**Video Script**

**Lecture 16**

**Radio Programs & Audiences**

**Welcome**

After a quick detour through political media from the 1920s through the War, let’s return today to the radio. Let’s put ourselves in the shoes of listeners in the 1930s and 1940s who suddenly found themselves with a big, noisy machine in the middle of their living room, and learn a little bit about who and what was blaring out of the speakers.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

**Review**

Before we jump into that, though, I just wanted to do a little bit of review on the various regulations the government placed on radio as it was developing. We talked about this in the last lecture, but regulations can be confusing and occasionally a little boring to learn about—but regulation is what makes radio *radio*. It’s what makes it different than the film industry, and it’s the foundation of our broadcast system.

**[ANIMATION]** So, remember: after Marconi built those bleak, *Lighthouse-*looking stations and antennae to talk with ships on the Atlantic, we get the Wireless Ship Act of 1910. It said ships *must have* radios on board for emergencies and that all radios had to be able to talk to each other. This was updated in 1912 to say that any ship with more than 50 passengers has to have two operators on board.

**[ANIMATION]** Then we get the Radio Act of 1912 which brings the radio under federal control. It declares the airwaves a natural resource, regulates them as interstate commerce, and requires you to get a broadcasting license if you want to start a station. This was to keep amateurs from just popping up and broadcasting on any frequency they liked, causing interference.

**[ANIMATION]** And then you get the Radio Act of 1927, which clarifies that licensees don’t *own* their channel, they just rent it. It creates the Federal Radio Commission, which eventually becomes the FCC. And it introduces that language that says radio licensees must serve the *public interest, convenience, or necessity*.

It’s this idea of public interest that will take us into our conversation on radio programs.

**What serves the public interest?**

The government doesn’t define what public interest means. So then…what does programming in the public interest sound like? **[ANIMATION]**

Is it content that is “good” for the public?

Is it content that is entertaining to the public?

Should it have a political affiliation?

Should it have an educational function?

Does pornography serve the public interest?

How do you measure public interest? Is it ratings? Are there some broadcast criteria?

Lots of these questions *remain* unsettled. What we do know is that in the United States, the government sets up a *commercial* broadcast system. Licenses are mostly distributed to people and companies who want to use the airwaves to make a profit. What programming ends up on the radio is determined some other structural factors, too.

**What factors (home)**

The first of these factors is the setting. The radio is, for the most part, a domestic technology. People don’t go to a place to hear the radio, they integrate it into their everyday lives. Radio thus has access to more hours of a listener’s day—you can flip it on the moment you wake up, and you can listen to it all night long if you like. So, a movie theater might show the same film six times in a row to different audiences. But the radio builds a *broadcast day* that doesn’t repeat its content.

**Network Oligopoly**

Pretty quickly, the structure of the radio industry is dominated by a couple of major networks—and remember, a network is the content *creator* of radio, like a studio. They send programs to affiliated *stations,* which are the individual local broadcasting businesses.

One network was CBS. The other was NBC, which was owned by RCA, the same company that was manufacturing all those radios. They had two networks, called NBC Red and NBC Blue. NBC Red was sort of the flagship network, the one with the premiere shows, and NBC Blue was kind of the JV network, where they would try out programs. The government stepped in in 1941 to break up RCA’s control of the industry; the result was that NBC Blue was sold off and eventually became ABC.

The result of having very few players in the radio network space was that broadcasting became highly standardized. Think back to the Edison trust: it’s the same effect. When all you’re seeing are Edison Trust movies, that’s what movies *are.*

**Liveness, seriality, commerciality**

Then, there are the characteristics we learned about in the last lecture. While scarcity really just applies to the radio waves—there are only so many frequencies, and the government doles them out—liveness, seriality, and commerciality apply to the programs.

What you see on this slide is an ad for the Jack Benny show, a popular sit-com that ran in one form or another on the radio from 1932 until 1955, *and* on television from 1950 to 1965. Jell-o, you know, that jiggly old-fashioned dessert, was Jack Benny’s sponsor. Some shows might just read an ad, but Benny got creative. I’ll link you in the module to a particularly wacky ad they did in 1938 that I can’t imagine Jell-o would let anyone get away with today.

