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LISTENING IN: RADIO AND THE
AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Introduction

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A sigh seems such a corny way to start. But that's how so many people, of different ages, begin their musings about the thing. "Ah, radio," they say, and then off they go, into reveries about *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*, or Jean Shepherd, or Wolfman Jack. Few inventions evoke such nostalgia, such deeply personal and vivid memories, such a sense of loss and regret. And there are few devices with which people from different generations and backgrounds have had such an intimate relationship. Ask anyone born before World War II about the role of radio in his or her life, and in the life of the country, and you will see that person begin to time-travel, with an almost euphoric pleasure, to other eras and places, when words and music filled their heads and their hearts. It is a lost world now, a place once overflowing with the music of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, and Arturo Toscanini, the jokes of Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, and Fred Allen, and the more sobering words of Franklin Roosevelt, H. V. Kaltenborn, and Edward R. Murrow.

Much of this world is gone forever, having lived only briefly before evaporating in the ether. Only portions of it are preserved on tape. But it's not just Americans who grew up in the 1930s and '40s who get romantic about radio. Millions of us born after World War II remember lying there in the darkness of our bedrooms, or driving around at night in our parents' cars, listening to Sam Cooke, or the Beatles, or the Doors, and feeling illicit pleasures. The music transported us out of the house, out of our dull neighborhoods, and off to someplace where life seemed more intense, more heartfelt, less fettered. Even very hip pop and rock stars of the 1970s—Elvis Costello, Donna Summer, Queen—sang about radio with a sense of longing. As the fabulous Freddie Mercury put it on Queen's classic "Radio Ga-Ga,"

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I'd sit alone and watch your light/ My only friend through teenage night/
And everything I had to know/ I heard it on my radio.

The refrain then summed up the sadness, even a hint of betrayal, that radio
had been displaced:

You had your time/ you had the power/ you've yet to have your finest hour/
Radio.

People who grew up with radio still pine for the old radio days, for their intimate relationship with the box in their living room or bedroom, for a culture without television. They miss what now seems like the simplicity of those times, the innocent optimism (even during the Depression and the War), the directness of the medium itself. But what they yearn for most is the way that radio invited them to participate actively in the production of the show at hand. A listener could ornament any radio broadcast, whether it was a political speech, *Inner Sanctum*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, or the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, with appropriate visuals. This meant more than imagining the people and their expressions, the setting and its architecture and decor. It also meant that with words and tone of voice as your only clues (often reinforced by sound effects and music), you conjured up people's emotional states, their motivations, the tenor of their interactions with others. You envisioned Mary Livingstone rolling her eyes at Jack Benny's unfounded vanity; you winced as the entire contents of a closet cascaded out into a hallway; you even glimpsed the elusive, invisible Shadow. You had to fill in the other senses—taste, touch, and smell—also. Even though you might be lying on the living room floor, or lounging in a chair, you were anything but passive.

Listening to radio was like being a child again, having stories read to you and being expected to have—and use—a vivid imagination. And what radio listeners miss most are these, their supple, agile, bygone imaginations. They miss their role in completing the picture, in giving individual meaning to something that went out to a mass audience. They miss the mental activity, the engagement, the do-it-yourself nature of radio listening. They miss having such a free-ranging role in giving mass culture its private and public meanings. They miss the kinds of conversations radio provoked, in which friends or family or co-workers talked together to fill in the blanks. They miss radio's invisibility. When people sigh about radio, they are yearning for a mass medium that stimulated the imagination instead of stunting it. They are also acknowledging how deeply radio burrowed into people's autobiographies, marking, shaping, and responding to who people were at different points in their lives.

Not that this relationship to radio ended with the advent of television. On

the contrary, that generation born after World War II, the baby boom, also had a very special and intense relationship with radio, although the terms were necessarily different. People certainly listened to radio by themselves in the 1930s and '40s, but, especially during the early evening hours, radio listening was largely a family affair. Thirty years later radio listening was often more private. By the mid-1950s most American homes had television, which, dominated as it was by shows like *Zorro*, *The Real McCoys*, and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, was filled with kid shows and family programming. Baby boomers, certainly those born in the 1940s and '50s, went to radio for something else. We turned to radio for rebellion. And we turned to it for an affirmation of our sense that, as a generation, we were indeed different. Young people in the 1990s, searching for the increasingly rare "alternative" stations, or tuning in to what's come to be called modern rock, still use radio to locate others like themselves, to inhabit a world not meant for those over thirty.

