"A Godlike Presence":
The Impact of Radio on the 1920s and 1930s

Tom Lewis

I live in a strictly rural community, and people here speak of "The Radio" in the large sense, with an over-meaning. When they say "The Radio" they don't mean a cabinet, an electrical phenomenon, or a man in a studio, they refer to a pervading and somewhat godlike presence which has come into their lives and homes (1).

—E. B. White, 1933

Today, as we look forward to high definition television bringing satellite-transmitted pictures from around the globe, we sometimes dismiss radio as merely a quaint prologue to the present. Radio was and is more than that. It defined the twentieth century as much as the automobile. The first modern mass medium, radio made America into a land of listeners, entertaining and educating, angering and delighting, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture. The various entertainers in the thirties and forties—the "golden age" of broadcasting—captured the imagination of millions. People talked then as much about the schemes of Amos and the Kingfish or the visitors to Fibber McGee and Molly as they talk today about Murphy Brown's new baby or the latest video footage on the TV news. Radio created national crazes across America, taught Americans new ways to talk and think, and joining every age and class into a common culture.

The first modern mass medium, radio made America into a land of listeners, joining every age and class into a common culture.

The new medium of radio was to the printing press what the telephone had been to the letter: it allowed immediacy. It enabled listeners to experience an event as it happened. Rather than read about Lindbergh meeting President Coolidge after his flight to Paris, people witnessed it with their ears and imaginations; rather than learn of President Roosevelt's thoughts on banking from a newspaper story the next day, people listened to their president speak to them from the White House. The radio, which knew no geographic boundaries, drew people together as never before. Now a single speaker could sow seeds of information, propaganda, entertainment, political and religious fervor, culture, and even hatred across the land. The farmer's phrase, the word that changed the nation, was broadcasting.

To help us understand the ways in which radio has intersected with the social history of the country, we can consider the time when its impact was greatest—the second and third decades of this century. In the beginning of broadcasting, 2 November 1920, when station KDKA in Pittsburgh reported the results of the Harding-Cox presidential election, radio was listened to with awe. In the thirties, when as many as fifteen million people were unemployed, bread lines were common, and families feared for the future, radio became a means of escape from their present condition (2).

The Twenties and the Period of Awe

After the KDKA election broadcast, radio swiftly captured the imagination of Americans and became a craze. By the end of 1923, 556 stations dotted the nation's map in large cities and places like Nunah, Wisconsin; Paducah, Kentucky; Yankton, South Dakota; Wichita Falls, Texas; Altoona, Pennsylvania; Hastings, Nebraska; and New Lebanon, Ohio. An estimated 400,000 households had a radio, a
jump from 60,000 just the year before. And in that year’s spring catalog, the Sears Roebuck Company offered its first line of radios, while Montgomery Ward was preparing a special 52-page catalog of radio sets and parts. Included was “a complete tube set having a range of five hundred miles and more” for $23.50.

Overnight, it seemed, everyone went into broadcasting: newspapers, banks, public utilities, department stores, universities and colleges, cities and towns, pharmacies, creameries, and hospitals, among others. In Davenport, Iowa, the Palmer School of Chiropractics had a station; in New Lebanon, Ohio, the Nushawg Poultry Farm started one; in Cleveland, the Union Trust Company began broadcasting over WJAX; in Clarksburg, West Virginia, the Roberts Hardware opened WHAK; the John Fink Jewelry Company of Fort Smith, Arkansas began WCAC; the Detroit Police Department began the mnemonic KOP; the Chicago Tribune began WGN (World’s Greatest Newspaper); in San Francisco, the Glad Tidings Tabernacle delivered its message of salvation over KDZX; and in Milford, Kansas, over KFKB (“Kansas Folks Know Best”), Dr. John R. Brinkley lectured three times each day about the virtues of implanting goat glands to restore male potency (3).

