**Video Script**

**Lecture 15 – Political Media (20s to 40s)**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Here’s a confession: I struggled a little bit with the order of this week and next week’s lecture topics. I know I’ve brought this up a hundred times, but I have just fourteen screenings this semester and have been charged with showing you the entirety of American media history in those screenings.

What I landed on was a little interruption in our regularly scheduled programming about how the radio industry developed in order to fit in a screening I find fascinating, and still quite politically moving—that’s Charlie Chaplin’s 1940 anti-Nazi manifesto, *The Great Dictator*.

In our last lecture, we learned about the origins of radio. You need that info to understand today’s lecture on how politics and media interacted on the airwaves *and* on film from the 1920s through WWII.

And then next week we’ll return to thinking about how radio developed in the 1930s and 1940s. Capeesh? Capeesh.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

**Politics & war on the radio**

So, we know from our last lecture that radio use in the United States started to mushroom in 1922 when, in one year, sets in use ballooned from just 60,000 to more than 1.5 million.

And as radio programming by major networks developed throughout the 1920s, the medium tied the nation together in new ways. The radio became familiar--people listened in their homes—but it was also collective. They heard breaking news at the same exact moment as other listeners from coast to coast.

**Coolidge**

Politics found a home on the radio right away. The first presidential election to take advantage of the new medium was in 1920.

Though radios were still mostly operated by amateurs that year—we’re just a couple of years shy of mass production of radio sets—this article from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* proves that there were enough of them to warrant sending out election returns over the airwaves for the first time. The article says:

*Radio amateurs of Cleveland will have a wonderful opportunity Tuesday evening to show their friends, young and old, the wonders of their wireless apparatus. More than 600 radio amateurs of the Fifth City who have modern outfits have been requested to get up election night parties in their own homes or convenient clubs, churches, or schools Tuesday evening and receive radio telephonic election news. Cleveland branch officials of the Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company announced yesterday that this company has been granted a license by the government to send out election returns by wireless telephone*

So you can see here through the use of terms like “wireless telephone” they’re still thinking of the radio as a communication device, not a broadcasting device. Nonetheless, asking people to gather round a radio to hear the results as they come in marks the beginning of election night news coverage that we’ve come to expect—so much so that possible *lack* of election night results in the upcoming election has become contentious.

**Coolidge at microphones**

Warren G. Harding won the election that all of those radio amateurs were tuning in to, but he died in office a few years later. He was succeeded by his VP, Calvin Coolidge, who became the first president to give an address on the radio. In his speech, he paid tribute Harding, addressed a range of topics like foreign affairs, agriculture, and Prohibition, and emphasized the responsibility of the United States to provide stability in the post-WWI world. Your run-of-the-mill presidential stuff.

**[ANIMATION]** A New York Times article about Coolidge’s first radio address emphasized the wonder and occasional confusion of hearing the President speak live. The article said *So clearly was President Coolidge’s message broadcast by radio through half of the nation that while he was speaking, KSD, the radio station in St. Louis, telephoned the Capitol and asked: What is that grating noise? And the transmission experts at the Capitol promptly replied: That’s the rustling of his paper as he turns the pages of his message.*

Now, what *I* like about this whole thing is the so-good-you-couldn’t-script-it fact that the first president to have is voice boom out of radio speakers nationwide was known **[ANIMATION]** as Silent Cal. Isn’t it ironic?

Coolidge was *notoriously* a man of few words. There were jokes about it at the time—people used to say he was “silent in five languages.” Writer Dorothy Parker, upon learning that Coolidge died in 1933, reportedly said “How can they tell?”

**World Series Crowd**

So, the government begins using the radio to communicate with the public beginning in the 1920s, and the do it in ways that feel pretty familiar. Silent Cal’s speech isn’t that different than watching the State of the Union streaming through Twitter, for example.

The sheer size of the radio listening audience paired with its liveness and its intimacy is what sets it apart from previous media forms. This image shows a bunch of people gathered around a radio broadcast of the 1922 World Series. This is pretty innocuous, right? But some people saw this kind of audience as an opportunity to sell a political message, raising the question **[ANIMATION]**

“Can mass audiences be *influenced* using the radio?”