One primal experience those born before and after the Second World War share is lying in bed, sometimes with the covers just barely over our heads, listening intently to the box next to us. Maybe it was the darkness, the solitude, or being in bed, but the intimacy of this experience remains vivid; listeners had a deeply private, personal bond with radio. One group listened to *The Shadow* or *The Lone Ranger*, another to DJs like Alan Freed, Cousin Brucie, Wolfman Jack, or Tom "Big Daddy" Donahue. Both groups listened to music, to the tunes that would become the theme songs for different moments and eras of their lives. Baseball bridged this generational divide, as tuning in to ball games became a national passion, especially from the late 1930s to the late 1960s.

We also started listening when we were young, even before we became teenagers, and we often listened alone. Radio kneaded our psyches early on and helped shape our desires, our fantasies, our images of the outside world, our very imaginations. Unlike other major technologies—automobiles, airplanes, or trains—that move us from one place to another, radio has worked most powerfully inside our heads, helping us create internal maps of the world and our place in it, urging us to construct imagined communities to which we do, or do not, belong. While radio brought America together as a nation in the 1930s and '40s, it also highlighted the country's ethnic, racial, geographic, and gendered divisions. And radio hastened the shift away from identifying oneself—and one's social solidarity with others—on the basis of location and family ties, to identifying oneself on the basis of consumer and taste preferences.¹ Certainly it has played a central role, over the last nine decades, in constructing us as a new entity: the mass-mediated human, whose sense of space and time, whose emotional repertoires and deepest motivations cannot be extricated from what has emanated through the airwaves.

But while radio listening has been a constant fact of twentieth-century life, the way people listened to radio was profoundly shaped by the era in which they began to listen. In the 1920s people had to tinker constantly with their sets to pull in different stations, discovering through their headphones a host of unearthly sounds—static, blasting, feedback—they'd never heard before. By the mid-1930s the noise had cleared enough to allow Americans to concentrate on stories on the radio. By the late 1950s the stories had largely disappeared. In other words, different generations learned to listen to and use the radio differently. So it's not only *what* people listened to—Benny Goodman or the Rolling Stones—that defined generations. It's *how* they listened as well that shaped people's memories, associations with others, their sense of who they were and their place in history.

This book is about those times—whether curled up in our beds, sitting in the living room with our families, or blasting around in our cars—when Americans listened to the radio, often with a passion. It asks what it meant for a culture glutted with visual stimuli to turn, dramatically and avidly, to listening. The book argues that radio's invisibility—the fact that it denies sight to its audience—has been absolutely central to its effects on American culture. It considers what people listened to in different eras as the device and the programming evolved; and it examines how this technology, and the programming on it, introduced us to, and cultivated in many of us, different modes of listening that helped constitute us as individuals, and as Americans. While the impact on radio of inventors, corporate leaders, and certain self-satisfied DJs and talk show hosts has been duly recorded in books both pop and academic, the relationship of us, the listeners, to this invention remains unexplored. This book takes on that exploration.

I confess that this is, at times, a romantic book, in the way that Woody Allen's *Radio Days* is a romantic movie. Allen's valentine to radio acknowledges that its commercials were often sappy and moronic, its stars sometimes pretentious and talentless hypocrites, and many of its shows utterly mindless and politically retrograde. Ever since the 1920s critics have rightly complained about the commercial bastardization of radio. In fact, listening to old programs today—even famous, highly rated ones like *The Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show*—one is struck by how bad they often were. From its start radio perpetuated ethnic, racial, and gender stereotypes, and it played a defining role in making consumerism our national religion. By the 1930s radio was under oligopoly control, managed almost exclusively by two networks, CBS and NBC, who in turn had their content tightly regulated by advertising agencies and their corporate clients and, to a lesser extent, the FCC. Radio was hardly an unfettered vehicle for the democratic expression of diverse American voices.

Yet there is something about the medium itself that makes listeners willing to forgive—even forget—much of this. I want to understand why this is so. Radio historians, myself included, have most often had a political and economic emphasis to our work as we have traced how radio fell under, and advanced, corporate fortunes. Indeed, given radio's history, it would be impossible to abandon this emphasis, and I don't intend to do so here. But radio as a tool of corporate agendas is not the only or at times even the most important historical story, although at other times, of course, it is. The sighing about radio should interest us too, the silky nostalgia that swirls around it, and radio's role in constructing and activating the collective memories of so many Americans.

