations ceased broadcasting and distance reception was better. These same men joined their families to listen to local stations' broadcasts of cultural events earlier in the evening as part of their familial responsibilities. Attitudes varied from place to place. A Connecticut respondent to a *Radio Broadcast* survey in 1927 noted, "DX in itself is not sought except when experimenting with a new hook-up or new parts. There is still a thrill in DX," which this man engaged in late at night when he couldn't sleep. But a Washington state respondent to the same survey was more enthusiastic, claiming, "Every radio fan likes to fish for DX." DXing necessarily was more popular and survived longer in more remote regions. As late as 1927 *Radio Broadcast* claimed that 80 percent of the geographic area of the United States still required DXing to receive stations. But more people were beginning to listen rather than tune. In 1928-29 NBC's market researcher Daniel Starch found that about one-fifth of families continued to seek distant stations, but three-fourths listened regularly to one or two favorite stations with good reception.¹⁵

"Listeners-in"

Even the simple broadcast listener needed some knowledge to install and operate his set. Batteries for tube sets ran down and had to be tested and charged or replaced. As tubes wore out, reception weakened. Owners had to figure out which tubes needed replacing and do it themselves. Only expensive radios had speakers and could be heard without headphones, restricting family listening. Newspapers and magazines published many articles about buying, assembling, and operating radio sets. One such article referred to "this intriguing sport

called radio." Even as late as Christmas 1926, when Crosley Radio Company announced a free instruction booklet, thousands wrote in requesting it.¹⁶

Tuning involved several dials, and the more tubes, the more dials. Sets with vacuum tubes required two separate batteries. Voltages from the two batteries had to be carefully adjusted to obtain good reception and to avoid burning out tubes. Before the neutrodyne was introduced in 1924, one could not reliably receive a station by adjusting the dial to the same position that had succeeded before. Rather, one had to scan the dials until some station was tuned in, then listen for the call letters to discover what station one had tuned.¹⁷

Tuning was typically depicted as a masculine skill. It was usually the role of the father or son to be the "operator." One wife from Pennsylvania complained that the quiet necessary for tuning was destroying family discussion, as a "deathlike silence must prevail in the family circle ... prattle of the children is hushed, necessary questions are answered in stealthy whispers."¹⁸ Such limitations sustained the idea of radio as a hobby of tuning rather than a relaxing practice of listening. Not being able to reliably tune to a particular station deterred interest in specific programs and encouraged random scanning to receive any station as long as it was a distant one.

The distinctions between amateurs, DXers, and simple listeners meant that the name of the radio audience underwent an evolution. Since radio required more than listening, in the early 1920s it was not customary to refer to those using radios as simply "listeners." "Fan" was most common during the craze of 1922. A fan might build his or her own receiving set and engage in DXing, but not in transmitting signals like the amateur operator. "Listener" or "listener-in" began to replace "fan" as more and more people acquired radios. *Radio News* began a column in 1923 titled "Broadcast Listener," offering technical information in terms understandable to the radio novice that offered help in building or operating a radio set. *Radio Broadcast* had a high-brow program critic's column titled "The Listeners' Point of View," beginning in April 1924. In June 1925 *Popular Radio* began a similar but somewhat more relaxed program critic's column, titled "The Broadcast Listener," and another column in January 1926 titled "Listening In."¹⁹

These columns, despite their titles, reflected a shift of attention away from the listener to programs. "Listener" implied inactivity. *Radio Broadcast* articles in 1927 used the term "passive listener" to describe the average radio listener who accepted whatever was broad-

cast, and complained of the failure of listeners to speak up. Amateurs derided those who merely "listened." As we will see, some thought passive radio listening was de-masculinizing.²⁰

Gendering the Listener

With the introduction of broadcasting, radio magazines sought to enroll the new radio fans as readers. Wireless magazines that had served hobbyists began to change, and new magazines were conceived specifically for broadcast listeners.²¹ These makeovers were obvious attempts to attract a new female readership, mixing messages of domesticity and women's equality with unflattering images of men fumbling with radio technology. *The Wireless Age* had been published for amateur wireless enthusiasts since 1913 by American Marconi Company, holder of many radio patents.²² It was a slim monthly of about 50 pages per issue, most of it advertising radio parts and accessories. A column called "World-Wide Wireless" chronicled new breakthroughs in radio technology. The "Experimenters' World" column and "Queries Answered" offered solutions to readers' technical problems. The cover pictured technical facilities such as giant aerial emplacements.

Beginning in May 1922, the magazine presented an entirely new face, without any explanation to its readers. It was clearly an effort to appeal to a broader, less technical readership. The covers featured Norman Rockwell-style color illustrations of people listening instead of black-and-white photographs of equipment. The May cover depicted a well-dressed woman sitting listening with headphones, radio wires and batteries hidden in a furniture cabinet, and "air conducting" the music with her hands. On the August cover, sophisticated couples danced on a verandah under Japanese lanterns to music from a radio loudspeaker. In January 1923 a young couple was depicted visiting their parents, the men in suits and ties with cocktails in hand, the women sitting next to each other holding hands before a roaring fire in a large stone fireplace. A large loudspeaker is situated just next to the fireplace, competing with it as the new hearth.²³

These covers were part of a larger discourse in radio magazines constructing the new radio audience. The people were affluent, as indicated by their houses, dress, and expensive radios with cabinets and loudspeakers. Radio listening was problem-free enjoyment, slightly romantic, and family oriented. All the covers, even the dance,

were set at private homes. Romance and family were icons of gender that softened the previous masculine image of radio as technology and broadened the appeal beyond middle-age men and their teenage sons.

A pictorial rotogravure section of several pages was introduced, showing all types of people using radio almost everywhere. Each monthly issue included a page of children, another of movie actresses, another of women outdoors, all listening without men's help. Feature articles concentrated on broadcasting rather than telegraphy and equipment. Two pages of cartoons reprinted from newspapers and other magazines, and another two pages of "radio humor," were introduced. A "Letters from Readers" column printed "applause cards" from readers expressing appreciation for various broadcast programs.

Several articles appeared concerning women in radio, and many pictures showed women listening. Technical matters were pushed to the back of the magazine, which had doubled its length to about 100 pages, the first half reserved for the new look and broadcasting, the second half retaining the older, technical departments for hobbyists.

Radio News underwent a less thorough makeover, but male readers nonetheless objected. When the editor tried a new cover style in 1920, one reader complained about their light-hearted nature. In 1922 the magazine was still predominantly technical, and a husky 200 to 300 pages per issue, but added a few whimsical covers, melodramatic fictional stories about radio amateurs, cartoons about radio, and occasional pieces on women using radio.²⁴ Yet some readers felt betrayed. A Philadelphia reader objected strenuously to changes that suggested anyone other than the amateur operator as reader. He wrote,

in the editorial of the first issue [July 1919] you stated that the magazine was for and by the AMATEUR, and you signed off H. Gernsback – your editor. The issue of August, 1922 is nothing more than the average broadcast magazine, great numbers of which have recently sprung up, and you signed the editorial with a plain H. Gernsback.

