

From the introduction of the radio in 1920 to its widespread usage by 1930, the rise of this new communications technology swept through American society following the conclusion of World War I. The radio provided Americans with the first true form of mass media and it would go on to play a significant role in various social movements throughout the early 20th century. From its commercial debut in the United States after World War I, the radio became a popular technology that not only provided Americans with a form of mass media, culture, and entertainment, but allowed for the mass coordination and communication for popular social events including the Harlem Renaissance, the temperance movement, and progressivism.

Before its installation into American Society, the radio became an emerging technology during World War I and many Americans became familiar with how to operate and communicate with it. By 1920, the radio was a critical component of vocational training for the US Army and was the preferred method for military communications especially where there are “small posts, camps and stations where other vocations...cannot be taught with economy and efficiency.”¹ The complexity of other communication methods created an appealing draw to the radio and its relatively straightforward operation, which would go on to later serve the American public. The radio provided additional benefits initially for wartime purposes that would eventually be adapted for civilian life. One such advantage was the integration of radios into airplanes and boats: allowing for seamless communication between pilots or crewmen and

¹ United States War Department. “Use of Radio Equipment For Vocational Training.”

ground forces.² Radio-equipped airplanes provided a number of benefits including the ability for more complex air movements and the ability to report air and land conditions instantaneously. These airplanes could additionally travel further and for longer stints which made air travel a more viable option for the public after the Great War.

Radio-equipped naval vessels recieved similar benefits. One of the most critical components of the military's use of the radio is the several service members who were introduced and trained on radio equipment. With many in the US military being volunteers or draftees, a number of these soldiers would be trained on this equipment with "proper qualifications for duty as radio operator mechanics" before returning to their civilian lives after the war but would still retain the operational knowledge of the radio.³

Following the conclusion of World War I, much of the knowledge and experience gained from wartime radio usage began to trickle into civilian life. With radio operators leaving the service and wanting to apply their newfound knowledge, a large demand for commercial radios emerged. It was not until 2 years after the war in 1920 when the first commercial radio would be introduced to the American public. While the radio was an existing technology in the United States, existing radios were not practical for the average American household and were often reserved for dedicated hobbyists or communications corporations. It was not until the first radio station was established in 1920 and the emergence of smaller and more portable commercial units when radio began to experience explosive growth in American society. As radio networks began to expand, so did the variety of stations and content that was broadcasted.⁴ With so many

² United States War Department. "Report on Auxiliary Control for Use in Connection with Airplane Radio Telephone Set, Type SCR-68 [on Military Aircraft Testing]."

³ "Radio Training." *Aviation and Aeronautical Engineering (1916-1920)*.

⁴ Smulyan, Susan. *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting 1920-1934*.

Americans buying into this original form of mass media, information including the news, ideology, and culture began to spread rapidly across increasingly further distances. Previously isolated groups were suddenly able to engage and participate in this new mass culture that radio cultivated.⁵

The expansion of radio networks and radio stations throughout the United States led to the quick construction of mass media and the widespread dissemination of culture, art, and information. These new radio stations allowed previously quiet voices the ability to be heard throughout the nation. The expansion of the radio became one of the most significant driving factors for the Harlem Renaissance. When the radio was introduced into American society, a fervor of mass culture swept the nation. This new mass culture provided the Harlem Renaissance with the opportunity to introduce massive portions of the United States to Harlem and African-American culture. A hallmark of the Harlem Renaissance was the growth of music through mass culture. Blues and jazz became important aspects of the Harlem Renaissance and were symbols for the people within the movement. Blues came up through the 1920s, right as the radio was hitting the markets and becoming widely available. The Harlem Renaissance was able to use blues and the mass culture created through the radio to create the first media stars.⁶ These highly influential people were able to completely change the face of the Harlem Renaissance and introduce otherwise uninterested masses to the movement. Like blues, jazz was a critical component of the Harlem Renaissance. The ability for blues to be spread across the nation not only helped spread the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance out to the United States, it provided an

⁵ Langer, Alexander. "The Politics of Normalcy and Mass Culture."

⁶ Langer, Alexander. "I've Got The Blues."

important foundation for the creation of later musical genres including rock in the 1960s. The radio and blues became the first opportunity for African-Americans to disseminate their culture and begin to integrate it as a part of American culture.

While blues existed separately from the rise of the radio, the growth of jazz music experienced a more direct relationship with the growth of radio in the United States. Jazz was another popular music genre that emerged in the mid 1920s from the popularity of blues and the success of the Harlem Renaissance and was inherently mixed in with the movement. Both jazz and the radio were considered new and experimental and because of their nature they became entangled in a symbiotic relationship where they needed each other in order to grow. Without the radio, jazz artists would be unable to spread their works to the masses and without jazz, there would be less content and demand for the radio.⁷ In order to get their careers off the ground, many Harlem musicians and artists needed the radio to broadcast their content to as many people as possible. Famous jazz musician Duke Ellington, a notable supporter of the Harlem Renaissance, started and grew his career through the radio: spreading Harlem culture to faraway places like Chicago. His performances were often a financial victory for the Harlem Renaissance as well as his performances would “be a benefit for the USO, all the net proceeds being credited to the funds of the organization’s Harlem division.”⁸ Without the radio, an artist as famous and influential as Duke Ellington would have had a much harder time spreading the Harlem culture outside of Harlem and presenting themselves in a manner that professionalized the Harlem Renaissance. Without the rising stars of Harlem propped up by the radio, the

⁷ Wall, Tim. “Jazz on Radio.”

⁸ “Duke Ellington Gets Radio Spotlight Job.” *The Chicago Defender*.