**Long & Coughlin**

Two men put this question to the test in the 1930s. Huey P. Long and Fr. Charles Coughlin each conducted a kind of experiment in marrying together politics and broadcast media and amassing a great deal of power as a result.

To understand how these men used the radio, we need another definition.

**Demagogue**

And that’s *demagogue*. **[ANIMATION]** A demagogue is a leader who makes use of popular prejudices, false claims, and promises in order to gain power. A demagogue riles people up! And then he directs that frenzy however he pleases.

How the radio might be used to influence politics was an open question in the ‘20s and ‘30s—and to some degree it *remains* an open question about how the media and politics can, do, and should affect each other. Now that the radio could bring people’s voices right into our homes, was a leader necessarily an elected person? Could a celebrity be a leader? Could a *leader* be a *celebrity*? How does the radio allow the person with the microphone to gain political power? Do you need political power if you can just wield influence?

**Huey P. Long**

Huey P. Long, known as The Kingfish, was more of a traditional political figure than Father Coughlin, in that he did hold elected office.

**[ANIMATION]** He was the governor of Louisiana from 1928 until 1932 and then held a senate seat from 1932 until 1935, when he was assassinated.

[**ANIMATION]** Long ran on the motto “Every man a king,” which he said meant that “every man [could] eat when there is something to eat; all to wear something when there is something to wear. That makes us all sovereign.”

**[ANIMATION]** So, Long was a leftist populist. He campaigned on the concerns of the poor, arguing against Standard Oil and other corporations making money off of Louisiana and not sharing it with the common person. But he also used his office to accrue an almost despotic amount of power as Governor.

**[ANIMATION]** The media enters Long’s story in the 1920s, when he had a friend who owned a powerful radio station in Shreveport, Louisiana. That station owner gave Long hours on end of free airtime for three reasons:

1. he was a good speaker who was appealing to people’s deepest concerns, so people tuned in
2. putting a politician on the air counted as broadcasting in the public interest. There’s that wiggly little term again!
3. By turning over the microphone to a somewhat controversial politician, it made KWKH seem like they were not censoring the news. You could trust them to bring you the whole story.

So Long would broadcast for hours on end, sometimes by remote from his hotel room while lounging in his pajamas. And it was by having this direct channel of appeal to the public—paired with a populist message and a charismatic delivery—that Long won his elections and milked those seats for every drop of power they contained.

When Long was assassinated in ’35, he was a potential candidate for president and one of the most powerful members of the U.S. Senate. He was also widely believed in his time to be a demagogue.

**[ANIMATION]** Journalist Carleton Beals said at the time: *Huey Long became the polecat, the wild ass, Messiah, and enigma of American politics that should be studied, memorized, and utilized. He was well on his way to becoming America’s first dictator.”* The power that people feared was, at least in part, power he gained by commanding the airwaves like no politician before him.

**Coughlin**

Father Charles Coughlin was a different kind of political media figure—one who pioneered the kind of political talk radio we still see today.

**[ANIMATION]** Coughlin was a Roman Catholic priest in Detroit, Michigan.

**[ANIMATION]** He first took to the radio in 1928 to denounce the activities of the KKK—he saw them as really vile, and he thought it was part of his religious duty to speak out against them.

**[ANIMATION]** He kept broadcasting, and he had a good audience of listeners. But his station was bought in the 1930s, and the new owner urged him to be more political. He began to address more controversial topics of the day, like the New Deal, and at first he was supportive of FDR. Like Long, Coughlin kind of positioned himself as the voice of the everyday working person.

**[ANIMATION]** By 1934, he had tens of millions of weekly listeners. He was extremely, extremely popular.

**[ANIMATION]** He was receiving 10,000 letters every day from fans.

**[ANIMATION]** Eventually, though, his broadcasts took on a different political cast. He declared FDR a Wall Street puppet..