...if you canned those silly [fiction] stories and the articles on scarf-pin radio sets you would have room to admit some of the amateur stuff you were so glad to start with.

do you know Mr. Gernsback that there are two general classes of broadcast fiends? 1. The rich bird who buys his stuff outright and wonders why he can't get long distance telephony, especially in summer [season of greatest interference] by simply turning the knob. 2. The fellow who builds his set according to directions and if it doesn't come up

to his expectations tortures his paper with fool questions such as "Why can't I get the music from Hokem with my \$3.75 set?"²⁵

The letter writer was insulted that his technical knowledge was pushed aside in favor of the effeminate know-nothings who preferred broadcast listening. He was not "a kid" or a "silly" woman with a "scarf-pin radio." He was a master of technology. The technical and serious nature of the magazine was an affirmation of his manhood. Tinkering with its content betrayed his manhood.

Foolish Father and His Radio

This sentiment of insulted male pride in the letter was mixed with a hint of lower-middle-class resentment. The "rich bird" was pushing aside the hard-working amateur unafraid to dirty his hands with radio technology. Images in the magazines probably furthered such class resentment. Broadcast listeners depicted elegantly on the magazine covers and in radio ads were quite affluent. Inside, cartoons typically depicted lower-middle-class men, neither a manual worker nor affluent. For these men especially, masculinity, unproven by physical labor or success, was a sensitive issue, part of the larger shift in masculinity of the Progressive era.²⁶ The male bastion of radio technology was being breached by women, with the help of turncoat magazine editors. To make matters worse, their unsure hold on the world of radio technology was made the butt of humor. In 1922–23, newspapers were filled with cartoons about radio, enough to fill pages of reprints each month in *Wireless Age* and *Radio News*. Many popular comic strips such as "Mutt and Jeff," "Simeon Batts," "Cicero Sapp," and "Out Our Way" took up the theme of radio high jinks. The men in these cartoons were typically lower-level white-collar workers pushed around by their bosses.

The most prevalent theme in these cartoons was the ignorance, ineptness, and foolishness of men who succumbed to the radio craze. There were several versions of this view of the foolish white-collar man. One was the father pretending to buy the set as a toy for his son, but in fact using it himself. More common was the man who knows little but pretends to know. The man offers to help fix someone's set, and of course destroys it. A husband explains how radio works to his wife: "They sing into the horn and it goes out of the box and up a wire to the roof, see? Then there's something they call vitamins or kilometers or whatever it is and they grab it and the next minute those wires of

ours grab it and down it comes through the box." Another man tries for hours to tune his radio with no success, when his son or daughter or wife sits down and in seconds tunes in a station.²⁷ The success of the wife or daughter was not portrayed as skill, but simply dumb luck, the son more often as skill. The point, however, was about the man rather than the wife or children. Another theme that depicts the man's loss of his domain is the domineering wife who monitors her husband's activities by sending him messages via radiophone, or who decides what show they will tune in.

Women's Equality in Radio

The gender references in stories and cartoons about radio were not coincidental. The 1920s was a distinct turning point in gender roles. The early years of the decade were an era of triumph, riding on the exhilaration of the passage of the nineteenth amendment. In 1922, when broadcast radio began, there was much discussion and hope of extending women's rights to other areas, including assertions of women's competence with technology. But soon the political mood of the country began to shift to the right, and feminists were attacked as communists or labeled unfashionable. Conservatives mounted a campaign against women's organizations in 1923–24, and magazines began writing about the ineffectiveness of women's votes. In 1925 the child labor amendment that feminists had advocated was defeated.²⁸

Popular interest too shifted from politics to pleasure. Emancipation from patriarchal control and greater freedom in social behavior were for some more significant than political freedom. Younger women diverted their attention from political goals to a fusion of sexuality and consumerism, emphasizing fashion and cosmetics, fostered in popular media. The *Ladies' Home Journal* called it the "cosmetics revolution." Magazine articles emphasized the modern woman defined in personal terms, while the numbers of newspaper article about women's rights and the women's movement dropped precipitously. By mid-decade the flapper replaced the suffragist as the image of the modern woman.²⁹

As radio changed from a hobby to a domestic furnishing, the gender of radio use underwent similar metamorphoses. The changing discourses on women and radio in the 1920s radio magazines reveal the nature of such process submerged in popular discourse rather than in more overt political debates, and thus help us understand broader cultural changes. Radio had become a fixture in the living rooms of mil-

lions of homes. This "domestication" of radio effectively moved the radio from the traditional masculine sphere of technology to the feminine domestic sphere.

But before domestication, there was a brief period in which a case was made for the equality of women within the *technical* sphere of radio. Articles, pictures, and cartoons in radio magazines suggest a more complicated picture of gender issues during the early stage of crystal sets and DXing than is typically recognized.³⁰ Two discourses coexisted in the same magazines: one asserting women's technical prowess and "rights" to radio; the other depicting their ignorance and ineptness. The peak in women's advocacy was 1922. It gradually withered until 1924, when magazines turned again to more masculine formats.

Broadcast magazines included some surprising assertions of women's equality, which demanded access to the already masculinized activity of radio use. A speech advocating women in radio was printed in the third issue of *Radio Age*, a magazine for teenage boys. *Radio Broadcast* told of a woman who had made and installed 37 receiving sets, including stringing the antennae wires outside. She began when her husband brought home parts to build a set. But while he was at work she put it together herself.³¹

From its inception in 1922 to about mid-1924, *Radio World* gave marked attention to women. Pictures, stories, and cartoons presented images of women in control of this new technology. The predominant message was one of women successfully using and enjoying radio. Numerous pictures showed women listening and operating radios, for radio telegraphy as well as broadcast listening. A woman in New York was pictured playing chess via radio telephone with a female friend in Chicago. One cover featured the first woman graduate of a radio school.

Many of these pictures appeared as part of a regular column, titled "Radio and the Woman," which began with two pages in 1922. The columnist's pseudonym, Crystal D. Tector, alluded to the crystal set, suggesting that the author was something more than a passive listener. She was a weekly booster of women, sprinkling her column with examples of women's technical feats with radio, and generally advocating women's equality.³² She said such things as "women are equally as capable and as practical as men," as evidenced by the use of a hairpin to fix a radio; "there will be many positions which [women] will fill to better advantage than men"; "promising girl student among those

taking the wireless course at the Radio Institute of America, spiritedly contradicts all masculine statements which infer that women in general appear dazed when technical terms are mentioned"; "Most any department store will tell you ... that at least half the inquiries for sets and parts are made by women, and that their knowledge of the science is equal to that of the men."³³

But the outright assertions of women's equality ended in 1922. After that the column occasionally mentioned what women did, but not as frequently and not tagged with feminist alarums. The "Radio and the Woman" column gradually shrank to one page in 1923, to intermittent quarter-pages, and then disappeared in 1924. In mid-1924 the message of the magazine changed. Covers frequently pictured young women in bathing suits or dancing, legs exposed, while listening to radio. Beauties posed beside radios, but did not operate them. Cartoons depicted women as ignorant of the technology. One showed a housewife who tells her husband she cleaned his radio – but could not put it back together. Another showed her using the radio aerial as a clothesline. By the end of 1924, *Radio World* had shifted to a more technical, masculine readership, publishing almost exclusively sober, technical articles and eliminating the humor and women's columns altogether.