I want to suggest that this nostalgia is especially powerful because it is rooted in the act of listening. In other words, you can't appreciate the importance of radio until you understand the importance of hearing. This may seem baldly obvious. But existing histories of radio—with the exception of Marshall McLuhan's 1964 best-seller *Understanding Media*—do not pause, even for a minute, to meditate on the particular qualities and power of sound, and how these have shaped the power of radio. Yet it is clear that with the introduction of the telephone, the phonograph, and then radio, there was a revolution in our aural environment that prompted a major perceptual and cognitive shift in the country, with a new emphasis on hearing. Because sound is dynamic and fleeting, radio conveyed a powerful sense of "liveness"—it was, from the beginning, "an account of what *is* happening, rather than a record of what *has* happened." Radio was a perceptual technology that extended, deepened, and magnified hearing to completely unprecedented levels. It provided "a flood of aural experience" and a changing relationship to sound.²

What I have attempted to do, then, is conduct an archaeology of radio listening from the 1920s to the present, and to lay out what I see as the different modes of listening that radio cultivated in Americans in different eras. I do so because I have become convinced that the modes of listening radio cultivated in us in our formative years powerfully shaped our individual and collective identities and also shaped the contours of American cultural and political history. Listening to the radio has become such an embedded, taken-for-granted feature of everyday life that we are oblivious to how we have come to listen to specific broadcasts differently, and we have forgotten that this was something we all had to learn. It is high time that we stopped, cocked our ears for a bit, and considered the fact that *how* we learned to listen to radio shaped our subjective, inner selves and the generations of which we are part. No, generations are hardly monolithic; they are riven with all sorts of divisions that radio—or any mass medium—could hardly smooth over. But radio surrounded different generations with common and evolving

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ural soundscapes that their members tuned in, entered, imbibed, or turned off, and understood to be theirs.

It is also time to scrutinize that old bromide “Radio stimulates the imagination,” and think about exactly what radio encouraged Americans to imagine luring different historical eras and how it did so—through music, sound effects, ambient sound, and the invention of a new form of discourse, radio announcing. With a few exceptions I have identified these modes of listening with particular broadcasting genres: for example, news listening, story listening, baseball listening, and music listening (which has its own subcategories, as people listen to music in multiple ways). But within and across these genres—and certainly modes of listening overlap with one another—listening ranges from flat and informational, as when people take in the weather or the latest headlines, to deeply layered and multidimensional, as when fans envision the geometry of a ballpark and feel they actually see the arcing trajectory of a home run. Americans chose to enter these modes of listening, often with great anticipation, and they learned how to switch modes, often instantly, as *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*, for example, moved them from a solo by Gordon MacRae to a commercial to a skit in which they imagined Mae West as Eve in the Garden of Eden. Individuals developed their own repertoires of listening styles out of these modes and moved fluidly between different cognitive and emotional levels, and all this through hearing alone.

Even today, in the age of TV and the Internet, Americans have learned to turn to radio to alter or sustain particular emotional states: to elevate their moods (classic rock, oldies), to soothe themselves (classical, soft rock, smooth jazz), to become outraged (talk and shock). Some modes of listening have helped constitute generational identities, others a sense of nationhood, still others, subcultural opposition to and rebellion against that construction of nationhood. Most modes of listening generate a strong feeling of belonging. Even as mere background noise, radio provides people with a sense of security that silence does not, which is why they actively turn to it, even if they aren’t actively listening.³

How has radio listening made Americans who they are? Of course, this is a ridiculous question: there’s no “typical American,” and it is impossible to speak of some collective “we.” People of different generations, regions, sexes, races, and ethnic groups have listened to and used radio very differently. And there have been and remain massive individual differences in how people listen and what they attend to on the air. Most of these differences I am unable to explore here. But my goal is also different, and goes against the grain of much work in media studies that has rightly emphasized the specificity of media impact and the often highly individualized ways in which people interact with and draw

meanings from the mass media. While acknowledging these differences as crucial to our understanding of the wide-ranging effects of the mass media, I want to reflect on some of the commonalities of radio listening, on how radio might have shaped very different listeners in sometimes similar ways.