**[ANIMATION]** …and began to spout anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Jews and banks, gross untruths that you *still* see recirculated today

**[ANIIMATION]** He became an active voice against Communism. His platform and influence on the subject brought him into the more traditional halls of power: he became a witness for the House Unamerican Activities Committee, which was dedicated to rooting out Communists wherever they might lurk in American life.

**[ANIMATION]** ..he also became quite supportive of fascism, saying complimentary things about Mussolini and Hitler,

**[ANIMATION]** …and eventually began using his broadcasts to question why America has elections at all.

**[ANIMATION]** Coughlin, like many in his day, was an isolationist who did not want to get involved in WWII and pointedly criticized the FDR administration for any action it took against Nazi Germany. As a result of this stance, and many of his controversial and borderline seditious takes, he was eventually forced off the air. He was done in by combination of targeted federal regulations—like invoking that “public interest” language to yank his license—and private policies set up by the National Association of Broadcasters meant to stop him. The Catholic Church stepped in as well, and basically forced him to cease broadcasting and return to his normal duties as a parish priest, which is what he did until his retirement in the 1960s.

So, as Coughlin became more controversial *and* more powerful, he was taken off the air. But without his example of how a non-politician might wield political power through the media, I don’t think we’d have broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh in later decades.

**FDR @ Desk**

In 1933, few years after Long and Coughlin began using the radio, Franklin Delano Roosevelt began a series of famous radio broadcasts as governor of New York that he continued through is presidency, up until his death in 1945.

**[ANIMATION]** Unlike the more formal address by Silent Cal, these radio addresses were known as “fireside chats.” The name was inspired by Roosevelt’s press secretary, Stephen Early, who said FDR imagined his audience as a few people seated around his fireside.

The goal of these broadcasts was to calmly explain political decisions, to advocate for policies, to allay fears as the country heard what has happening across Europe, and eventually to drum up support for the war. How did he do that?

**FDR with microphones**

Well, according to the Museum of Broadcast Communication, he had a few techniques.

**[ANIMATION]** Fireside chats were broadcast on all national networks at 10pm EST, which is 7pm Pacific, a time when most people would be home from work and able to listen. They were also relatively brief, ranging from ten to 45 minutes.

Tonally, the addresses were meant to be simple and accessible. They used basic language. Eighty percent of the words FDR spoke in his broadcasts were among the 1000 most commonly used words in the English language.

He also peppered the broadcasts with stories, analogies, and metaphors to explain complicated issues facing the nation. For example, he used a baseball analogy to describe the first two months of the New Deal: “I have no expectations of making a hit every time I come to bat. What I seek is the highest possible batting average, not only for myself, but for the team.”

FDR was confident in his policies, but knew that they relied on public buy-in. His broadcasts raised the question of whether the radio might be able to turn listeners into active citizens willing to participate in New Deal Projects or the war effort.

In order to do that, he needed to make it seem like he and the listening public were all part of the same team. By using words like “you” and “we,” he took advantage of the intimacy of radio in order to build that relationship.

**Blitz**

So, as I’ve alluded to in some previous slides, the United States was very divided on whether or not it should enter WWII in the years leading up to 1941. Many Americans—and many politicians!—were staunch isolationists who believed the U.S. had no place in a foreign conflict.

The radio played a part in moving the public toward interventionism.

This is a photograph take from a German Luftwaffe aircraft over the East End of London just as they were beginning their bombing raids on September 7, 1940.

**Edward R. Murrow**

An American broadcast journalist, Edward R. Murrow, was stationed in London at the time and brought live coverage of the bombings to listeners back at home. For the first time, Americans could gather around their radio and hear the news as it was happening instead of reading about it in the newspaper. You’ll listen to a little bit of one of Murrow’s London broadcasts for this module.

**Murrow Boys**

Your reading for this lecture by Susan Douglas is called “WWII and the Invention of Broadcast Journalism.” You only have to read from page 14 of that chapter onward, although the whole thing is really interesting if you’re an RTF student who also does some journalism—and I bet there are some of you! I often have students in my class interested in both fields.