In the beginning people’s awe at hearing sounds through the air was so great they would listen to almost anything. The broadcasters decided to give them a mix of culture, education, information, and some entertainment. Typical of the programming were the offerings of station WJZ, which began regular broadcasting in New York at 3:00 PM on May 16, 1923:

3:00 Violet Pearch, pianist
3:20 Elsa Rieffin, soprano
3:30 Things to tell the Housewife about cooking meat
3:45 Elsa Rieffin, soprano
4:00 Home—Its Equipment, by Ada Swan
4:15 Rinaldo Sidoli, violinist
4:30 Ballad of Reading Gaol, part 1, by Mrs. Marion Leland
4:45 Rinaldo Sidoli, violinist
5:00 Ballad of Reading Gaol, part 2, by Mrs. Marion Leland
5:15 Rinaldo Sidoli, violinist
5:30 Rea Stelle, contralto
6:00 Peter’s Adventures, by Florence Vincent
7:30 Frederick Taggart, baritone
8:15 Lecture by W. F. Hickernell
8:30 Viola K. Miller, soprano
8:45 Salvation Army band concert
9:15 Viola K. Miller, soprano
9:30 Salvation Army Band, Male Chorus
10:00 Concert

So it went day after day. That year WJY, another New York station, would present 98 baritone solos, 6 baseball games, 5 boxing bouts, 67 church services, 7 football games, 10 harmonica solos, 74 organ concerts, 340 soprano recitals, 40 plays, 723 talks and lectures, and 205 bedtime stories.

Brisk radio sales were part of the wave of the post World War I prosperity that was breaking over the nation. One company that epitomized the 1920s was the Radio Corporation of America. Formed in 1919 as a consortium of the various companies that held patents crucial to radio, RCA quickly moved into a position of prominence. As it grew in importance so did the value of its stock. Ten thousand dollars of RCA stock purchased in 1924 would be worth more than a million dollars by June, 1929 (4).

RCA’s greatest contribution to radio’s presence in the twenties was its formation in 1926 of the National Broadcasting Company, the first national radio network. Initially NBC had nineteen stations linked together by telephone lines, but by Saturday, 11 June 11 1927, when America’s newest hero, Charles A. Lindbergh returned to America after his flight to Paris, it linked fifty stations in twenty-four states for the largest network broadcast ever.

Amelia Earhart’s historic flight was one of many events during the 1920s and 1930s which radio brought to the nation as a whole.
From 12:30 PM to midnight that day, radio reporters never lost sight of the aviator. Covering Lindbergh’s arrival at Washington aboard the U. S. Navy’s Memphis, the parade up Pennsylvania Avenue, and the presentation of the Flying Cross, was NBC’s Graham McNamee who led the team of announcers carefully placed about Washington. One announcer was perched atop the Washington Monument; another in the dome of the Capitol; and another on the roof of the U. S. Treasury.

How many people listened? In the week before Lindbergh’s arrival, stores reported brisk radio sales. That Saturday in June there were approximately six million sets across the nation. An average of five people would listen to each, so the statisticians figured, for a total audience of thirty million. Even if these projections were inflated, it was a fact that across the nation more people were listening than ever.

Beginning with the election of 1928, radio began to have a profound effect upon the way politicians conducted their campaigns. Certainly radio had been used before, but the limited number of set owners meant campaign broadcasting had been more a novelty than an indispensable campaign tool. In May of 1928, Herbert Hoover’s managers declared that he planned to campaign “mostly on radio and through the motion pictures,” thereby, placing his hat in the “ethereal ’ring.” Personal appearances by the candidate, so the managers proclaimed, were a thing of the past. “It is believed,” wrote a reporter for the New York Times in language that appears remarkably contemporary, “that brief pithy statements as to the positions of the parties and candidates which reach the emotions through the minds of millions of radio listeners, will play an important part in the race to the White House.” It was the 1928 version of the sound bite, shorter in length than the usual political oratory, and designed to play to feelings and passions.

Radio was changing the attention span of listeners, who were no longer willing to suffer overly long and fulsome speeches. The new medium would effectively reduce the length of the average campaign speech that fall to ten minutes.

By the end of the decade, the period of awe, it was clear to all that radio was changing the interior life of the country in ways that few could have envisioned. The invisible sinews of electromagnetic waves were binding the country together as never before. Those waves crossed the nation without regard for regional or state lines, often leveling cultural lines in their path. Increasingly, people ceased to refer to themselves just as Pennsylvanians, Coloradans, Californians, Oregonians, or Texans; radio brought the nation into their homes and gave them a national identity. A single event, a boxing match, an inauguration, a football game, a concert, a comedy sketch, a political speech, or a sermon, gave Americans the chance to share in a common experience. Whether the show took place in Washington, Chicago, New York, or San Francisco, radio allowed the nation to be a part of it the moment it occurred.
RCA introduced its new line of Radiolas in 1927 in response to the rapidly growing market for household radio sets.

