**Video Script**

**Lecture 17 – Women in Radio**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

This is our last lecture on radio. We’ve come a long way in the last few lectures, learning about the invention and regulation of a new technology that formed the basis of our broadcasting system. So much of what we associate with television was indeed pioneered by radio, from the broadcast day and its ideological segmentation to the individual genres of programming, like news, sit-coms, and soap operas. And above all, radio pioneered the commercial sponsorship of media content. Commerciality is inextricable from radio programming.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today’s lecture, which focuses on the contribution of women to radio from the 1920s through the 1950s. When we learned about the film industry, we saw that there were a bunch of women like Alice Guy-Blache or Lois Weber who built powerful careers in the early, chaotic days of the business. When film became profitable, social norms about who should have managerial power took over and pushed those women into “proper” roles, like acting.

You see the same pattern in radio. In the early days of a new technology, there’s this little window where people who are sometimes kept distant from managerial or entrepreneurial roles get a chance to flourish before the rules solidify. So today, I want to think about some of those women.

**Listening**

Our portal into that discussion is going to be through a theory of how we listen to the radio. Your reading on WWII and broadcast journalism last week came from a book called *Listening In* by a media historian named Susan Douglas. In an earlier chapter of that book—one that I am *not* making you read—Douglas describes three ways we might listen to the radio.

**[ANIMATION]** The first is called cognitive listening. That’s listening just for information. Cognitive listening is the kind of listening you do when you’re in an airport and you’re listening to the gate agent call the different boarding groups. Cognitive listening is what you do when you get a voicemail. Hopefully cognitive listening is what you’re doing right know, but I realize that’s optimistic on my part.

**[ANIMATION]** The second is called dimensional listening. This is when we use what we’re hearing to create a three-dimensional picture of another place in our mind. Think back to the Edward R. Murrow clip you listened to. When you hear his voice, the wind, the far away sounds of bombs dropping, and air raid sirens, you can create a mental picture of Murrow standing on the roof and reporting the Blitz as if you were right there, standing next to him.

**[ASSOCIATIONAL LISTENING]** Finally, the third kind of listening is associational listening. Associational listening activates a network of personal thoughts and memories. We each bring associations to what he hear based on the lives we’ve lived and people we’ve known and where we grew up and our identities and beliefs and tastes and so on and so forth.

**Alanis**

So, here’s an example of associational listening. **[ANIMATION]** Whenever I hear a song from Alanis Morissette’s 1995 album *Jagged Little Pill,* I’m sort of instantly transported **[ANIMATION]** back to being 13, when this album came out, and I totally loved it. And that memory **[ANIMATION]** activates a whole web of associations—memories, events, smells, sensations—all tied to the first times I heard this record, and all of the subsequent times I’ve listened to it.

This web of associations is highly personal to me. Even if we were the same age and from the same place and listened to the same music, we wouldn’t have exactly the same associational listening experiences whenever we heard “You Oughta Know” on the radio. But, we might have some overlapping ones that are based on shared cultural beliefs and assumptions.

**Radio dial + text**

Susan Douglas notes that radio was often called “miraculous” as it emerged in the 1920s, and that it felt like such a miracle precisely because it tapped into *all three kinds of listening.* By hearing live news reports from around the world, radio connected listeners together as a nation. It was immersive and evocative. By listening cognitively, dimensionally, and associatively, Americans heard the world in new ways.

Associational listening, though, is what brings us into the conversation about women on the radio. What associations did people of the 1920s-1950s have with female voices?

**1920s**

When radio began its rapid spread across the country in approximately 1922ish, America was just two years beyond the passage of the 19th amendment, which gave women the right to vote—though activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett pointed out the limits of that movement for Black women. But for decades, this had been the central issue of women’s organizing—the so-called first wave of feminism—and in the years after it passed that activism began to disperse.

**Clara Bow**

A few lectures ago, we talked about how Clara Bow represented the so-called “new woman,” during the 1920s, this carefree white flapper girl who smoked and drank and worked and flirted. But was this the woman that radio structured its day around? No, right? The Clara Bows of the world were not up at 9am, listening to soap operas. The radio targeted its programming to the middle-class, married, usually white, wife or mother who was at home during the day.