What the author highlights in this chapter is how Murrow and his team of reporters, the so-called Murrow boys, brought up questions about what journalistic objectivity was in this new medium. It was so evocative—a reporter broadcasting from a bombing might have a shaky voice and sound palpably afraid, and that emotion was derided as less “objective” than written news. Further, it brought up questions about how news could be ethically produced when sponsors held so much sway over the radio content.

As you read, also consider how these live broadcasts helped create a national sense of duty, as well as a national sense that intervention rather than isolationism was right and moral.

**Film**

Okay, so now we know how politics, war, and policy interacted on the radio beginning in the 1920s. But what about film? What role did the film industry play in all of this?

**Pathe**

**[PLAY FILM**] Well, we’ve already learned about the newsreel, and we’ve watched a few of them in this class. Newsreels are short documentary films that show moving images of current events. Because they needed to be shipped and manufactured and distributed, they weren’t as instantaneous as listening to an Edward R. Murrow broadcast—but they did bring the news to life.

What we’re watching here is a British Pathe newsreel of the German invasion of Poland in 1939. Newsreels showed big picture events, like this footage of a bombing…

**[SKIP to 4:20 or so]**…as well as everyday life. Here, you’ll see women feeding German troops.

**[SKIP TO 5:11]** They also contained up-close footage of key players in geopolitical events. Here, you can see Adolph Hitler surveying his troops. I’m showing you this both to demonstrate what visual information newsreels could convey, and because without these images it’s unlikely that Charlie Chaplin could have made a film like *The Great Dictator*, which made fun of Hitler with such specificity.

**Newsreel theaters**

And while most people saw newsreels before feature films, there were a small number of theaters dedicated just to showing newsreels. You could pop in to one of these theaters and enjoy hour-long show of the weekly news—some of which might be intense, like the invasion footage, and some of which might be lighter, like prize-winning cows at the Texas state fair.

**Propaganda**

But I think when we think of the WWII era and its intersection with film, what we tend to think of is propaganda. Let’s define that term.

**[ANIMATION]** Propaganda is the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person.

**[ANIMATION]** Put more simply, propaganda is media that intends to persuade.

**[ANIMATION]** And political propaganda intends to persuade its audience politically.

**Riefenstahl**

Some of the most lasting, most effective, most ambitious, and most stomach-churning propaganda of the 1940s came from the Third Reich. Here’s a still from filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl’s infamous 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*, a film about the 1934 Nazi Congress in Nuremberg. She was an innovative filmmaker who found new ways to express the scope and strength of the Third Reich.

Remember that quote about D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, the one that said he had “yoked his mighty talent to the cause of hatred”? You can see the same thing here, in Riefenstahl’s work. This would not have been such a persuasive film had her technique not been so compelling; that all of that talent was used in service of Hitler’s image makes it all the more dreadful.

**Poster 1**

But Germany was not the only country producing propaganda. The US produced its own propaganda to rally citizens behind the war effort.

When we think of US pro-war propaganda, we might think of images like this, urging women to find a job.

**Poster 2/3**

Or this, asking people to buy war bonds or to carpool to work to save gasoline.

**Poster 4/5**

Or these, urging people to grow what was called a victory garden or to buy less coffee so that the military had what it needed.

**OWI**

These images were produced by the Office of War Information, which opened in 1942 and operated until 1945 under the leadership of a former CBS newsman, Elmer Davis.

The goal of the OWI was to centralize national messaging about the war in order to win the American people over to the side of intervention. Not everyone agreed that the US should be involved in the war, but widespread support was necessary to implement policies like rationing or the draft. The OWI sought to manufacture that support through posters, sure, but also in much more subtle ways.

The OWI worked with Hollywood movie studios to produce films that advanced American war aims. According to Davis **[ANIMATION]:**

*"The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people’s minds is to let it go through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized."*

By 1943, every major Hollywood studio except Paramount allowed the OWI to examine their film scripts. Films were written to depict the Allied armed forces as valiant “Freedom Fighters,” or they advocated for civilian participation like conserving fuel or rationing food.