I’ve got a couple of other examples to help you remember these characteristics.

**A Christmas Story**

The first is from Christmas movie classic *A Christmas Story.* If you haven’t seen it, it’s a Christmas film that takes place in 1939 and revolves around a kid protagonist named Ralphie and his deep, unquenchable desire to receive a Red Ryder bb-gun from Santa.

**A Christmas Story (gifs)**

For the purposes of this class, I’m less interested in holiday magic and more interested in the part that radio plays in his life. Ralphie is a huge fan of the Little Orphan Annie show and tunes in every night to hear it live.

**[ANIMATION]** At the end of each broadcast, the announcer reads a coded message. It sounds really urgent. Only kids who have a decoder pin can figure out what the message is from Annie to her special club of insiders. Ralphie sends away for a pin and waits and waits and waits for it to arrive. When it finally does, he copies down the coded message and retreats to the bathroom to do his decoding…

**[ANIMATION]** …only to find out that it’s an ad for a powdered chocolate drink called Ovaltine. “A crummy commercial??” he says right after this, “son of a *bitch*.” And then he slams down his pencil and leaves. You can see him grow into a cynical, world-weary consumer right before your eyes.

So, this demonstrates both liveness (he must tune in every night to get the message) and commerciality (the radio will never pass up an opportunity to push the sponsor’s products).

I’ll link you to the whole scene in the module if you want to watch it.

So, the radio sells Jell-o, it sells Ovaltine…

**Brinkley**

…but my very favorite radio salesman is from its earliest days. In 1923, this gentleman, John Romulus Brinkley, founded the first station in Kansas. He called it KFKB, which stood for Kansas First, Kansas Best.

In the days before the big networks like NBC or CBS, Brinkley was responsible for his own programming. He filled the time with lectures, weather reports, sporting events like baseball, and music—and in fact, the station was one of the first to popularize country music. And while he didn’t have a national sponsor like Jell-o, he used his channel to sell his services as frequently as possible.

Now, why am I harping on John Brinkley?

Can you feel the twist coming?

Can you *feel* history about to cough up one of its most magical and ridiculous tidbits?

**Brinkley in operating rooms**

Well, friends—it would be criminal for me *not* to include John Brinkley in this lecture because the service he advertised and sold was an erectile dysfunction surgery he pioneered.

I should of course mention that **[ANIMATION]** John Brinkley was *not in fact a doctor*, and that **[ANIMATION]** the surgery involved implanting goat gonads into a poor impotent person’s testicles.

Did that work, you ask?

NO, OF COURSE NOT. OF COURSE IMPLANTING GOAT BALLS INTO HUMAN TESTICLES IS NOT A CURE FOR ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION.

Unsuprisingly, the Federal Radio Commission and the American Medical Association both objected to his use of the airwaves to sell bogus medical remedies, and he was eventually removed from the air.

**Brinkley and plane**

And while this has nothing to do with the radio, let’s just finish the story—he ran for governor of Kansas in 1930 on a write-in campaign and *somehow managed* to gain 30% of the vote, which, if that doesn’t show you the importance of voting, I don’t know what will.

He was ultimately unsuccessful, though. As a political slogan, I guess “a goat ball in every sack” doesn’t have quite the same ring as “a chicken in every pot.”

He moved to our very own state of Texas after that and set up *another* radio station, where he sold bogus prostate treatments until he was once again shut down.

You cannot tell me that media history isn’t a gift, folks. You just can’t!

**Factors (ideology)**

The final factor that structures radio programming in the 1930s and 1940s is ideology. And to explain that, I’ve got a little activity for you.

**Broadcast Day**

This is a schedule of the complete broadcast day on WJSV, a Washington D.C. radio station, on September 21, 1939. I’ve included a little description of each show after the title.

I’m going to put 30 seconds on the clock. See if you notice anything about the schedule

**[PLAY CLIP]**

Did you notice anything?

