Chapter 6  Mass Culture

1 Bruce Bliven, Radio's Promise and Pitfalls, 1924

Popular memories of the interwar era tend to revolve around its mass entertainment. We may have seen some of the period's great movies – Gone With the Wind (1939), King Kong (1933), The Wizard of Oz (1939). Some of its comic strips survive in one form or another – Blondie, Gasoline Alley, Little Orphan Annie. Most of us can conjure up in our minds newsreel images of the Hindenburg explosion. Radio stars such as Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, the Lone Ranger, and Tarzan endured for decades. Mass culture, defined simply as culture that reaches a broad, cross-class audience, emerged in the mass-market magazines and urban newspapers of the late nineteenth century. It came of age in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly through the maturation of the motion picture and the popularization of the radio, an invention that had existed in primitive form since the turn of the century but became a household staple in the 1920s. It is difficult today to grasp the revolution embodied within radio's ability to deliver instant entertainment, news, politics, and sports into the home. It connected isolated communities into a national whole, furthering the process of creating a unified American nation. Here, journalist Bruce Bliven ponders the changes radio has wrought and its possibilities for the future.

In Bliven's eyes, what benefits does the radio bring? What promises will it fail to reach? How accurate are his predictions? How does Bliven's perspective on the radio compare with today's discussions about the Internet and other new communication technologies?
Radio will not change human nature, at least not in any hurry. At present it is a fad, and if you care to note the folly of rash predictions in such a case, go back and read what was promised in the early days of the bicycle or the phonograph.

Having made this point, let me rush into the pit I have digged with six observations of my own about the future of radio, based on a study of what it is already accomplishing.

First, radio is not likely, on the basis of any inventions now perfected or in sight, to become an important factor in the education of the young.

Second, radio will probably have a serious influence on our national political life, and, on the whole, this will be for the better.

Third, radio will not take the place of newspapers and magazines. Its immediate effect will be to hurt the periodicals somewhat, but ultimately it will prove beneficial to serious and intelligent papers which deal with the important questions of the day.

Fourth, the use of the radio for advertising is wholly undesirable and should be prohibited by legislation if necessary, but incidental advertising or publicity which has been the motive behind a great deal of radio broadcasting, if unwanted by the listening public, will probably die of itself in a short time.

Fifth, any monopolistic control of broadcasting is so strongly opposed to national policy that even in the absence of prohibitive legislation it is likely to be held in check by public protest. At least, radio broadcasting should be declared a public utility under strict regulation by the Federal authorities; and it may be necessary to have the Government condemn and buy the whole industry, operating it either nationally or locally on the analogy of the post-office and the public-school system.

Sixth, radio will do much to create a sense of national solidarity in all parts of the country, and particularly in remote settlements and on the farm. It may even be the final factor needed to make rural life attractive to young people, and stop that herding into the cities which is now going on at the rate of 1,200,000 a year, and is causing students of American social conditions much alarm.

Such cold sober prognostications as these would break the heart of any radio engineer, as I have discovered after talking to several of them. They are as delirious as gold-miners about the possibilities of their mushrooming industry. Despite their supposedly conservative engineering turn of mind, they talk to you in terms which leave H. G. Wells's earlier manner simply nowhere. They speak, for instance, of things like these:

World-wide broadcasting from a single station, the greatest artists and lecturers of the five continents being assembled there, or their voices picked
up at any other point by special low-power transmitters, and re-broadcast from the central spot.

Great universities, or perhaps only one such institution, giving radio courses in every conceivable subject, and granting degrees on the basis of subsequent written examinations.

One universal language (English or Esperanto) made inevitable by world-wide broadcasting.

World peace facilitated, and perhaps insured, by the close international relationships created through the new art.

Transmitter-receivers which can be carried in the waistcoat pocket like one's watch, so that every human being may have instantaneous communication with every other, no matter where they are. The engineers seem to like this prospect, which fills me with nothing but horror.

Wireless transmission of power, from great central stations operated at the taxpayers' expense, the power being free to any one who cares to use it.

Radio transmission not only of pictures, but of motion-pictures, so that the listener in his home will be able both to see and hear the participants in the distant base-ball game or the speaker on his platform. . . .

The question remains, What of radio's social usefulness? . . .

Every one of course thinks of education when this question is asked. It is true that much information of value is already being broadcast, together with an appalling mass of solemn bunk and some really vicious propaganda. Columbia University has conducted a course in Browning's poetry in this way, a syllabus being sent by mail to every one willing to pay a small fee. A large number of letters were received showing a good grasp of the lectures' content, and of adverse criticism there was virtually none. The university, in fact, regards the experiment as an unqualified success, and is planning to repeat it on a wider scale with other subjects. More than fifty schools and colleges now have broadcasting apparatus of their own, and many others use the near-by commercial stations from time to time. . . .

I have already said that I believe radio will have little importance as an aid to formal education for the young. Modern ideas of education have swung completely away from the notion that children ought to be filled with facts by sheer force. Our conception of a good mind is that it must be built, not stuffed; schools are primarily places in which to grow up, and the most useful thing about them, educators are some what mournfully agreed, is the extended opportunity for contact with others of your own age. Radio, of course, faces squarely against this whole tide.

There remains, then, only adult education, as to which the question is, do a sufficient number of grown-ups want this to make its administration by radio possible?
Perhaps I am a pessimist, but I believe the answer is no. I see no signs that more than a highly insignificant minority of adults want to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of anything whatever. They don’t mind getting some facts, certainly, if the process is easy enough. . . . Perhaps the convenience of radio listening will induce them to hear such lectures more frequently than at present; but except as to people on farms, I cannot believe that the results will be of much social importance. . . .

In the long run, anybody who wouldn’t sit through an hour’s discussion of national or local issues in a lecture-hall will probably be equally impatient when tuning in on the oratory. Yet against this must be placed the fact that a President of the United States, for instance, may be heard simultaneously in every part of the country by a number of listeners already supposed to equal one fifth of the population. Persons of sufficient importance—Presidential candidates, certainly, and perhaps those running for senatorial and gubernatorial positions—will be sure of reaching, every time they speak, an audience much greater than the total they could address during a campaign in pre-radio days. . . .

A problem for the politicians is the fact that a radio audience has a psychology utterly different from that of a crowd assembled in one place. The mob spirit, with its facetious enthusiasm, is of course entirely lacking. There is no applause to let the speaker know what is his most popular “line.” His ideas will therefore have a better chance of being weighed for what they are really worth. . . .

The present effect of radio upon periodical literature other than newspapers has been to injure the circulations of most of the general magazines. When several million persons suddenly take up a new occupation which keeps them busy virtually all the evening six or seven nights a week, their previous recreations, of which reading was, of course, an important one, must go by the boards. The chief large gains in circulation recently, with a few exceptions, have been among magazines which are themselves devoted to radio.

But such complete devotion to the new toy is unlikely to last forever. Incredible as it may now seem to the devotee, the day is coming when he will tune in only when there is something on the air he wants to hear. This means he will go back to reading for at least a part of the time. . . .

The real danger for radio is not that it will destroy other means of communication, but that its users will fail to live up to the magnificent opportunity it creates. Here is the most wonderful medium for communicating ideas the world has ever been able to dream of, yet at present the magic toy is used in the main to convey outrageous rubbish, verbal and musical, to people who seem quite content to hear it. . . .