A similar but less pronounced pattern appeared in *Wireless Age*. In 1922 in the magazine's pictorial section there were plentiful pictures of women using radios in almost every conceivable setting. By 1924 pictures of pretty young women in swimsuits listening to radio predominated. The magazine published a few articles in 1924 and 1925 whose very faintness in advocating women's place in radio simply echoed the decline. One article about Eleanor Poehlor, the first director of a broadcast station, emphasized her skills as a saleswoman for her station, not her technical know-how. Another about Christine Frederick, who broadcast home economics programs, actually highlighted the domestication of radio. Even an article that asserted a girl was "just as good as father or brother!" acknowledged radio technology as a masculine sphere and males as the standard of skill.³⁴

The trend was decidedly away from advocacy of women's equality in radio technical skill. *Radio Age* soon pictured a mother hanging wash on a boy's aerial, and pretty young women in the kitchen following a recipe from the radio, stringing an aerial on a rooftop in an evening gown and high heels, and listening to the radio on the beach with prominent nipples showing through their bathing suits! These

and a goodly number of other pictures of attractive young women suggest that, by 1924, the magazine was courting not-so-young boys as their market, and considered women not a market but bait.³⁵ Magazines frequently referred to women listening while the man or boy did the building and operating. One *Radio Broadcast* article, to indicate the contribution of women, described their role as interior decorators. The women made suggestions as to where to place the radio, but the boys solved the technical problems to achieve these. A wife demanded a radio, but the husband was expected to buy the parts, set it up, and make it work.³⁶

Ads continued to feature women operating a radio set. Such ads, however, were not suggesting women's skills. Quite the contrary; ads used the image of women as technically inept to demonstrate how easy it was to use the featured brand of radio. A 1925 Atwater Kent pamphlet pictured a woman in evening dress tuning a set with one hand. The ad copy read, "Any child can do it!," equating women to children.³⁷

These disparaging images of women's competence in ads and cartoons were part of the larger backlash against women's equality that gained ground in the mid- and late 1920s. Between the wars, advertisements, information, and advice articles in women's magazines emphasized women's domestic role as a labor of love for her family. She was also depicted as needing experts like Christine Frederick to tell her how to be the perfect wife and mother, and to use domestic appliances she did not understand, like the radio. The voices of these experts were also brought to her by the radio in the first daytime programs in the mid-to-late 1920s.³⁸

Listening Habits

Letters and cards from early listeners indicate they did not experience themselves as passive eavesdroppers listening to something happening far away.³⁹ For them radio was a form of imaginative yet real *interaction*, what television researchers would later call parasocial interaction. People often wrote that they felt like the person on the radio was actually in their home, and wrote to welcome them. Letters from all over, large cities and small, east and west, are filled with open-hearted responsiveness to announcers and entertainers they heard on the radio. Listeners of the 1920s looked upon the radio announcer as a friendly good Samaritan to whom they turned for help in resolving problems and mysteries of their lives, to find a lost loved one, to

announce over the air calls for missing persons, and so on. Some even visited stations to ask announcers to broadcast personal messages.⁴⁰

Such responses were encouraged by the practices of live broadcasts. Announcers intentionally addressed listeners as if they were speaking to old friends. Broadcasts consisted largely of direct address to listeners and relatively little drama or even conversation among announcers and guests at the station. The style elicited strong attachment by listeners to announcers and performers, and the "location" of the interaction in their homes domesticated the relationship.⁴¹

One of the consequences of this social orientation to the radio voices was that listeners often talked back, and listening was lively. A Nebraska "traveling man" claimed in a letter to the editor that, of at least 200 homes he visited each year, he could not remember a single place where the broadcasts were listened to quietly: "Even the prayers in the [broadcast] church services were interrupted with bright remarks, and other irresponsible and extraneous material." Robert and Helen Merrill Lynd described Middletown radio listening in 1924 as an active pursuit.⁴²

Communal listening also was a widespread and viable institution in the 1920s. Public listening occurred in many places. Pictures showed crowds listening in streets by stores that had placed a loudspeaker outside. Major radio stations mounted radio sets with public address loudspeakers on trucks that parked and turned on the sets in parks and other places of public gathering for major sporting and political events, as a means of promoting the station. "Radio and the Woman" mentioned that "several of the better class tea shops [along Fifth Avenue, New York City] were equipped with radio sets." Another column mentioned a radio in a barbershop.⁴³ However, such listening was among anonymous crowds that were unlikely to foster a sense of commonality and collective action, as in nineteenth-century theater audiences.

Before radio was commonplace, homes with radios also became centers of social gatherings, much as the first television homes would in the early 1950s. Those with a radio, whether in their home or store, often found themselves hosting an audience of friends, neighbors, and relatives who were eager and curious to experience the new invention. A New Jersey woman wrote to *Radio World* that "Every night our home is crowded with neighbors." A Tennessee farm wife wrote to *Radio Broadcast* in 1924, "There are only six radios in our area of thirty square miles. So quite often, we invite our friends in to enjoy a

good program of music or lecture of some special interest."⁴⁴ This listening was not just collective, as in public places, but communal.

In the early to mid-1920s such socializing centered around the radio was common even among the affluent, as attested to by the many references in magazine columns and ads to "radio parties" at which curious guests could enjoy the new marvel of radio. A Connecticut respondent to a *Radio Broadcast* survey in 1927 said, "When any particular event of outstanding interest is advertised we generally plan to invite a few friends and make an evening of it." The "Radio and the Woman" columnist mentioned a friend who ensured everyone would come to her parties by writing on the invitation, "Radio Party and Tea." A "Radio Supper Club" met every Friday evening for dinner and dancing to radio at another friend's house. She said that, since installing a radio speaker, "all my friends want to do is come over and dance." In another column she exclaimed, "Heaven help you if you should forget to invite [your neighbors] to your house every evening for that radio entertainment."⁴⁵

By the late 1920s these "radio parties" were waning. The *New York Times* described an incident in the late 1920s where the etiquette of listening together was unclear, apparently already becoming less familiar. Another *Times* article characterized the radio audience as individuals "without a group mind," referring to the habit of listening in their separate homes.⁴⁶ The communal use of radio lasted longer in working-class and rural communities, where radio was slower to become a fixture in every home, especially under the financial stress of the Depression. In working-class Chicago homes in 1930, people listened together in shops and neighbors' parlors; most families listened together. Even in 1931 a radio attracted visitors to a rural Virginia home.⁴⁷

The shift from communal to family listening was implicit in the domestication of radio, which presumed that each family would listen separately in the privacy of their home. As soon as radio was defined as a household appliance, privatization was just a matter of time. But group listening did not disappear entirely; in the 1930s it became formalized. Various organizations established listening groups for educational purposes, supplanting the grassroots communal listening of the 1920s. Participants were from all backgrounds, although housewives and students predominated and they had more than average education. They met in private homes to listen to and discuss public affairs or family guidance programs (child-rearing, homemaking, education).