Not that all of this wasn’t a little bit controversial. The press, for one, feared that they would be getting censored information from the government about the war effort. And the American public was leery of propaganda—in fact, because they’d been hearing about all about Germany’s propaganda from Edward R. Murrow and other reporters in Europe!

**Casablanca**

One such film produced with the blessing of the OWI is the cornerstone of the US film canon, 1942’s *Casablanca*. If you haven’t seen it, the gist is that Rick, seen here in the hat, is faced with a painful decision on the eve of war. He must choose between his love for this woman, Ilsa, or helping her and her husband—who is a Czech Resistance leader—escape from Vichy-controlled Casablanca to continue their fight against the Nazis.

Rick becomes this symbol of American isolationists—he’s just sitting there in Casablanca, refusing to care who controls the city or what they’re fighting for or against—but who is eventually moved to see the morality of intervention and makes personal sacrifices to stop the Nazis.

The film was supposed to debut in 1943 in Casablanca, but after Allied forces landed in Morocco in November of 1942, they moved up the release. They held the premiere in New York on November 26, 1942, an event that included a military parade of Free French forces up 5th Avenue.

**Private Snafu**

The OWI also produced propaganda to train servicemembers. The *Private Snafu* cartoons were a series of American animated shorts written to instruct military personnel about stuff like security, proper sanitation habits, booby traps, and other topics, as well as to improve troop morale. Remember, the young men being drafted into military service were those who had grown up with motion pictures, and the military wanted to speak to them in a language they knew.

The series was created by Chuck Jones & Mel Blanc of *Looney Tunes*, the character was created by Frank Capra of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and they were written by a bunch of folks, including the one and only Theodore Geisel, a.k.a. Doctor Seuss. You’ll watch one of these military training cartoons for this module.

**Microphones**

It’s called “Spies,” and it’s all about keeping your big drunk soldier mouth shut so you don’t leak secrets **[ANIMATION]** into that pretty lady’s boobies, which are in fact Nazi microphones.

Also, it contains some pretty racist and stereotypical caricatures of enemy nations. As you watch, think about what purpose that serves. Why might the military want to make enemy combatants into flat, cartoonish villains?

**Not just!**

Finally, I want to end our lecture by thinking about how politics and film interact during the 1940s in ways that are *not* directly related to the war effort.

**Three Caballeros**

Which brings us to Walt Disney, and a film called *The Three Caballeros.*

In 1941, Disney is facing an animator’s strike. They wanted to unionize. As you can see from this image, animators are perhaps the worst group of people on Earth to piss off, just in terms of the incredible protest signs they can draw using your intellectual property. **[ANIMAION]** Like….angry Donald?? Come on, so good. **[ANIMATION]** This one’s hard to see, but it’s like a real snide and real perfect cartoon of Disney himself yelling “WHAT WE WANT IS MORE LOYALTY!”

So, Walt Disney is eager to get out of Dodge.

**Good Neighbor Policy**

Here’s where the Good Neighbor policy comes into play.

**[ANIMATION]** The Good Neighbor policy was instituted by the Roosevelt administration to improve relations between the United States, Mexico, and the nations of Central and South America through cooperation and trade rather than military force. The point was to maintain stability throughout the hemisphere.

**[ANIMATION]** As FDR put it in his inaugural address in 1933, “*In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others*.”

So FDR was eager to quell any influence of fascism and Naziism throughout Latin America, and Walt Disney, beloved media titan, was eager to get away from the unsavory business of negotiating with his animators.

**Disney photos**

**[ANIMATION]** The result was that Disney went on a press tour through Latin America, celebrating all this supposed friendship between America and its neighbors.

When he returned, and the animator strike had been settled, Disney produced two propagandistic films promoting the good neighbor policy. **[ANIMATION]** The first was *Saludos Amigos* in 1942, and the second was **[ANIMATION]** *The Three Caballeros* in 1944.