Laying out such a schema is risky business. Radio historians struggle with one of the spottiest, most ephemeral historical records in all of the mass media. So many of the shows weren’t recorded; so many of the listeners, who were asked by ratings services which shows they liked (and whether they remembered who the sponsors were), were never asked *how* they listened or why they liked listening to certain kinds of shows. We have less to go on than we would like. And there has been virtually no collaborative work between media historians and cognitive scientists that explores how particular media—in this case one that addresses only the ears—affected the life of the mind. But we must start somewhere. With all the academic attention on the power of “the gaze,” the power of hearing to shape individual and collective subjectivity has gotten short shrift.⁴ It’s time to rectify this.

Radio is arguably the most important electronic invention of the century. Cognitively, it revolutionized the perceptual habits of the nation. Technically, culturally, and economically, it set the stage for television. It forever blurred the boundaries between the private domestic sphere and public, commercial, and political life. It made listening to music a daily requirement for millions of Americans. For the entire span of the twentieth century, listening to radio—first introduced to America as “wireless telegraphy” in 1899—has been a major cultural pastime. Even with the advent of television, which was supposed to make radio obsolete, radio has remained a thriving cultural and political force. Today we have twice as many radios in America as we do people.⁵ And they listen in, on average, about three and a half hours a day.

Yet radio as an invention, and a cultural force, is regarded as mattering very little now in the grand scheme of things, especially in the face of cable TV, blockbuster movies, and the Internet. It is low-tech, unglamorous, and taken for granted. There are only a handful of books about radio after World War II, even if we include the recent self-promotional offerings by Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh.⁶ The press and most cultural observers ignore radio, except when Stern pushes his own rather relaxed limits of tastefulness too far, or when conservative talk show hosts instruct their listeners on the best method for gunning down federal officials. It’s as if radio fell off the planet after television, when, in fact, the reverse is true.

But radio is also hard for our culture to remember properly. We enshrine and relive our history through images—TV documentaries, movies, museum exhibits, and magazines—or through books. Except for the rare radio docu-

mentary, there is simply no form in which the medium's enormous impact on American life can be properly conveyed. Radio, therefore, drops out of all too many of the stories told about our past. So we see World War II through newsreels and think of it as a visual war, when this was, first and foremost, a radio war that millions listened to and imagined. Or we read books about the 1930s and the word *radio* isn't even in the index, even though 40 million people might have listened simultaneously to the same show on a given night. The industrial, commercial forms in which our collective memories are preserved and re-presented are, simply put, biased against what was the dominant mass medium in the country for thirty-five years.

What follows is a thematic history and, of course, a highly selective one—covering one hundred years of this technology's history properly in one volume is impossible. I will not tackle the institutional histories of the networks, the ad agencies, or the Federal Communications Commission. Nor is this a celebration of radio's "golden age," a fond review of all the hit shows and their stars; that has been done, many times. Entire, critically important genres of radio programming, such as dramas, children's shows, soap operas, and many of the comedies, won't appear here. Rather, I have chosen examples of certain kinds of programming, from Duke Ellington to Rush Limbaugh, that exemplify the particular ways in which Americans turned to listening. Beginning in the 1920s, when the "radio boom" swept the nation, and ending with NPR and talk radio in the 1990s, the following chapters will focus on those topics—radio comedy of the 1930s, the invention of broadcast journalism, listening to baseball and boxing on radio, the rise of the DJ and the Top 40 format, the FM revolution of the 1960s and '70s—that capture key moments in the evolution of radio listening in America. In the 1930s we also see the beginning of radio research, the start of turning you and me into a commodity—an audience—to be bought and sold, delivered to advertisers for a price. This, too, has shaped our sense of who we are and why we matter. When you have researchers working in collaboration with advertisers and networks, seeking to unlock the black box of individual motivation and somehow rewire its innards, you have a major recasting of a society's psyche.