**Broadcast day (color coded)**

Here’s something I noticed. The shows from about 8:45 to 3:15ish, with a little interruption of some live breaking news, are almost all soap operas. And soap operas are traditionally marketed toward women.

The shows from about 5:30 onward are what we might consider our prestige programming—lots of news, and some entertainment like comedy and variety shows. These are generally marketed towards men, or at least an audience that includes men and women.

This is what I mean by the radio being structured by ideology. Through this broadcast day of so-called women’s programs during the day and so-called men’s programs at night, the radio is choosing a kind of household as its primary audience. It is one where women are home during the day to listen to all of these soap operas. It’s one where men are *not* home—are out working—and thus don’t need daytime programming. It’s one where the men return home in the evening and want to listen to news and jokes.

Now, of course, there are many, many, many households that are not structured like this. In 1939, for example, one of my grandmothers worked full time in a laundry and the other one worked full time in an aerosol spray can factory. That’s because they needed the money. So, they wouldn’t have been home to hear all of these soaps even if they wanted to. Further, who even says they wanted to! Maybe women would have liked to hear a little bit more news or comedy during the day, too.

**Ads**

It’s not a given that radio daytime is lady time. This was a *choice* the broadcasting industry made in its early days according to ideologies of gender and class. By this, I mean assumptions about who is home, what they want to listen to.

And, at the end of the day, why might they want to speak to women who are working at home and not in aerosol spray can factories?

**[ANIMATION]** Money. Because a household where a woman can work only in the home probably has more money to spend on Jello and Ovaltine than a household where the woman works outside the house too.

**Radio**

Okay. Now we understand a lot of the big factors that influence radio programming, from its domestic setting to the industry structure to the inherent characteristics of radio (like liveness and commerciality) to ideology. But what was *actually* on the radio?

**Program types**

Popular program types included variety shows, which were influenced by vaudeville. A variety show is a show with a bunch of different acts in it. We see the legacy of variety shows today on TV in the form of late night shows—a host, a musical guest, a few interviews, a monologue, maybe a skit or a taped segment, etc.

There were also quiz shows and serial comedies like the Jack Benny Program.

There was music, which becomes the dominant radio format after television becomes the most popular vehicle for domestic narrative entertainment.

And then there’s soap operas, news, and dramas. Let’s take a closer look at these last three.

**Soap operas**

Soap operas are the form of radio programming most squarely aimed at that middle-class wife or mom who’s working at home all day. Soap operas got their name because they were often sponsored by home cleaning products like soap and laundry detergent and furniture polish—all things a mom might be inclined to buy if she heard an ad every single day of her life at 11:30, or whenever she tuned in to her favorite show.

Most soap operas ran five or six days a week, and they were only 15 minutes long, meaning they didn’t have a big slice of airtime each day to advance the plot. They were also *very* slowly paced and repetitive. Why?

**Woman at home**

Because if your target audience was running in and out of the room to put dinner in the oven and answer the phone and vacuum and soothe the crying baby and change the laundry, they might miss something.

Soap operas move slowly to make sure that distracted women working in the home don’t fall behind.

**Guiding Light**

Soap operas are the cornerstone of daytime radio programming. There are more than 60 soaps on the air by 1940, and some even make the jump to television. On the left, you’ll see a photograph of the cast of *Guiding Light* in the early 1940s. On the right, the cast of the final season in 2009. By my rough calculation, it’s likely they produced more than twelve thousand episodes of this show across its 72-year across radio and television

**Thurber**

Historically, soap operas are not a well-respected media form. They’re associated with women, a criteria that usually excludes something from being considered high art. They’re full of commercials, which make them seem crass. And they’re repetitive, which make them seem dumb if you’re not listening in a busy, distracted way.

**[ANIMATION]** Humorist James Thurber wrote in 1948:

*“If soap operas did disappear from the air (and I see no signs of it), the wailing of the housewives would be heard in the land. I doubt that could be drowned out even by the cheers and laughter of the househusbands dancing in the streets.”*

That’s a good encapsulation of what people generally thought about soaps.