Though those same listeners might relive the event later through the newspapers or the newsreels in movie theaters, it was radio that brought it to them first.

The Depression and Period of Entertainment

Through the economic turmoil of the depression, radio was one of the most important forces keeping the nation together. By the thirties, radio had pervaded the consciousness of every American, subtly changing the way they thought and lived. There were 19,250,000 radio sets in America, and it was not unusual for a person to regard the radio as the most prized of possessions. Even though a quarter of the nation was unemployed, radio continued to grow in popularity. It enabled people to leave the economic trials and wretched conditions besetting the country. Social workers found that Americans would sooner sell their refrigerators, bath tubs, telephones, and beds to make rent payments, than part with the box that connected them with the world (8).

The nature of broadcasting was changing, too. While there still were inspirational and educational talks, and classical music programs, serious dramas, infrequent analyses of current events, and even the occasional protest talks, broadcasters offered a decidedly lighter fare of comedy, variety, and popular music. Vaudeville theaters, were now only a memory, and performers like Eddie Cantor, the Marx Brothers, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jack Benny, and Ed Wynn successfully made the transition to the new medium. Listeners came to regard radio less as a medium for the transmission of culture and education and more as an easy way to escape their condition. As a most astute advertising agency head once said, America should laugh and dance its way out of the Depression (9).

The most popular program that brought the most laughs was of course “Amos ‘n Andy,” which NBC broadcast at 7:00 each weekday evening. A publicity picture of the pair suggests what the show was about. One man sits on a barrel. He is wearing a shirt open at the throat, an unbuttoned vest, rumpled work pants, and shabby shoes. Another, dressed in dark wrinkled pants, a mismatched worn dress coat, white dress shirt and a wide tie, stands authoritatively beside him. Chewing on a stogie, he places his right hand on the other’s shoulder, while his left grips the lapel of his jacket. Atopt his head at a rakish angle, rests a derby hat. Thick lips, and the vacant look in their eyes are the most prominent features of their dark faces. They are Charles J. Correll and Freeman Fisher Gosden, not black men, but a black face comedy duo. In 1933 they earned $100,000 from NBC; more than Babe Ruth; more than the president of the network that employed them; more than the president of RCA; indeed, more than the President of the United States (10).

“Amos ‘n’ Andy” and almost all the other popular radio shows had commercial sponsors that brought the networks and stations money. The list of broadcasts, punctuated by commercial announcements written by clever advertising agencies, grew as the decade advanced. By the early thirties commercials had become the standard way of financing broadcasts. Convenience goods, consumed by millions, became the most popular products to sell, accounting for 86 percent of the network and 70 percent of the non-network advertisements in 1934 (11). Cigarettes (Lucky Strikes and Chesterfields), cigars (“There’s no spit in
Cremo Cigars!"), toothpastes (Ipana and Pepsodent) coffees (Maxwell House and Chase and Sanborn) and laxatives (Haley's M-O) proved especially popular.

More and more, advertisers—and the enormous revenues they offered to networks and small stations—controlled the content of broadcasts. Advertising agencies in New York, rather than stations and networks created programs to meet a specific need of the client, and they hired audience rating companies to measure the response. Clever copy writers dramatized commercials and sometimes wove them into variety and comedy material. The singing commercial began to take form, too:

When you're feeling kinda blue
And you wonder what to do,
Ch-e-ew Chiclets, and
Chee-ee-ee ear up! (12)

Gone was the ten minute sales talk for "Hawthorne Court," a suburban apartment development in Queens, New York, the radio advertisement in 1922 that had started it all. Now commercials were short, snappy, and often full of humor. To one wag of the time, radio was simply "a new and noisy method of letting peddlers into your home."