**Hilmes (slide 1)**

A media historian named Michele Hilmes has done a lot of research on where women fit into the picture during the golden age of radio. I’ll be drawing heavily on her work (cited on this slide) for this lecture.

She says: “although women have always been the primary audience of broadcasting’s commercial address, their agency as active ‘speakers’ and producers in the medium has been severely and deliberately circumscribed.”

By this, she means that the radio has always tried to sell things to women. And that was a smart choice frankly—“advertising studies since 1918 had confirmed that 85% of household purchases were made by women, making them the primary target” for radio ads. But as valuable as women were as an audience, they were not seen as quite so indispensable to radio production.

**Desired/feared**

Hilmes argued argues that when it comes to radio in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1940s (the so-called Golden Age of radio) women are **[ANIMATION]** desired, meaning they are vital to its commercial success, but they are also **[ANIMATION]** feared. They’re feared because if they are *too* associated with the radio, the radio becomes a feminized medium, and therefore associated with all the bad stereotypes about women.

In the early days of radio, there were all kinds of concerns about media effects. There were fears that the radio might influence you, might manipulate you, might take advantage of you, might turn you into a weak, little lump sitting around at home. And if you think about it, those are all traditionally stereotypes about women—that they aren’t rational, that they are vulnerable, that they’re weak, and that they belong at home. This is what I mean by associational listening being our entrance into the conversation; culturally, we associate different qualities with female voices than with male ones.

**Questions at stake**

So, there were a number of questions to be worked out during the early days of radio.

**[ANIMATION]** Women had won the right to vote just two years before the spread of radio. This means that American women were brand new citizens. Should such newcomers to the political process have a voice on the radio, where politics was being discussed and debated and reported?

**[ANIMATION]** If women could and should work in radio production, in what capacity? As participants in shows created by men? Or as writers, producers, creators, and announcers in their own right?

**[ANIMATION]** Would the radio become a “women’s medium” if it was used in the home and it was primarily trying to sell things to women?

**[ANIMATION]** And what kinds of programs should be aired for women?

**Early radio**

**[ANIMATION]** The very early days of radio were a lot like the very early days of film. There were no rules, and women seized that opportunity. Women served as station managers and on-air announcers, and programs on the whole were not differentiated by the assumed gender of the audience.

**Waller**

This woman, Judith Waller, is a great example of one of those women who saw an opening in early radio and ran with it. She became the station manager of Chicago’s WMAQ in 1922 and secured the rights to live baseball coverage from Wrigley Field. Cubs fans have this woman to thank for almost 100 years of baseball broadcasts!

**Golden age**

**[ANIMATION]** As we enter the so-called “Golden Age” of radio, from about 1927 through the fifties, you see gender ideology organize broadcasting—exactly what we saw in that 1931 broadcast day we analyzed in the last lecture. Men were increasingly moved into roles as announcers, producers, and managers. Daytime was set aside for women’s programming, which was low-budget, highly commercial, and mostly soap operas. Night was set aside for men’s programming, which was higher budget and more serious—even though surveys showed that women *still* made up more of the broadcast audience than men during these hours!

Women in the industry were moved into roles seen more appropriate to their gender. Women who had earned supervisory positions in general radio programming, including Judith Waller, were shifted to women’s programming, children’s programming, or educational programming—sort of mom-adjacent concerns.

**Radio announcer debate**

So, that’s the general shape of the radio industry for women—they could do a lot, and as radio began to behave like any other industry, they got moved into more constrained roles. But when this process happened in the film industry, we still had plenty of women working in front of the camera, as actresses. Why were women moved out of announcer roles on the radio?

Well, there was an episode that Michele Hilmes describes as the “radio announcer debate of 1924” that helps us understand this discrepancy. **[ANIMATION]**

There was a magazine covering the radio industry called *Radio Broadcast* and a reporter named Jennie Irene Mix had a column there where she answered listener questions. In 1924, a phonograph salesman wrote in with a strong opinion about female announcers. He said: *“When the speaker is not seen in person, and if that speaker be a woman, her voice is very undesirable, and to many, both men and women, displeasing…People will not pay good money to listen to the talking record of a woman’s voice. Consequently, I believe that a vote of radio fans would show great disapproval of woman announcers and speakers.”*

So, Jennie Mix didn’t take a vote but she did do some investigation. She surveyed a handful of station managers—all male—about women’s voices. Here’s some of what they said.