**Media studies quotes**

In the 1990s, though, media scholars began to look back at the history of soap operas and see things a little bit differently.

**[ANIMATION]** Instead of seeing soaps as poor narratives, Tania Modleski argued that they are simply a different *kind* of narrative. She theorized that soaps are a kind of “feminine” storytelling that revolves around open-ended plots, families, multiple perspectives of the same event, and relationships rather than action.

**[ANIMATION]** Another scholar, Horace Newcomb, argued that soaps in fact *expertly* combine the two most important characteristics of radio and eventually television programming: intimacy, meaning that you feel like you know the characters really well, and continuity, meaning that the story picks up right where the previous installment left off.

**Newcomb quote**

Newcomb also connected the form of soap operas to the realities of their female listeners lives **[ANIMATION]**

“Tune in tomorrow,” he said, “not in order to find out the answers, but to see what further complications will defer the resolutions and introduce new questions. Thus the narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, makes anticipation of an end *an end in itself*. Soap operas invest exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman’s life: **waiting**—whether for her phone to ring, for the baby to take its nap…”

And again, we know that not all women lived this life. But some did, and those were the listeners the radio wanted to cultivate as an audience to whom sponsors could advertise.

**News**

Moving on, there’s also news. I don’t want to dwell too long on this, because we talked about news during our lecture on political media, but the radio revolutionized how Americans heard the news.

The news might go live to Edward R. Murrow standing in a war zone, the sounds of bombs actually audible in the distance. It might bring the president’s voice right into your home, so you felt like you were sitting across the Resolute Desk as he explained the New Deal. In this way, radio became *immersive*. It let you imagine you were there, where things were happening.

Previously, people got breaking stories daily, or maybe twice daily if they lived in a place where the newspaper had a morning and evening edition. But when news came to the radio, it became a round-the-clock event. News might interrupt your regularly scheduled broadcast. In the late 1930s, people were on edge with the constantly breaking news of Hitler’s rise. Put a pin in this—we’ll come back to it in just a second.

**Radio Dramas**

Finally, let’s talk a little bit about radio dramas. Radio dramas were plays, adaptations of literature, and other high-falutin’ dramatic presentations that tried to set themselves apart from what was seen as lower, more frivolous, more commercial fare like soap operas. A radio drama might be a presentation of *Hamlet*. It might be an adaption of popular literature by its author, like a 1956 version of *Brave New World* written by Aldous Huxley himself.

Or it might be a creative adaptation of an old H.G. Wells story about an alien invasion.

**Mercury Theater**

If people know anything about old radio coming into this class, it’s usually the infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938. Orson Welles was a very young actor and director at the time, just 22 years old. He founded the Mercury Theater Company and they were operating in New York, producing little, intense plays, and Welles was working in radio simultaneously to pay his bills.

In 1938, based on the strength of his previous radio work, he received an offer from CBS to produce a series of dramatic adaptations of classic literature. Incidentally, he was paired up with a composer Bernard Hermann to provide the score for the show—and Hermann went on to become a fabulous, Academy-Award-winning composer. He’s the man responsible for the soul-chilling score to *Psycho*, for example.

So, Welles called his show *Mercury Theater on the Air* and they went live with their weekly show in July of 1938 and…

…no one listened to it. No one listened to it! He didn’t even have a sponsor.

**October 30, 1938**

On October 30th, 1938, *Mercury Theater on the Air* produces an extremely creative version of H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*, the story of an alien invasion. It’s like the found footage horror film of 1930s radio. Instead of having people just act out the story, Welles writes it as if the alien invasion were truly happening that moment. How would the radio report it?

The program clearly states at the top of the show that this is an adaptation of *War of the Worlds*…but then it cuts to what sounds like just a normal music show. There are a couple of minutes of bland, uninterrupted orchestra music. Then, an announcer interrupts with a breaking news bulletin. Something strange is happening in Grovers Mill, New Jersey…

**Why did people panic?**

What unfolded on the radio and across the country over the rest of that hour has taken on mythological proportions. *War of the Worlds* made everyone run out into the streets screaming, fearing that aliens had landed! *War of the Worlds* was the biggest hoax mass media had ever played on the public! The whole nation panicked!