Some listened to high culture, such as classical music or plays. Extension services of land grant colleges in Ohio, Iowa, New Jersey, and Kentucky began to offer courses via radio, for which people were encouraged to listen in groups. Many other types of organizations formed listening groups, among them the National League of Women Voters, local PTAs, YMCAs, and libraries. The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration organized groups to listen to NBC's *American Town Meeting of the Air*, which began broadcasting in 1935 to foster group discussions of current public issues. An estimated 3,000 groups across the country listened to the program in 1938-39. Another program, *Great Plays*, reported a thousand groups listening. Several other radio programs were designed specifically for such voluntary group listening, announcing availability of information or mailings to help.⁴⁸

Listeners Organize!

Some listeners went beyond communal listening and acted collectively to shape radio. This represents some of the most significant collective actions by twentieth-century audiences, short-lived and different from, yet equal in ways to the actions of theater audiences of the early nineteenth century. Listeners organized to solve problems of interference in receiving broadcast signals.⁴⁹ Most significant was the movement for "silent nights," when local stations agreed not to broadcast so listeners could tune in distant stations without local interference. This movement arose and faded with the shift from DX to program listening and the growth of broadcasting from an experiment to a profitable commercial venture.

The first silent nights were established sometime in 1922. At that time broadcasting was sufficiently experimental and unprofitable that broadcasters voluntarily agreed not to broadcast one night a week in several cities, among them Kansas City, Cincinnati, Dallas, and San Francisco. Chicago stations agreed to silent Monday nights in 1922 when the Department of Commerce radio inspector suggested it "in response to a demand from many fans," and after a poll taken by the *Chicago Daily News* indicated listeners were 11 to 1 in favor of a silent night. The radio inspector also obtained agreement by the American Radio Relay League for amateur operators to be silent that night.⁵⁰

Chicago's silent night continued through 1924 without controversy. In 1925, however, some stations began to construct powerful trans-

mitters in suburban areas. The original agreement applied to stations within Chicago, so these stations claimed exemption. In August a local organization, the Broadcast Listeners' Association, called for a boycott of stations violating silent night. Within three weeks two such stations agreed to adhere to silent night; another agreed in September; and the last capitulated in late November. In the midst of this the city broadcast stations reendorsed silent nights, supporting the boycott.⁵¹

Silent nights continued through 1926 and 1927, accompanied by "a more or less animated discussion." In March 1927 a major Chicago station ceased silent Mondays in order to broadcast an NBC network program from New York. This raised the question anew whether to abandon silent nights. A poll indicated a five-to-one support for silent nights and the broadcasters' association decided to retain the practice. Then in November 1927 Chicago stations announced they would end silent nights. The trend toward commercial broadcasting made Monday nights too valuable as advertising time to remain silent. Chicago broadcasters claimed in the *Daily News* that silent nights were no longer necessary for DXing and that they deprived other listeners of a night's radio. As if to close the story of silent nights in Chicago, a radio writer in the *Daily News* claimed that the DX fan had settled down to enjoy programs on local stations.⁵²

As the need for distance reception varied with location, the demand for silent nights differed from place to place. During this same period, silent nights were debated in New York City with different results. In a 1925 discussion of the topic, the *New York Times* wrote that "New York has heard less agitation for one silent night a week on the radio than any other big city." It claimed that this was because New York was the radio entertainment center, so anyone seeking entertainment need not seek distant stations, and that the majority had given up DXing until late at night.⁵³ Nevertheless, in October 1925 a Citizens Radio Committee, coordinating its efforts with the Chicago boycott, mounted a campaign for the first silent night in New York City. A week later another organization, the National Radio Service League, announced its opposition to a silent night, arguing that New York programs were much better than in the past and "the distance craze" had been replaced by "a desire on the part of listeners for genuine entertainment... A radio set is no longer a scientific plaything for the mechanically inclined man; it is a source of amusement for the whole family." The organization had offices in Aeolian Hall, the location of classical music concert broadcasts. So it would appear that this was

likely the voice of cultural elites and/or broadcasters. "The Broadcast Listener" column in *Popular Radio* also opposed the idea, referring to DX fans as "animated by some sort of kid passion" in whose hands "A radio receiver becomes a mere toy." It referred to the Chicago strike as "foolish." The same column in December 1925 used harsher terms, calling DX fans "long distance cranks" and "a bunch of idiots."⁵⁴

Such belittling of DX fans was a notable change. Metropolitan listeners had lost interest in DXing as broadcast programs and tuning capabilities of radio sets dramatically improved. The loss of interest was greater and occurred sooner in New York City, so that support for silent nights was never sufficient. In Chicago support remained into 1927, yet by the end of that year no protest arose when broadcasters abandoned silent nights. Newspapers and others claimed DXing was no longer popular and that most people just wanted to receive a good program and, in cities like New York and Chicago, could do so without DX.

As circumstances shifted, so did listener concerns, from support of DX to objections to interference in tuning in local stations. There were more complaints to city officials and radio inspectors in New York City about interference from nearby transmitters or cheap regenerative radio receivers than about silent nights.⁵⁵ In 1925 and 1926 listener organizations formed in several cities. Little information beyond brief mention in newspapers and magazines exists about these groups. Many organizations, often formed by local elites, planned to put a stop to cheap radio sets that interfered with local station transmission. The United States Radio Society was formed in Cincinnati in February 1926. The National Broadcast Listeners' League in Indianapolis organized "to fight all forms of outside interference" from "blooping" regenerative sets. Another antiblooming organization was formed in Chicago by several prominent Illinois politicians.⁵⁶

An example of these elite organizations, The Listeners' League of Greater Cleveland was founded in March 1926 at a meeting at the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce. It had as its board of directors the trust officer of the Central National Bank, the secretary of the Lake Erie Trust Company, a superintendent of roads for the Cleveland Railway Company, the agent for the American Railway Association, an attorney, and a consulting engineer. Its expressed goal was "first to campaign against avoidable interference with reception."⁵⁷

There were a couple of organizations that seemed more concerned about the rights of listeners versus broadcasters, but there is little to

suggest they were successful. A Boston group named the Association of Broadcast Listeners, begun in summer of 1925, composed of about 300 "storekeepers, accountants, ministers, mechanics, chauffeurs, trolley conductors and motor men," proposed creating a national system of powerful broadcast stations owned and controlled by listeners. Nothing came of the proposal.⁵⁸

Radio Broadcast briefly mentioned receiving information from the Iowa Listeners' League and other Midwest groups attempting to organize listeners. The magazine supported the idea, but doubted "very much if the radio listener can ever be organized." The president of the Iowa League published a criticism of Henry Field's use of his radio station in Shenandoah, Iowa, as a "home shopping" station, announcing his products and prices and giving the address to send money and orders. This appears to be a different and more critical stance than that taken by those organizations concerned with interference from cheap radio sets. However, a hint of elitism bleeds through the criticism here too. He bemoans the station's entertainment as "not of a high-class nature [but] common music for common people." He claimed that "letters from opponents of the principles of direct selling are on excellent paper and represent a highly educated class, while those from supporters of the direct seller are for the most part extremely hard to read, are not noted for cleanliness and usually avoid referring to the real subject of debate."⁵⁹

Class issues underlay these contests over silent nights and interference as well as between DX hounds and other listeners. More powerful, richer stations opposed silent nights. Upper-class listeners with more expensive, powerful receivers were more concerned with interference from cheaper sets, likely owned by lower-income listeners. In a range of ways the debates over broadcasting were struggles between unequal economic forces or classes over whose interests would prevail. By the end of the 1920s the more powerful corporate forces had prevailed in broadcasting, while for listeners issues of silent nights and interference faded away as better technology and programming became accessible to a broader spectrum of classes.