The rise of the computer has been accompanied by elegant analyses of its impact on our identities and our models of society, and Sherry Turkle's *The Second Self* suggests how we need to rethink the impact and significance of radio. Turkle explores the profoundly intimate relationships people forge with their computers until the machines become "second selves" that alleviate loneliness but make no unreasonable or threatening demands for intimacy. The computer fulfills the "desire for fusion" with something outside of and bigger than oneself. Turkle suggests that, while providing a sense of community and

of technical mastery, the computer undermines our confidence in the distinctiveness and importance of human intelligence. In her follow-up study, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Turkle found that as people play games and talk with others in cyberspace, the invisibility and anonymity of the medium allow users to assume all sorts of identities. Many come to think of themselves as consisting of multiple personas that are in constant tension with one another, and they often enjoy the ability to create new selves on-line.⁷ Turkle's work prompts us to ask how radio, which brought so many diverse personalities into the home, set the stage for this new twentieth-century relationship between the self and unseen others, and between the local and the distant. Radio, by cultivating different modes of listening, also fostered people's tendency to feel fragmented into many selves, which were called forth in rapid succession, or sometimes all at the same time.

Radio played a pivotal role, especially in the first half of the century, in helping us imagine ourselves and our relationships to other Americans differently. It constructed imagined communities—of sports fans, Fred Allen devotees, rock 'n' rollers, ham operators, Dittoheads—and thus cultivated both a sense of nationhood and a validation of subcultures, often simultaneously. Radio did indeed, as the cliché goes, bring the country together, and we need to explore more precisely the linguistic and musical mechanisms through which this occurred. In bringing this about, the radio networks cemented New York City's role as the cultural capital of the nation.

But radio, because it was never totally centralized in America, also did the opposite—provided niches and outposts for different people of different tastes, attitudes, and desires. Even during radio's "golden era," that heyday of network programming and a vast, national audience, certain listeners identified themselves as Fred Allen fans who would never be caught dead listening to Eddie Cantor or *Major Bowes' [Original] Amateur Hour*. Radio, much more than movies, sped up the process whereby people identified themselves, and their relations to others, through the consumerist mirror of taste preferences—in humor, in music, in detergent—a form of identification now rampant today. In part because of radio, such identifications began to destabilize, however imperceptibly over time, those based on ethnicity, locale, political affiliation, and class.

Radio also transformed Americans' relationship to music. Indeed, after radio Americans didn't just have access to music, we *needed* it, often on a daily basis. It is easy to forget that, ever since the 1920s, it has been music that has predominated the broadcast day, even during the height of radio comedy and drama. And this, too, may help explain the powerful nostalgia that radio evokes. Music so effectively taps our emotions—brain mapping by cognitive

scientists shows that the brain's musical networks extend into its emotional circuits⁸—that we develop deep, associative memories between particular songs and our own personal narratives. People often remember when they first heard certain songs: where they were driving in their cars, how they felt, what their hopes were.

Radio introduced a new orality to American culture, in which ancient ways of conveying myths, heroic stories, or morality tales intermixed with more modern ways of conveying information, through text and images. And so accustomed are we to turning on the radio and hearing Linda Wertheimer reporting the news, the DJ introducing a new song, a sportscaster giving the play-by-play, that we forget that all these modes of radio talk, just like radio technology itself, had to be invented. How exactly would you do a vaudeville skit on the air so people knew who entered the room when, or what had just happened that was funny? How would you help people rendered blind by this medium see a man hit a line drive? What accents and patterns of speech were acceptable? How could you get people to remember that Kent cigarettes were better because they had “micronite filters”?

Broadcasters on the air had to calibrate how they would speak so that they appealed to as wide a range of socioeconomic classes and geographic regions as possible. They had to figure out how people would remember specific information and particular personalities. In the process radio voices—from comedians and newscasters to DJs—introduced Americans, over the years, to the concept of audio signatures—from “Holy Mackerel” or “This . . . is London” to the howl of a wolfman. Radio talk relied often heavily on repetition, on rhythmic cadences, on alliteration and mnemonic devices to facilitate ready recall and retention.⁹ People learned an “acoustic shorthand” that evolved from one era to the next. The constant reinvention of radio talk, and the way its signatures and cadences got grooved into our inner lives, also powerfully shaped generational identity.

These changes have affected nearly all of us, whether we realize it or not. But having said that, I want to suggest that radio has been a critically important and often redefining invention for men. While I don't want to diminish, for a minute, the importance of radio to women and girls, for men and boys there has been something especially liberating about this device.¹⁰ Whether claiming the technology as their own, as legions of crystal set tinkerers and ham operators did, or reclaiming musical virtuosity and music appreciation as distinctly masculine, as jazz musicians did in the 1920s and as millions of male rock 'n' roll fans have done since the 1950s, boys and men have found in radio not only a hobby but also a medium that validates their aesthetic and emotional needs. That radio talk show hosts like Howard Stern, Don Imus, and

Rush Limbaugh brandish distinct yet insistent brands of masculinity and speak to a largely male audience further identifies radio as a medium in which boys really feel they can be boys without apology.