Well, we’ll see about that in a minute, but to the degree that some people were nervous enough to call the station and see what was happening, why did this show strike such a nerve?

**[ANIMATION]** One, it used that same breaking, immersive news format that people were used to hearing with all that bad news from Europe. It sounded real, and people were primed for those interruptions.

**[ANIMATION]** It used a real place. This is a photograph an old student sent me when he ws driving through the real Grovers Mill, New Jersey. This only amplified the news-like effect.

**Apology**

In essence, what people were mad about was that this was FAKE NEWS—perhaps our first FAKE NEWS crisis. I’m going to link you in the additional content a video of Orson Welles taking questions from reporters the next day. They ask if he thinks the reason people were so scared is because he used fake news bulletins; he kind of deflects by insisting he wasn’t the first one to come up with it. They ask if it should be outlawed. He says he has no idea how you would legislate that, but that everyone in radio would like to avoid what happened the night before.

What’s so funny to me about this video is that you can see him straining to pretend to be, like, a good and contrite boy…when he obviously knows that this is the start of his career. This is the kind of press money can’t buy! And indeed, his career took off after that. *Citizen Kane* came out three years later.

**Panic (continued)**

**[ANIMATION]** Another reason people might have felt nervous is the combined effect of dial-spinning and *Mercury Theater on the Air* having very few regular listeners.

What does that mean?

Well, the reason Orson Welles’s show didn’t even have a sponsor was because it was on CBS at the same times as one of the most popular shows on the radio…

**Bergen**

NBC’s *The Chase and Sandborn* hour starring Edgar Bergen and his puppet, Charlie McCarthy. I need you to think about that for a minute. The most popular show on the radio was a puppet show. The most popular show on a NON-VISUAL FORMAT was a puppet show. HOW DO YOU EVEN KNOW THAT THIS GUY IS DOING BOTH VOICES…you know, never mind, I’m just going to move on. But people loved this. Ate it up. Listened to it in huge numbers.

**Panic (continued)**

When that was over, they went dial-spinning—the radio equivalent of channel surfing—to look for another show to listen to. Which means they joined *War of the Worlds* late. They missed the introduction that clearly said the show was an adaptation of a science-fiction story.

And finally…**[ANIMATION]** *War of the Worlds* didn’t really cause a huge panic. I get why we want to think that this is true, though. We want to see people in the past as more naïve than we are—just like we enjoy thinking that people believed the train in the Lumiere short was going to hit them.

I’ve asked you to read a short *Slate* article for this lecture that debunks a lot of the myths of the *War of the Worlds panic*. The authors argue that most people were able to figure out the show was fake once they got to the part about aliens. Newspapers had a reason to inflate the story of radio being capricious and dangerous and irresponsible, because they were facing so much competition from radio news. It benefitted the print news business to inflate panic. Even the papers who were not purposefully grinding an ax were simply reprinting rumors of panic.

And finally, an ensuing report meant to gauge the impact of the panic was faulty in its design—it asked people whether they were *frightened,* instead of whether they believed it was actually happening.

Those are two different things! I was *frightened* watching *Hereditary*, but I didn’t think Toni Collette was really hiding in the dark on my ceiling. Fright is what you were *supposed* to feel listening to *War of the Worlds*. Panic is not.

**Newspaper**

So, perhaps the *War of the Worlds Panic* wasn’t the mass hysteria we think it was, but instead a handful of nervous people calling the station and a manufactured crisis thereafter. I was curious to see if there was any such panic in Texas, and I was able to find the article from the *Statesman* from the day after the broadcast. It’s kind of the standard article about what happened, but they insert this little bit **[ANIMATION]**

*If Texans were alarmed by the “Invasion from Mars” broadcast Sunday night, they were too excited to call state police headquarters. “Or maybe,” laughed Capt. Homer Garrison, director of the state police, “they’d run too far from a telephone.” In any event, state police did not record a single telephone query during the time easterners were panic stricken.*