**[ANIMATION]** “Few women have voices with distinct personality. It is my opinion that women depend on everything else but the voice for their appeal.”

**[ANIMATION]** “I do not believe that women are fitted for radio announcers. They need body to their voices…when women announcers try to be congenial in their announcements, they become affected; and when they attempt to be business like they are stiff.”

**[ANIMATION]** “…a well-modulated male voice is the most pleasing to listen to [because women’s voices] tend to be monotonous.”

So, the consensus here is that women’s voices sounded monotonous to men who couldn’t look at her body while she was talking.

**Debate (continued)**

So, Jennie Mix passed away unexpectedly, and a man named John Wallace took over her column. A year later, in 1925, he revisited the issue of women’s voices and female announcers.

**[ANIMATION]** He cited a study done by a New York radio station manager who said he surveyed 5,000 people and found that listeners preferred male announcers to female ones 100 to 1. Wallace dedicated a column to trying to interpret these results.

**[ANIMATION]** First, he blames technology. Maybe men’s voices just take better to the radio. Maybe radio receivers don’t do well with high voices. But also, he points out that men are “naturally better fitted for the average assignment” of an announcer, citing sports, shows, operas and public meetings. None of those, according to Wallace, are a natural fit for a woman to talk about.

**[ANIMATION]** He goes on to suggest that *…perhaps the best reason suggested for the unpopularity of the woman’s voice over the radio is that it has too much personality. A voice that is highly individual and full of character is aggravating to the audience that cannot see the face and the expression to go with the voice…*

**[ANIMATION]** *The woman announcer has difficulty in repressing her enthusiasm and in maintaining the necessary reserve and objectivity.”* As you can see, this is, *infuriatingly*, 180 degrees from the reasons station managers gave a year before. Women’s voices are somehow too stiff *and* too expressive, to monotone *and* too enthusiastic. Both, however, seem to agree that there’s something uniquely irritating about hearing a woman without being able to watch her, too.

After this column is published, the idea that audiences hate women’s voices 100 to 1 becomes sort of radio gospel. It’s used to justify decades of on-air strategy.

**Upspeak**

And while there are certainly more female DJs and announcers on the radio now, these assumptions about whose voices are “right” for radio persist! Female radio reporters *still* receive criticism for the quality of their voices. NPR reporters Miki Meek, Chana Joffe-Walt, Jessica Grose and tons of others have received letters that sound strikingly like the ones from 1924. The radio show *This American Life* dedicated a whole segment to the hate mail their female reporters get for their voices in 2015.

The article pictured here points out that women’s voices are pathologized for upspeak (bringing your voice up at the end of a sentence) and vocal fry (bringing your voice down at the end of a sentence). Along with our previously documented hatred of monotone female voices, there is seemingly…*no way for me to end this sentence in a satisfactory way.*

**Flow article**

Questions about fitness for certain types of broadcasting remain as well. Just as John Wallace argued that men were just naturally more suited to sports broadcasting in 1924, baseball announcers like Suzyn Waldman and Jessica Mendoza were both on the receiving end of listener backlash at the beginning of their careers. Suzyn Waldman received feces and used condoms in the mail and had to be protected by stadium security in the 1980s; Mendoza, who began broadcasting for the MLB in 2015, still can’t go on Twitter for a day or two after a game.

**Radio station**

So, we’ve seen how women were marginalized in radio broadcasting during its early days in ways that still continue to shape the industry. But I’d like to close this lecture on a more celebratory note by recognizing three women from radio history who I love. There are many others I could have picked, but I don’t have space to talk about them all. So, if this is a topic that’s interesting to you, I encourage you to keep looking into it for one of our research assignments.

**Martha Jean Steinberg**

The first is Martha Jean “The Queen” Steinberg, who was a DJ and radio personality in Civil Rights era Detroit (and for decades after).

**[ANIMATION]** She was one of the first Black female DJs in broadcast history. The Queen got her start in Memphis in 1954, when she got her foot in the door by winning a contest for an on-air job. She wanted to host an R&B music show, and she did that, but because she was a woman and expected to produce “women’s programming” she was also required to talk about “household tips” between songs.