13

Radio Cabinets and Network Chains

In the early 1920s radios were purchased in pieces, not just by those ambitious to build their own set, but by everyone. People purchased tubes, dials, headphones, batteries, and aerials, and wired them together at home. The challenge for the middle-class homemaker was to make this mess of wires and parts invisible or at least presentable, and to prevent leaking batteries from ruining furniture and carpets. Christine Frederick, a popular home economist and magazine writer, provided extended interior decorating advice on the appropriate place in the home for a radio. She chronicled the change.

...for the first couple years of radio [1922-23], no body seemed to think it strange to pile the library table with mechanical paraphernalia... Until this current year radio was the toy and the joy of men rather than women. It has been only since women have taken a practical home making interest in radio that ... has resulted in demand for higher class, more beautiful and more artistically designed sets... She is thoroughly through with all the original radio messiness.

Frederick suggested putting the radio in a room where the family gathered, and hiding the “ungainly horns and instruments” in a cabinet or wall recess. More direct, an Atwater Kent ad in *Ladies' Home Journal* of December 1925 reassured middle-class housewives that “radio needn't disturb any room.”¹

Soon the whole task was made simple by manufacturers offering factory-built radio sets mounted in fine wood cabinets. In 1923, *House and Garden* announced the appearance of the first radio “desk cabinets” in which to hide the mess, but still located the radio room, “a room of masculine character,” in the attic. A few months later *Radio Broadcast* noted, “While there are still in use plenty of unprepossessing and shy crystal receivers ... an aristocracy of receiving sets is emerging.” This “aristocracy” was radios in wood cabinets designed to blend with the parlor decor, much as had been done with phonographs earlier. But these were not yet commonplace.²

To fit a radio into a cabinet meant replacing headphones with a loudspeaker and batteries with house electricity. Loudspeakers were becoming affordable, and electric service was becoming a standard feature of new, upper middle-class homes by the late 1920s.³ The year 1927 marked a significant shift in marketing radios as furniture. The January issue of *Radio Retailing* noted that manufacturers would be offering far more console models than in 1926. A February article noted that manufacturers were concentrating on cabinet design and making tuning easier, using two dials instead of three. Radio dealers were giving up the parts business and selling only factory-built sets. By 1929, only 3 percent of families still used home-made crystal sets.⁴

The radio was now within the upper-middle-class woman's realm of home decoration.⁵ With the domestication of the radio, *Radio Retailing* said, “no longer can the radio dealer slight the artistic appeal when selling the woman prospect.” Another ad in the upscale *Saturday Evening Post* said,

The men have had their turn at radio. They've fiddled and fussed with a thousand-and-one hook-ups, amplifiers, relays and what-nots in their efforts to get “distance” and “volume” until our living rooms resemble the workshop of a boy inventor. The ladies' turn has come and here is the instrument built expressly for them. It's a smart little *personal* writing desk all the time and a wonderful radio whenever you switch on.

The ad pictured an affluent woman in high heels and evening dress, with a pull cord behind the \$120 radio desk to call the maid.⁶

Radio Retailing announced that dealers needed to sell the radio as a fine piece of furniture rather than as a technical instrument, in order to please their new market of women. *New York Times* radio columnist Orrin Dunlap, Jr. claimed housewives' desire for a radio built as a fine piece of furniture that was compatible with the living room decor also fueled this shift.⁷

The year 1927 was also significant in advertising's shift to emphasize the entertainment delivered into the home by radio. Many ads and articles referred to radio as a “musical instrument.” *Radio Retailing* told dealers, “You are selling music, not radio.” The magazine claimed that radio needed to be marketed to the three-quarters of American homes without a radio at that time as “music and entertainment, not as a technical instrument.” An ad stated, “RCA Victor introduces a master built musical instrument.”⁸ Such marketing suggests listeners who cared not for technical wonders but convenience, something easy to use that would blend into the rooms' furnishings.

No Place Like Home

Radio was being redefined as a domestic appliance. Early communal uses and public listening places, under other circumstances, could have become the standard for radio. Amateurs, crystal set hobbyists, and DX fans, even while operating from their homes, were oriented to a community of fellow hobbyists. But domestication of the radio implied privatization within the home. Making radios affordable for the single family was a prerequisite for this “ideal” to be realized. But the symbolism of the time also strongly reinforced this idea of radio domesticity. The association of radio with the home was part of a larger movement in advertising to depict products and center consumption in the home by creating a domestic ideal.⁹

Ads deployed many metaphors of domesticity and domestic tranquillity. An RCA ad circa 1927 showed a little cottage and was captioned, “When you own a radio there is no place like home.” Another RCA ad in *Saturday Evening Post* was captioned, “Make your home life richer with the magic of Radiola.” It went on, “A world of entertainment ... in your home.” The family gathered around the radio was a common picture.¹⁰

Ads claimed the radio eliminated the need to go out for entertainment. A Stewart-Warner radio ad claimed the radio “cuts your entertainment cost in half” since it provided good entertainment in the

home, and people therefore went out less. An ad for Herald loudspeakers stated, "Dine out - at home! A famous restaurant, a great orchestra ... right in your own dining room." Many ads featured an upper-class couple entertaining another couple in their home, using radio to provide high-class background music for an intimate evening of dinner and conversation.¹¹

Radio Comes of Age in the Depression

Despite the Depression, radio saturation continued to rise. Radio set prices dropped precipitously to an average of \$34 in 1933. Income became less a factor in radio ownership, and radio use was no longer skewed upscale. By the late 1930s, lower-income groups listened more, preferred local over network programs, and preferred radio to reading.¹²

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, practices of broadcasters and listeners became institutionalized. Broadcasting settled into its commercially sponsored form, dominated by networks. Networking, or what was then called "chain broadcasting," made radio attractive to national advertisers with budgets large enough to sponsor more elaborate programs. NBC began the first network programming in 1926 and CBS began in 1929. Soon higher-cost drama and variety programs began to make inroads into music as the principal form of programming. Regular commercially sponsored programs, broadcast at the same hour each day or week, began in the early 1930s.¹³

Market Research Constructs an Audience

Since radio listening was rapidly becoming a familiar daily routine, it no longer warranted discussion in magazines. Radio magazines themselves disappeared, became simply program listings (e.g., *Radio Broadcast* became *Radio Digest*), or shifted their market from the general listener to retailers, repairmen, or hobbyists (e.g., *Radio World* reverted to an all-technical format). About the same time, radio stations and networks were beginning to conduct systematic surveys of their listeners.¹⁴ From the earliest days of radio, stations wanted to know who was listening. At first they distributed "applause cards" and encouraged people to write in.¹⁵ By the late 1920s the audience had become a product for sale to advertisers, who wanted more accurate measures to price the product they were buying. They turned to the nascent fields of market research and academic radio research.