**The Three Caballeros**

The premise of *The Three Caballeros* really hits home the good neighbor ethos. Donald Duck receives birthday presents from bird friends representing other nations. You see here Panchito, who’s from Mexico, and Jose Carioca, who’s from Brazil.

The film is made up of shorter segments where the three travel to scenic locations and Donald absorbs all that Latin America has to offer.

So, this isn’t *Triumph of the Will,* but you can see how this is propaganda, right? It’s selling FDR’s North and South American foreign policy. Is cooperation between nations a good thing? Can propaganda *be* good? Sure—but really, what you think about propaganda mostly depends on how much you believe in the moral rectitude of what they’re selling.

**Tropicalism**

Here’s one more concept I want to talk about today, and I promise you it’s in service of a weird detour that you did not see coming. *The Three Caballeros’s* take on the Good Neighbor Policy promotes a seemingly positive goal of cooperation between the US, Mexico, and the nations of Central and South America. But it often does so by using *tropicalism*, or **[ANIMATION]**

*The system of ideological fictions that dominant cultures (Anglo and/or European) use to stereotype Latin America and U.S. Latinx identities and cultures.*

We’ve seen an example of tropicalism in this class before. And that’s **[ANIMATION]** Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio, who, when people heard her lightly accented English, was relegated to stereotypical roles like the Latina temptress.

**Carmen Miranda**

Brazilian performer Carmen Miranda is a great example of tropicalism. If you know her as anything, it’s probably as the lady who wears a hat made out of fruit. In her on-screen roles, Miranda often embodied tropicalized stereotypes of South American people being musical and sensual.

**Aurora Miranda**

Here’s the turn you’re not expecting. At least half of *The Three Caballeros* is Donald Duck’s out of control horniness for the women of Latin America, including Carmen Miranda’s sister, Aurora. Donald simply cannot control himself.

**Donald eyeballs**

He falls in love with an array of *human, not animated* women, which is…

.**Donald kisses**

…uncomfortable, to say the least.

**Flower**

The film ends with an increasingly psychedelic sequence that is a Freudian fantasia of subtle and not so subtle erotic imagery trying its darndest to convey Donald’s near-fatal levels of horniness for adult, human Latinas. These women are highly tropicalized—exotic, sensual, shapely beauties that a red-blooded American duck simply cannot resist.

**Review**

Now remember, we are not just in the age of propaganda and war policy making their way into films. We’re also firmly in the grip of the Production Code, but the combination of FDR propaganda, innuendo and animation seemed to be an effective one for squeaking *very* suggestive content past the Production Code Administration.

But they didn’t sneak it past everyone.

I was able to find this review of *The Three Caballeros* from the New Yorker in 1945, which clocked its propagandistic angle as well as its…other angles. The reviewer says:

*Walt Disney, who started out with a couple of mice in simple arrangements of black and white, has got to the point now where he will settle for nothing less than an ambitious combination of living women and caricatured animals and a series of backgrounds that are half stylized drawings and half what appear to be photographs of picture postcards, all executed in Technicolor. I can hardly believe that it is a step in the right direction. “The Three Caballeros,” which is the occasion for this complaint, is ostensibly our patriotic attempt to cement our relations with South America. Actually, it is a mixture of atrocious taste, bogus mysticism, and authentic fantasy, guaranteed to baffle any critic not hopelessly enchanted with the word “Disney.” It is probably best to take these points up in sequence.*

*In the first place, a somewhat physical romance between a two-foot duck and a full-sized woman, though one happens to be a cartoon and the other pleasantly rounded and certainly mortal, is one of those things that might disconcert less squeamish authorities than the Hays office. Leda and the Swan have the endorsement of the libraries and art galleries* [talking about the Greek myth]; *Leda and the Duck, executed purely for comic purposes in a moving picture theater, may just possibly be obscene. It might even be said that a sequence involving the duck, the young lady, and a long alley of animated cactus plants would probably be considered suggestive in a less innocent medium*

**Cactuses.**

Suggestive? Pfft. I have NO IDEA what he’s talking about.