News and commentary were not popular with advertisers or broadcasters. On 12 and 13 March 1933, two typical days, listeners in New York had the following choices: WEAF carried only Lowell Thomas, who devoted his fifteen minutes as much to commentary as to news, and a fifteen minute talk direct from Berlin by the chief European correspondent for the New York Times, who assured listeners that Adolf Hitler's rise to power was "no cause for general alarm" even though Jews were being clouded by charges of the blacks' mistreatment in jail. In Berlin, roving bands of Nazi youths were attacking Americans. Chancellor Adolf Hitler's National Socialists had won resounding victories in municipal elections throughout Prussia. Showing at the Palace in New York was Mussolini Speaks, a biography of the Italian dictator with a running commentary by Lowell Thomas. Undergraduates at the universities of Glasgow and Manchester, following the lead of the students at Oxford, passed a resolution refusing to bear arms "for King or country." In St. Petersburg, Florida, Colonel Jacob Ruppert, owner of the New York Yankees was trying to get Babe Ruth to sign a new contract for $50,000. Before the Newaygo County courthouse in White Cloud, Michigan, the sheriff and his deputies used tear gas to disperse 400 men gathered to protest a mortgage foreclosure sale of land belonging to a fellow farmer. And Helen Keller revealed that one day while she was having tea in Lady Astor's London drawing room, her companion, Mrs. Macy, haltingly and with a quaver signed in her hand the pronouncement of her fellow guest George Bernard Shaw: "All Americans are deaf and blind—and dumb."

Dark messages did come through the air, however. From Detroit Father Coughlin excoriated the rich for having been "dulled by the opiate of their own contentedness" and organized his listeners into the "National Union for Social Justice" and the "Radio League of the Little Flower." Often implying anti-semitism, he denounced international bankers, blaming them for the Depression and suggesting that "Democracy is over." A startling number of listeners agreed. When a Philadelphia station asked its listeners if they would like to hear Coughlin or the New York Philharmonic on Sunday afternoons, the vote ran Coughlin 187,000; Philharmonic 12,000 (14).

From Baton Rouge Huey Long raged against "lyin' newspapers" promised "Every Man a King," and complained that though the Lord had invited the world to a feast "Morgan and Rockefeller and Mellon and Baruch have walked up and took 85 percent of the vittles off the table." He had an engaging conspiratorial way of bringing his audience into league with him:

Hello friends, this is Huey Long speaking. And I have some important things to tell you. Before I begin I want you to do me a favor. I am going to talk along for four or five minutes, just to keep things going. While I'm doing it I want you to go to the telephone and call up five of your friends, and tell them Huey is on the air.

Listeners did. Across the land they organized "Share the Wealth" clubs. Until his assassination in September, 1935, many thought the Kingfish offered them the way to economic salvation (15).

The few news events that did make the radio were those orchestrated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. After his inauguration on March 4th, the new president had declared a banking holiday as "the first step in the government's reconstruction of our financial and economic fabric." Farm leaders urged the President to take on sweeping new powers as a "Farm Dictator." And Congress rushed to approve an administration bill to sell beer and wine with 3.2 percent alcohol.

Roosevelt used radio to unite a fearful nation and to expand his popular appeal. When four out of every five newspapers declared their opposition to his policies, he spoke directly with the American people through his "Fireside Chats." And the people believed him. At 10:00 PM, Sunday, 12 March 1933, the end of his first week in office, the President delivered his first talk to explain the banking crisis. To prepare for it Roosevelt lay on a couch and visualized those whom he was trying to reach, ordinary people trying to get on with their affairs, who had little understanding
of the reasons why they couldn’t cash a check or withdraw their money (16). “My friends, I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking,” Roosevelt began.

First of all let me state the simple fact that when you deposit money in a bank, the bank does not put the money into a safe deposit vault. It invests your money in many different forms of credit. . . . In other words, the bank puts your money to work to keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning around.

After explaining how “undermined confidence” caused a run on the banks’ deposits, the consequent need for a “bank holiday,” and the plans for their reopening, he reassured his listeners, “I hope you can see, my friends, from this elemental recital of what your government is doing that there is nothing complex, nothing radical in the process.” And he concluded:

Confidence and courage are the essentials of success in carrying out our plan. You people must have faith; you must not be stampeded by rumors and guesses. Let us unite in banishing fear. We have provided this machinery to restore our financial system; and it is up to you to make it work. It is your problem, your friends, your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail.

Listeners heard his basic lesson in banking and they understood; they heard his fundamental sincerity and they believed. From Santa Monica, California, Will Rogers made the ultimate pronouncement. Roosevelt “stepped to the microphone last night and knocked another home run,” Rogers wrote in the New York Times. “Our President took such a dry subject as banking. . . . he made everybody understand it, even the bankers” (17).