Harlem Renaissance would have likely stayed confined to Harlem and African-American culture would have likely not been integrated as deeply into American culture. The success of the Harlem Renaissance was propped up on the radio and had substantial leverage in furthering civil rights for minorities in the United States and provided an avenue for minorities to meaningfully engage in American society.

An unlikely benefactor of the radio ended up becoming the temperance movement. The movement emerged as an attempt to cut down on American alcoholic consumption in the 1850s which was decades before the advent of the radio. However, it would not be until 1919 when the temperance movement succeeded in ratifying the Eighteenth Amendment and thrusting the United States into the era of prohibition.⁹ The height of the temperance movement coincided with the rise of the radio and the propagation of prohibition occurred throughout the explosive growth of the radio into the 1930s. This timing provided ample opportunity for the temperance movement to utilize the radio to not only persuade people to join the movement, but as a mechanism for enforcement after the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment. The institutions charged with promoting and enforcing prohibition in the United States quickly employed the radio to remind Americans of their duty to not only practice temperance, but to actively participate in and enforce the controversial law. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the 1920s became an avenue and a mediator to encourage the dissemination of temperance broadcasts across the nation. Temperance activists would occasionally try to impede in the licensing renewal process of radio stations that refused to broadcast temperance information and would cite it as “a violation of an FCC ruling that stations must grant time to spokesmen for both sides of important public

⁹ Langer, Alexander. “Prohibition.”

questions.”¹⁰ This would force the FCC to either deny radio stations broadcast licenses or impede radio station operations and force them to host temperance activism.

Temperance activists further their agenda through these radio addresses as well as information campaigns through other means. Radio addresses became the sensational way to disseminate information to the masses and transcripts of temperance addresses would often be reprinted in newspapers, expanding the audience. These addresses would often remind Americans of the laws and encourage the rejection of alcohol and citizen enforcement of these laws. Temperance addresses would often attempt to expose the corruption of law enforcement and the relaxed enforcement of prohibition laws.¹¹

While the radio did help the temperance movement establish their ideology into Constitutional law, the anti-prohibition movement was equally successful in adopting the radio to eventually repeal the Eighteenth Amendment. Many radio stations had financial incentive to oppose the temperance movement due to the overwhelming amount of ad revenue that came from alcoholic beverage commercials on radio broadcasts. Ad revenue was especially crucial for the early growth of the radio in the United States and breweries and vineyards often bought out large volumes of ads which provided much needed capital.¹² Once the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified, the radio stations had broadcast time that they needed to fill due to the sudden removal of brewery ads. Radio stations found an abundance of public speakers who were backed by special interest groups and who were willing to speak against prohibition to fill that broadcast time and

¹⁰ “Radio: Prohibition Rears Ugly Head In Texas Threat Vs. KRLD Time Sale Nix; Supreme Ct. May Get CBS Test Case.” *Variety* 158, no. 12.

¹¹ Wilson, Harold D. “Think For Yourself: A Radio Address on Prohibition Enforcement.”

¹² “Radio: Radio, Dailies Stand to Lose Plenty If South Carolina Adopts Prohibition.” *Variety* 140, no. 3.

help dampen the loss of revenue.¹³ Many anti-prohibition speakers would broadcast their views over national networks, often outperforming the scope that temperance speakers could achieve due to the ratings potential and the overall sensationalism that surrounded anti-prohibition talking points. Anti-prohibition speakers had a tendency to gain a larger audience mainly due to how extreme prohibition was to many Americans and any belief against prohibition was deemed a more rational solution.¹⁴ Through the employment of political activists and speakers, the prohibition issue in the United States became the first true political topic to be fought over the radio and endured widespread sensationalism as a result.

A more overarching social movement that defined the interwar era in the United States was the progressive movement. Progressivism became an avenue for a multitude of connected movements including environmentalism and feminism. A highlight aspect of progressivism in the United States during the 1920s was the emergence of flappers. Flappers were women who became cultural icons in the eyes of progressives and feminists who sought a more independent lifestyle.¹⁵ As more women began to graduate college and enter higher social statuses, more opportunities became available to women to not only advance their personal situation, but opportunities to spread feminist ideas became more common as well. Like stars of the Harlem Renaissance, many artistic flappers began to gain notoriety and were able to perform over the radio for the entire nation. Famous flapper groups like “The Radio Girls” became extremely popular and would perform elaborate shows for large crowds, which

¹³ “Radio Prohibition Addresses.” *The Wall Street Journal*.

¹⁴ “Hearst Advocated Change In Dry Law: Attacks Prohibition Ni Talk Over Radio and Indorses ‘Temperance Plan.’” *The Washington Post*.

¹⁵ Langer, Alexander. “Suffrage, Feminism, and the New Woman.”

would further be broadcasted over the radio, expanding the influence of flappers.¹⁶ Like jazz and blues, the flapper radio shows were able to help push feminist and progressive ideas to the nation and help legitimize the involvement of women in American society. As the flapper movement gained momentum, corporations and organizations began to create radio ads that were targeted towards flappers or young women. These radio ads were either an ad supporting the flapper movement or an ad to discredit the movement and promote traditional values.¹⁷ With the flappers becoming fairly commonplace after the initiation of the radio, it was a more mainstream form of communication that the flappers were more readily able to take advantage of.

The introduction of the radio into the United States transformed American culture, society, and politics as it allowed millions to tune into important issues and, for the first time, share a common culture. Groups emerging out of cultural isolation and into a unified mass culture created a slew of societal questions that Americans fought to answer throughout the interwar period. Not only did the radio introduce Americans to new issues, but it allowed the entire nation to stay informed on those issues and provided a standardization of arguments and discussion.

¹⁶ “The Radio Girls’ At Waldron’s.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1923-1927).

¹⁷ Gold. “Radio Reports: Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink.”

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