One of the earliest market researchers was Daniel Starch, whom NBC contracted in 1928 to measure its national audience. CBS also began its own research in 1930, contracting with Price Waterhouse. Many stations and organizations soon conducted or commissioned their own surveys.¹⁶ Broadcasters hired business professors at prestigious universities, such as Robert Elder at MIT and Herman Hettinger at the University of Pennsylvania, to conduct surveys.¹⁷ These one-shot surveys were quickly displaced by regular ratings services. In 1930 the Association of National Advertisers and the American Association of Advertising Agencies, representing the sponsors and ad agencies for most of the network programs at the time, formed the Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting and appointed Archibald Crossley, former pollster for the *Literary Digest*, as head, starting what quickly became known as the Crossley ratings. Crossley conducted monthly telephone surveys asking people to recall what programs they had listened to. In 1934 Claude E. Hooper, a former researcher for Daniel Starch, began his Hooper ratings to compete with Crossley. Hooper also used telephone surveys, but asked people what they were listening to at the moment, rather than asking them to recall.¹⁸

Market research and ratings described the size and demographics of the audience, when and how much they used their radio and types of programs they preferred. Absent from these studies is any information on what people did with radio, other than selecting programs. We cannot reconstruct from them a picture of a family's daily life and how radio fit into it. But the surveys and other studies of the 1930s do provide basic information helpful in picturing the radio audience.

Radio audience habits, which carried over to television viewing, were established around 1930 with the regularization of radio schedules. Listening quickly became routine, fitted to people's daily schedules. Housewives were the primary listeners in morning and afternoon, children after school, and men and women equally in "prime time" between 7 and 9 P.M. Surveys indicated household averages of two to three persons listening per set during evening hours in households in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Families listened together in 85 percent of households. Most people preferred popular music, and secondly comedy over other programming. As early as 1928 almost three-fourths of listeners preferred network programs over local programs.¹⁹

A handful of studies offered richer images of the radio audience. When the Lynds returned to Middletown in 1935, they found radio a "mild cohesive element in family life." But they believed that radio "carries people away from localism," while "binding together an increasingly large and diversified city." In other words, radio was eroding civic engagement and participation in community activities, making families more insular and orienting them, as described by mass society theories, to national elites, instead of to their local community peers. The Lynds' expression of concern was one of the earliest of what would become in the 1950s a small industry of criticism of radio and television for causing the breakdown of community and the "atomization" of society. The local radio station linked Middletowners to cultural elites in New York, and substituted sport spectatorship as the basis for civic identification over civic participation. In both cases the participation in community that mass society theorists considered important to integrating people into the national fabric, was supplanted by a superficial identification via centralized radio programming.²⁰ The Lynds also characterized radio as "almost entirely a passive form of leisure," in contrast to what they had noted as an active involvement in the 1920s. The change from DXing to listening struck them as a change from the active to the passive, and foreshadowed mass culture critic Theodor Adorno's claim that radio induced passivity and the common criticism in later years of television "narcotizing" viewers.

Perhaps reflecting the change from civic engagement to radio listening is the importance some listeners placed on the radio rather than on friends and neighbors to help them through hard times. For the unemployed during the Depression, listening filled the long idle hours. One unemployed listener in Chicago in 1935 wrote, "I feel your music and songs are what pulled me through this winter. Half the time we were blue and broke. One year during the Depression and no work. Kept from going on relief but lost everything we possessed doing so. So thanks for the songs, for they make life seem more like living." Destitute families who had to sell their radio described the loss as a considerable hardship.²¹

Other descriptions of radio listening portrayed a much more innocuous device, providing aural wallpaper for the family's activities. These were the frequent comments on radio's use as background and the inattentiveness of listeners. Inattentiveness contradicted the fear of radio's power to induce passivity. In 1928,

13 percent of respondents to a national survey said that no one in the family was listening when the radio was on. During the day housewives frequently listened while doing chores. A 1931 study found that only 13 percent of housewives were giving radio their full attention in the morning, 22 percent in the afternoon, and 55 percent in the evening. The author of a Minnesota survey commented that "No one who has heard his neighbor's radio blaring away constantly day and night can doubt that many radio owners fail to give full attention to their instrument."²²

Send in Those Letters!

One of the few remaining examples of listener voices from the 1930s is fan mail, which tells us how listeners used radio and what it meant to them. Lower-income and rural people were more likely to write. The class of letter-writers, however, varied with the program. For example, an upscale audience wrote to the *American School of the Air*.²³

Personal attachments to announcers and entertainers survived the shift from local stations to national network broadcasts. Listeners expressed the same un-self-conscious openness toward national radio stars as they did to local radio station announcers. One indicator of this is the ease with which performers prompted gifts from listeners. When Guy Lombardo mentioned strings on his violin, he received 193 yards of violin strings. When Amos and Kingfish decided to start a bank, hundreds of listeners sent in dollar bills to deposit! Listeners sent hams, sugar cane, maple syrup, peaches, sombreros, oranges, linen, cats, dogs, pencils, shoes, tires, and so on.²⁴

Fan mail to Lowell Thomas, who began a fifteen-minute nightly news broadcast in fall 1930, also suggests at least some listeners constructed a personal relationship with him. One writer castigated Thomas for making a remark about thick ankles because a young woman with thick ankles happened to be listening at the writer's home and left the table in tears. Another wrote, "Last night you mentioned that women use rouge. I myself never use any and certainly think it a most disgraceful remark to make over the radio." And another, "You embarrassed me so this evening in your talk about the dude hunters that if I live to be a hundred years old I will never be myself again."²⁵ They reacted to his behavior as if he were physically present in their home and had insulted them to their face. They showed no awareness of him speaking to thousands of others at the same time. Others saw him as someone to turn to for help and asked

him to intervene for them to help along a romance, promote some invention or idea, or pass along messages, as was common on local stations in the 1920s. They wrote as if he were likely to know their neighborhood and even their friends and family.

Such personal responses were not confined to simple folk. Letters to the Baldwin piano company for their broadcasts of classical music in 1929 reveal similar responses, except these listeners felt themselves guests in the "home" of the performers. One letter-writer from Staten Island phrased it, "our whole family greatly [sic] accepts your invitation to listen in again.... We felt very much at home during your *Concert At Home* tonight." Another from Colorado said, "thanks for the pleasure in being a guest in that delightful music loving home yesterday." And another from Bay City, Michigan wrote, "I almost felt as if I were in the room too - it seemed so delightfully informal." The inversion of listeners from "hosts" to "guests" eliminated the feeling of radio performers invading their homes. It meant too that they were less likely to write about their own families and their use of radio.²⁶

Daytime Listening

Radio stations at first concentrated their broadcasts in the evening, when the largest audiences were available. But soon some began to identify daytime as the "women's hours."²⁷ The first daytime programming was primarily informational homemaking and childcare programs for housewives. Broadcasters believed that the daytime schedule should look "like the non-fiction features of *Good Housekeeping*."²⁸ There was no criticism of these homemaker programs or their effects on the women listening.