Other talks by Roosevelt followed, three more in 1933, and sixteen in the following years. The flow of letters to the White House, from many of those Americans whom the President had envisioned, became a torrent. Some people placed Roosevelt’s picture beside their radios, so they might see him as he spoke.

By 1933, a minority who still dreamed that broadcasting might become a medium of culture, education and information, were pressing hard for reform. Through the National Committee on Education by Radio they encouraged sympathetic congressmen to propose legislation that would force the Federal Radio Commission to license stations with more power and more favorable places on the broadcasting spectrum, and they were hopeful of success when they learned President Roosevelt wished to create a communications commission. But the result of their efforts, the Communications Act of 1934 that created a Federal Communications Commission, only maintained the status quo. When a committee of the FCC held hearings on the role of education in broadcasting, the networks contended they already were devoting ample time to cultural enrichment, including shows like NBC’s “Amos ‘n’ Andy.” Nevertheless, the threat of legislation induced networks to create programs like “The University of Chicago Round Table” and “American School of the Air” to satisfy the FCC’s stipulation that broadcasting be in “the public interest, convenience, or necessity.”

It was not simply the threat of legislation that moved broadcasters to develop better programs. David Sarnoff, the president of RCA who had first proposed the “radio music box” in 1916 so that listeners might enjoy “concerts, lectures, music, recitals,” felt that the medium was failing to do this. By 1937, RCA had recovered enough from the effects of the Depression for it to make a dramatic commitment to cultural programming. With the most liberal terms Sarnoff hired Arturo Toscanini to create an entire orchestra and conduct it. On Christmas night, 1937, the NBC orchestra gave its first performance—Vivaldi’s Concerto Grosso in D Minor—in an entirely refurbished studio in the RCA Building. “The National Broadcasting Company is an American business organization. It has employees and stockholders. It serves their interests best when it serves the public best.” That Christmas night, and whenever the NBC orchestra played over the next seventeen years, he was right.

RCA’s rival, the Columbia Broadcasting System, hired writers like Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Vincent Benet, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, and Norman Corwin, among others, to write first-rate radio dramas. The most prolific and some would consider the most successful was Corwin, who often interwove political and social themes into plays like “They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease.” Broadcast in February 1939, the drama served as Corwin’s aesthetic response to the cold-blooded, fascist bombing of Guernica, Spain:

A symmetry of unborn generations, Of canceled seed. The dead below, spread fanlike in their blood, Will bear nor more.

Toward the end of the decade events in Europe began to overtake radio. In March, 1938, Edward R. Murrow broadcast reports of Hitler’s invasion of Austria for CBS. In the Munich crisis later that year, Murrow made thirty-five broadcasts. When German plans bombed London, Listeners across the United States heard the reserved Murrow intone “This . . . is London.” Politics had forced radio to enter the world of reality.

On 20 April 1939, before the RCA pavilion at the New York World’s Fair, David Sarnoff strode up to a podium and declared: “Now we add radio sight to sound”

It is with a feeling of humbleness that I come to this moment of announcing the birth of a new art so important in its implications that it is bound to affect all society . . . an art which shines like a torch in a troubled world . . . a creative force we must learn to utilize for the benefit of all mankind.

An RCA camera at the “Avenue of Patriots,” focussed on the trylon and perisphere. To the few hundred watching sets about the city the scenes were won-
Promotional advertisements increased demand for radios and helped sales to grow exponentially during the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Political events would halt the true introduction of television until the end of World War II. By 1953, when there were more than 17 million television sets in the United States, many proclaimed that radio would soon die. Events would prove otherwise, of course. Only rarely does a new technology entirely eliminate an older one. While television changed the function of radio in society, it did not eliminate it. Through popular music, especially rock and roll, radio continued to shape American culture. The development of FM broadcasting (an invention of 1933 which did not become successful for more than three decades), the creation of National Public Radio in 1970, and radio talk programs of recent years, demonstrate the power of the medium. Radio still captures the imagination, too. As a child once said, he preferred radio over television because “the pictures are better.”