In 1963 she moved to a station in Detroit and changed formats, focusing more on gospel and social commentary. During the Detroit Uprising of 1967, she stayed on the air for *two days straight,* broadcasting nonstop to protect her community, urging people to be safe and stay calm, and serving as a communication channel between protestors and the authorities.

Later, she led the other Black employees of her station, all of whom were on-air personalities of a white-owned enterprise, in a protest to get more Black employees involved in station operation.

She bought her station in 1982 and broadcast Gospel up until her death in 2000.

**Mercedes McCambridge**

The second radio lady I want to talk about is also an on-air performer by the name of Mercedes McCambridge. She was an actress, and Orson Welles once called her the “greatest living radio actress in the world.”

**[ANIMATION]** She worked on lots of different radio programs from the 1930s to the 1950s, but the one that’s most interesting is *Defense Attorney*. Contrary to gender norms of the era, she played the lead, a lawyer, and her reporter boyfriend played her sidekick. Even though it revolved around a female lead, it was a real crime drama, *not* a soap opera.

Now, why I like Mercedes McCambridge, and why I’m excited we get to mention her in spooky, spooky, October…

**Pazuzu**

...is that long after radio acting jobs dried up she went on to give one of the most incredible vocal performances of all time as the voice of Pazuzu, the demonic spirit at the center of 1973 horror classic, *The Exorcist.*

And while Marlon Brando and Robert DeNiro and Daniel Day Lewis get all the credit for their intense, method performances—McCambridge went just as far for this performance. To sound as disturbing as possible she swallowed raw eggs and chain smoked and drank whisky. She was actually bound to a chair during recordings to make it sound like the demon was really struggling against its restraints.

Sadly, her work on the film went uncredited for some time due to a weird dispute with the director, William Friedkin, who insisted she requested *not* to have her name on it. She said it was the hardest role of her life and left the premiere in tears when she was not in the credits. The Screen Actors Guild helped settle the dispute and she was eventually properly credited for her vocal work.

**Gertrude Berg**

And finally, I want to talk a little bit about Gertrude Berg. Berg was a pioneer both on the air and as a radio producer.

**[ANIMATION]** Berg grew up in a New York Jewish family; her father ran a hotel in the Catskills, which was the gravitational center of American Jewish comic entertainment. Berg got her start in radio when her husband lost his job at a sugar factory. She wrote a semi-autobiographical skit—and I mean wrote, she wrote it out longhand on paper—and secured a meeting to pitch it to NBC. When she got there, the executive couldn’t read her writing and she had to perform it, which led him to offer her a job as a writer *and* actress.

The result was a smash hit show called *The Goldbergs,* which ran on the radio from 1929 to 1946, and on television from 1949 to 1956. Berg was the sole writer of thousands of episodes, as well as the show’s producer. She also played the main character, Molly Goldberg, a soft-spoken Yiddish-accented mother figure who became a beloved mom to the nation during the Depression and WWII.

Your short reading for today talks in detail about *The Goldbergs* and its specific connection to the Jewish community. Molly Goldberg and her fictional family helped connect a kind of Old World Jewishness that was nostalgic for Jewish listeners to current, universal problems and themes. The Goldbergs were an explicitly Jewish family, but they also struggled with money, fought with each other, and had problems like everyone else.

The show was so beloved people used to say that no one would answer the phone while it was on the air. In May of 1931, Gertrude Berg got 3,302 letters from listeners, only 11 of which were negative—demonstrating that her desire to fix negative stereotypes of Jews in America was to some degree effective, or at least that people found The Goldbergs to be so relatable they felt at home in their Jewish home.

That’s not to say the show was entirely assimilationist, though. Passover episodes read passages from the Haggadah on the air, the real text used during Seder, which might have been the first time non-Jews heard it. And in 1939, Berg used her platform to address anti-Semitism by writing stories where the Bergs had rocks through their windows or discussed Kristallnacht (a violent pogrom against Jews throughout Nazi Germany in November, 1939).

**Listening to *The Goldbergs***

I’ve asked you to listen to a 15-minute episode of *The Goldbergs* for this lecture. If you’re finding it hard to lock your focus into a very old radio show, I have two suggestions for you:

**[ANIMATION]** Try to engage with your associational listening by jotting down the web of associations it activates for you. Alternatively, you can engage your dimensional listening by doodling what you hear. Either way, I hope you enjoy it. Happy listening.