This contrasts markedly to the attitudes of cultural elites toward the soap operas of the 1930s and 1940s. The first daytime serial began in 1929 when WGN in Chicago began daily broadcast of Irna Phillips' *Painted Dream*. Proctor & Gamble soon became the major sponsor of daytime serials in the 1930s, including *Ma Perkins*, *Home Sweet Home*, *Dreams Come True*, *Song of the City*, *The O'Neills*, *Pepper Young's Family*, *The Guiding Light*, *The Couple Next Door*, *Road of Life*, and *Kitty Keene*. The number of network daytime serials peaked in 1941 when at least one serial was broadcast in fifty-nine of the sixty quarter-hour segments between 10 A.M. and 6 P.M. on weekdays, on CBS, NBC Blue, and NBC Red networks.²⁹ By the 1940s half of

American women listened regularly to at least one serial; 10 percent listened regularly to seven or more serials.³⁰

As the soaps grew in numbers and popularity, they came under attack from social and cultural elites. Serials were first criticized for crowding out valuable programming. A New Rochelle woman's club in November 1939 began organizing an "I'm Not Listening" boycott, which by the spring had supporters in thirty-nine states. The boycott had little effect, however. The vice president of WHN chastised these affluent women for campaigning against serials that meant so much to "women not so fortunate as you club ladies." In 1942 more such "club ladies" mounted a campaign against soaps for their "insipid stories" and "belittling attitude" toward women. Mme. Yolanda Mero-Irion, the founder and president of the National Radio Committee, lambasted advertisers for "feeding women soap operas" that she described as "ridiculous, sentimental bunk which has no relation to any of the realities of our lives." She accused advertisers of handling women as if they were imbeciles; "The picture of the little woman with her hands in soapsuds, rapturously listening to Joe and Mary's imaginary trials and tribulations when the world is burning has something sickening in it."³¹

James Thurber caricatured soaps as "a kind of sandwich... Between thick slices of advertising spread twelve minutes of dialog, ad predicament, villainy, and female suffering in equal measure, throw in a dash of nobility, sprinkle with tears, season with organ music, cover with a rich announcer sauce, and serve five times a week." Thurber went beyond criticizing the shows to caricaturing the women listeners. He ridiculed those who "confuse the actors with the characters." He cited listeners in 1935 who sent hundreds of gifts to a character who was going to have a baby, and again in 1940 when two characters were to marry. Actors playing other characters received soap, live turtles, flowers, and get well cards. Thurber was not alone in deriding women soap opera fans and in characterizing them as mentally unstable. He cited a Buffalo doctor who in 1942 claimed that soaps caused an "acute anxiety state" in women listeners. The doctor's claims received much attention from the press.³²

Attacks on soaps continued a tradition in which, film theorist Tania Modleski argues, critics consistently have denigrated women's mass media and their readers, listeners, and viewers. The Buffalo doctor's reference to "acute anxiety state" echoed a very similar claim in 1901 by a Milwaukee doctor that drama matinees were harmful to young

women, causing "nervous prostration." A 1951 *Sponsor* magazine article suggested magazines and novels afforded women with sources of romance and adventure, but not companionship.³³

In the 1940s women researchers began to investigate charges that serials made women listeners psychologically unstable.³⁴ Although some critics suggested fans were lower class, studies consistently found no differences between listeners' and nonlisteners' educational or class strata. Women claimed radio helped the time pass while doing repetitive work like dishes or ironing, echoing the same sentiments expressed by women in the 1920s. In 1946, sociologist Ruth Palter conducted an in-depth study of white lower-middle-class women who were heavy radio listeners. They said radio took the drudge out of housework; "the ironing goes much faster," "it breaks the monotony and I don't even think about what I'm doing," "If a woman has the radio ... She ain't stuck in the ol' house." They described radio as a companion that warded off loneliness in an empty house.³⁵

Palter also described listeners relating to the speaker on the radio as someone with whom they interact. This "parasocial interaction," as it came to be called, was characterized in magazines and research of others as an unhealthy blurring of reality. But such involvement, reminiscent of the nineteenth-century tales of green'uns in theaters, has been given more positive interpretations by other writers that imply no loss of a sense of reality.³⁶

Psychologist Herta Herzog analyzed the results of four surveys conducted in the early 1940s to construct a picture of the daytime listener, and concluded women enjoyed serials for escape from their own problems and for an emotional release – a "good cry." Iowa listeners surveyed by sociologist Leda Summers in 1942 stated that serials helped them to solve their own problems. This was true for women with a college education as well as those with less education. Women in Pittsburgh and New York corroborated the statements of Iowa women, describing in their own words how serials helped them in their own lives. Respondents to a CBS national survey similarly said the stories were "true to life" and enabled them to extract "lessons in living."³⁷ The "true to life" comments suggest an explanation for talking about the characters as if they were real. Such talk would seem to make sense as part of the practice of extracting "lessons," rather than indicating confusion about the boundary between reality and fiction.

The research suggests more complex responses to radio than housewives becoming dangerously lost in the fantasies of the soaps.

More recent researchers argue that women have constructed positive readings from women's fiction and drama. Fiction writer Helen Papashvily claims the domestic or sentimental novel of the 1830s to 1880s lent themselves to a reading more supportive of women, glorifying the home and women in it and portraying men and the world outside negatively. The novels were a sort of subtle revolt, portraying men in uncomplimentary terms and focusing on the tribulations of the heroine. Yet men did not read them and accepted the novels as harmless pastimes for their wives and daughters. The soap opera is in some ways the twentieth-century equivalent of the nineteenth-century novel. Researchers interviewing television soap opera viewers in the 1980s similarly have documented alternative positive readings that viewers construct. So, we might suspect, did serial listeners of the 1940s.³⁸

Fan mail confirms this "lessons for life" orientation on the part of many devoted listeners. Letter-writers tended to be more regular listeners than the average, yet their letters suggest a helpful side to their habit. Letters to the creator of *The Guiding Light*, Irna Phillips, contain less talk of the listener's own activities and more focus on the show than did earlier fan mail.³⁹ They do not exhibit much absorption in the lives of the characters, the usual stereotype of the soap opera fan, but rather responses to the serials as morality plays from which they can draw lessons applicable to their own lives. Most of these letters are either asking for copies of dialog that they can use in their own work with children as mothers, teachers, and advisors; or they express concern about the fates of characters. Some write about characters as if they were alive. But this represents a conversational shorthand more than an actual belief. They talk about the characters as models.

Letters as well as interviews conducted by researchers then and more recently emphasize a more positive and autonomous use of radio text than critics warned of. What they do not reveal is more details about their behavior, details that would tell us something about the public or private, individual or collective nature of the audience. Did they listen together? Did they talk with each other about their readings? Did this lead to collective applications to their lives, or did these "lessons for living" promote an individual orientation to problem solving, a "reading" of life as interpersonal problems? Did the readings encourage or discourage the kind of collective action that was at a high mark at the dawn of broadcasting in the early 1920s, just as women gained the right to vote? What is important is not only

whether women were able to construct positive readings that might aide their self-esteem and individual autonomy, but also whether these listening practices fostered or interfered with their responding collectively beyond their circle of family and friends.⁴⁰

“Other” Audiences

It is difficult to ascertain anything about black audiences in the 1920s. In radio magazines, for example, they are simply nonexistent. With few exceptions radio programs of the 1920s were directed to white audiences. The percentage of blacks owning radios was much smaller than that of whites. But, much like whites, when there was something broadcast that attracted them, they gathered together in large numbers to listen. Writer Maya Angelou related her childhood memories of the crowd that gathered at a small black-owned grocery in Stamps, Arkansas to listen to a Joe Louis fight in the 1930s: “The last inch of space was filled, yet people continued to wedge themselves along the walls of the store ... youngsters on the porch... Women sat on kitchen chairs, dining room chairs, stools and upturned boxes. Small children and babies perched on every lap.” Clearly this event was exceptional enough to make a deep impression on the young Maya, but it is also reminiscent of similar scenes described in 1920s rural stores with white clientele, a customary way of listening to radio that survived longer in poor black communities where radios remained scarce.⁴¹

Another form of programming that may have attracted a black audience was the frequent broadcasts of “jazz.” Radio magazines frequently complained of the many hours of radio time “wasted” on jazz, the favorite music of the “lost generation” of young, white middle-class listeners in the 1920s. Magazines frequently described generational conflicts in white homes between teenagers wanting to listen to jazz and parents and youngsters who wanted to tune in something else. No mention is made in the magazines, but it is probable that these programs also appealed to black fans of jazz.