Endnotes

2. I have avoided saying that KDKA made the first radio broadcast, for claims of who was first inevitably lead to dispute. Certainly KDKA was among the first to make regularly scheduled broadcasts to those who had purchased receiving sets from the Joseph Horn department store in Pittsburgh. From his wireless station at Brant Rock, Massachusetts, Reginald Aubury Fessenden played “O Holy Night” on his violin on Christmas Eve, 1906. The ship operators who heard the broadcast were stunned that music was actually coming through their earphones. Beginning in 1909, Charles D. Herrold made frequent broadcasts.
to amateurs from his station KQW in San Jose, California. About the same time Lee de Forest broadcast Enrico Caruso from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House. In 1916 he made frequent broadcasts from his station in the Bronx, New York. Several months before KDKA went on the air William E. Scripps made experimental broadcasts from the offices of the Detroit News and Professor Earle M. Terry broadcast weather reports from the University of Wisconsin.

3. Information for this paragraph comes from Hugo Gernsback’s Radio for All (Philadelphia & London, J.B. Lippincott, 1922), and the 1924 World Almanac, p. 69.


5. “A darn nice boy,” McNamee assured his audience as Lindbergh alighted from the Memphis; “Lindy himself, receiving with his usual modest demeanor the plaudits of the crowd,” was McNamee’s description as he followed him along the parade route. “Here’s the boy! He comes forward; unassuming, quiet, a little droop to his shoulders, very serious; he’s tired out,” McNamee reported as the shy Minnesotan approached President Calvin Coolidge, “and awfully nice.” Radio followed Lindbergh throughout the day, interspersing McNamee’s descriptions and the numerous speeches, with an “Aviation Review Program,” a humorous sketch, “New York to Hackensack,” a “Musical Trip with Lindbergh,” and George M. Cohan singing his tribute “When Lindy Comes Marching Home.” Source: Phillips Carlin Scrapbooks, Broadcast Pioneers Library, Washington, DC.


7. In 1925 the presidential inauguration ceremonies were broadcast for the first time.

8. The depression affected the sales of radio sets, too. For example, while sales of radios in 1933 actually climbed 66 percent over the previous year to 300,000, other figures indicated the industry was far from healthy. The number of wholesale distributors of radio sets had dropped from 806 in 1929 to 533 in 1933, the number of radio stores shrunk from 16,037 to 8,161 in the same period. The Radio Corporation of America suffered, too. What had been one of the most spectacular ascents in a corporate stock in the twenties was followed by an equally spectacular fall after October, 1929. RCA stock had typified life in the twenties making many modest stockholders into millionaires and enabling them to partake in what Scott Fitzgerald called “the most expensive orgy in history.” But what had been worth $572 per share in 1929 had plummeted to just $10 in 1931 and had climbed back to only $12.25 in 1933. Sources: The Golden Web, p. 36, and Robert Sobel, RCA (New York, Stein & Day, 1984), p. 99.


10. The effect of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” upon radio sales was dramatic: from 650,500 sets in 1928, the year Gosden and Correll first appeared on WMAQ, to 842,548 in 1929, the year they signed on with NBC. Restaurants and movie theaters found they had to broadcast the show over loud speakers if they were to keep their customers. Calvin Coolidge let it be known he was not to be disturbed in the evening when “Amos ‘n’ Andy” was on the air. When floods in New England and Pennsylvania in the spring of 1936 knocked out electric power stations and forced many to abandon their homes and radios, frustrated listeners flooded the National Broadcasting Company with requests for synopses of what had taken place in Harlem. NBC obliged: “After Andy unexpectedly produces $500 to pay for the wholesale grocery company, . . . rumors arise that Andy has obtained the money by robbing a Harlem drug store. He is questioned by the police . . .” went the summary. An eager public delighted in every word. “There are three things which I shall never forget about America,” George Bernard Shaw once said after a visit to the United States, “the Rocky Mountains, Niagara Falls, and ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy.’” Source: George H. Douglas, The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, McFarland, 1987), p. 205; and files at the George Clark Collection, Smithsonian Institution.


13. Winchell sometimes worked news stories into his gossip column, but he was more interested in the marriages and divorces (“lohegrins” and “Reno­vations” in Winchell language) of celebrities. Sponsored by Jergens Lotion, Winchell always signed off “with lotions of love,” a valediction that gave the show and its sponsor a distinctive identification with the public (Barnouw, II, p. 101). Winchell carried his practice of tapping on a tele­graph key into the 1950s, when, shirt collar open, tie pulled down, and occasionally a reporter’s hat on his head, he appeared Sunday evenings on television. It was a foolish sight.


Tom Lewis is Professor of English at Skidmore College.