Record sales indicate heavy black consumption of *recorded* music. Record companies began race records, including most jazz, shortly after World War I, and race records sold well during a severe drop in record sales in the early 1920s when the radio craze hit. Okeh Records sold a million copies of its first blues recording. Black vaudeville singers were widely recorded, and vaudeville blues sold well to blacks in the 1920s. By 1927 blacks were purchasing an estimated 10

million records a year, or one record for every black American. Twenty percent of Victor’s catalog in 1928 was race records. The keen interest in recorded music on the part of blacks suggests that they probably also listened to radio broadcasts of jazz. Nevertheless, the first explicitly black-appeal radio program did not appear until 1929, when a small Chicago station, WSBC, began a black variety hour.⁴²

Few stations broadcast exclusively for any nonwhite or ethnic market. In the 1930s and 1940s, most such broadcasts were confined to specific programs on stations that either tried to supplement their mainstream market or tried to serve many different groups with programs tailored to each. In 1925 WSBC began to broadcast a variety of foreign-language programs to reach the one in four Chicagoans who were foreign-language speakers. By 1942, 205 stations offered foreign-language broadcasts in twenty-six languages, most commonly Polish, Spanish, Yiddish, and German.⁴³

Ethnic broadcasts sentimentalized the old country. The audience was predominantly elderly and housewives who were confined largely to the home and thus slow to learn English and American norms, and who consequently continued to be oriented and attached to their native culture and language.⁴⁴ Second-generation youth were assimilating to American ways and listening to mainstream American broadcasts. Radio served to widen the gulf between foreign-language-speaking parents and English-language-speaking children that has been chronicled in immigrant studies such as that by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki on Chicago Poles. Thus, while in the short run it may have provided a sense of ethnic and working-class community, it did so in a manner doomed to disappear with its aging audience, much like ethnic theater.⁴⁵

Individuation

Privatization, which was part of radio listening early on, refers to the process in which people consume a significant part of their entertainment within the household rather than in public spaces. Once the household market began to reach saturation, however, manufacturers reversed their domestication strategy and began to associate radio with individuals rather than the family and home.⁴⁶ One such effort was to promote radios in automobiles. Magazine ads for car radios began to appear in 1930. By 1933 the *New York Times* identified a “craze” for car radios and attributed it to young people. NBC

published a promotional booklet in 1936, "Radio Takes to the Road," telling advertisers that the car radio audience was already large and would eventually be almost as big as the home audience. The booklet reflected the change from domesticity in a sentence; "No longer is listening confined to the fireplace." In a similar 1937 booklet directed to advertisers, CBS promoted advertising sales in a graph that depicted the sharp rise in car radios. *Radio Retailing* reported that half of new cars sold in 1941 were equipped with a radio, and 30 percent of all autos had a radio.⁴⁷ Car radio advertising abandoned domesticity for other themes, particularly romance and sex.

A second strategy was to replace ads picturing families listening together with ads picturing them quarreling over what to listen to. The advertised solution was multiple radios in the home. The earliest experiments with such a strategy were initiated in the late 1920s. *Radio Retailing* called it "the 'radio in every room' plan." An Atwater Kent ad of 1929 illustrated this new theme, showing four hands reaching for the radio dial, each wanting to listen to something different. Crosley Radio introduced a new slogan, "A radio receiving set for every member of the family," allowing dad to hear "the baseball series, while the children tune in the bedtime stories and the young folks have dance music."⁴⁸

A third strategy to expand the market was launched in the late 1930s with widespread manufacture of portable radios. By 1940, over 80 percent of American households had a radio. Radio had far exceeded saturation levels of all other electric appliances except the electric iron. Only 56 percent of homes had a refrigerator, only 60 percent electric washers. Selling to the individual was a response to household saturation. Portable radios were the ultimate individuation, sold as an individual's accessory to enhance one's appearance and attractiveness, equivalent to a pocketbook, rather than a fireplace. In fall 1939, Majestic introduced a portable with shoulder strap weighing less than four pounds. The change in retailing was expressed in the 1941 headline by *Radio & Television Retailing* that the "Important statistic in the future will be the number of *people* with receivers rather than the number of *homes*." This article was illustrated with a photo of portables owned by an airplane pilot, a champion ice skater, and a fisherman, and small tabletop radios in a bedroom, cars, a piano studio, a lawyer's office, and a fire station. A photo in the August 1941 issue showed a bootblack with a portable radio under his chair, played to entice trade and increase tips.⁴⁹

Ads associated portables with sex appeal (a girl's dress blown up by the wind as she carries a portable radio) and romance (a couple holding hands while they walk with a portable radio.)⁵⁰ In contrast to the mid-1920s association with the home and family, these ads emphasized fun and going places. This shifted focus to individuals, particularly young people without spouses and children and household responsibilities. Such a change suggested significant reconstructions of the radio audience, or at least the construction of an additional new radio audience segment.

Young listeners were themselves expressing a desire for individuation of radio listening. A 1935 study found that California high school students were already listening alone or with friends, rather than with their families. A striking difference from earlier listeners was the desire to listen alone and not to be interrupted. As radio programs became subjects of interest, and as drama and comedy became increasingly significant forms of programming, attentive listening became more important than interaction with family and friends. Listeners were especially concerned not to miss a word of daytime serials. One researcher quoted women as saying, "I can't stand no talkin' while I'm listening"; "[if someone phones] I just say, 'Kid, I'm listening to so-and-so. I'll call you back'"; and "Naturally when you're with others they start to talk and they interrupt your listening ways."⁵¹

Listening was becoming an individual experience, each person attuned to the radio and insulated from every other. This was similar to the effect of dimming the lights in theater in the nineteenth century, which focused attention on the stage, discouraged conversation, and isolated audience members from each other. Radio both removed people from the crowd of the theater and isolated people from each other in – and out of – the home. Radio announcers began to foster a one-to-one intimacy between individual listeners and themselves. No longer did the announcer enter the listener's home. Rather the announcer drew the listener out of the family into a personal conversation in "radioland." This practice removed audiences further from the ground of collective action and provided grounds for critics to decry "hypnotic," "narcotic" effects of broadcasting on individuals.

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