But radio—by making musical pleasure acceptable for men; by producing a fraternal subculture of hams eager to feel a sense of connectedness to each other; and by letting male hysterics like Limbaugh vent their emotions about politics, culture, and women invisibly over the airwaves—has also given men access to those “stigmatized parts of themselves” that have been deemed feminine and therefore inadmissible.¹¹ In other words, through radio men have also been able to become more like women without appearing to do so.

Of course, masculinity has hardly been an unchanging construct in the twentieth century. Like femininity, it has been both a surprisingly durable concept and one that has been challenged, threatened, and rejuvenated throughout the century. Manhood is not some fixed, wired-in essence: it is a mantle boys and then men must learn how to put on and wear. Masculinity, like femininity, is a fluid, dynamic, and contradictory set of attributes that men must choose from, and during certain eras some attributes are more in favor than others. The self-restrained, honorable, good provider of high moral character—to pick just one archetype—was, at the beginning of the century, at odds with the more uninhibited, physically tough, and pugnacious ladies' man—another archetype, and the latter came to see the former as an overcivilized sissy.¹² John Wayne and Edward R. Murrow, for example, were both icons of resolute manhood in the 1940s and '50s, but their methods of achieving and demonstrating their manliness were quite different indeed.

The historian Gail Bederman cautions us, in her wonderful book *Manliness and Civilization*, against identifying certain eras as constituting “crises” in masculinity, lest we imply that in other eras notions of manhood were somehow set. Bederman is right: warring conceptions of manhood have always vied for supremacy. But in the twentieth century we see four eras in particular when anxieties about manhood became pronounced, and when radio played a central role in enacting and mediating between models of masculinity. These eras were the beginning of the Great Depression—certainly one of the most profound crises in capitalism and patriarchy in this century; the late 1940s and early 1950s, when overcivilized “organization men” seemed to beget their opposite, juvenile delinquents; the late 1960s and early 1970s, when many young men saw in the Vietnam war masculinity run amok; and the late 1980s and 1990s, when a backlash against feminism solidified into various versions of a “men's movement.” Radio comedy in the 1930s, the rise of the DJ in the late 1940s, the birth of the “progressive” or “underground” FM format in the late

1960s, and the rise of talk radio and shock jocks were all expressions of these periods of heightened gender anxiety.

Radio, in fact, played a central role in tuning and retuning certain versions of manhood, foregrounding sometimes more “feminine” traits, at other times more “masculine” ones, most frequently negotiating a new hybrid between the two. So I want to encourage a new take on how we think about men and machines. In the 1970s scholars influenced by feminism began to study how scientists, engineers, factory owners, and corporate leaders used a range of technologies to “master” nature (conceived of as female) and to buttress male privilege. These scholars turned their attention to the long-neglected topics of female factory workers, the marginalization of female scientists, and how domestic technologies, like vacuum cleaners and washing machines, often created “more work for mother.” Studies of gender and technology, then, focused most frequently on women. When they focused on men, what emerged was an often scathing critique of how technological problem solving, when fused with male arrogance, led to the rape of the environment and the subjugation of women and minorities.¹³

But certainly this is not the whole story, although it is a powerfully important one. Many men have also used technology—and this is especially true of communications technologies and the automobile—to rebel against dominant definitions of masculinity that have insisted they act like ruthless conquerors or corporate cogs. They developed technologies that extended sensory experience, like seeing and hearing, and that allowed for artistic expression. They used technology to reaffirm that they had feelings, and souls. Certainly male privilege remained: technical skill certifies that you are still a man. But such skill could also be a fig leaf, veiling the censored desire to be a nurturing, sensitive, emotionally expressive human being. It is time to take these impulses into account as well when thinking about how and why men use machines.

The radio boom of the 1920s occurred when the ideal of masculinity advanced by Theodore Roosevelt and Tarzan books—men as strenuously living, vigorous, even primitive he-men afraid of nothing, especially wild animals—began to seem rather preposterous in the face of the bureaucratization engulfing male work life. More to the point, being aggressive, overly competitive, and individualistic was actually dysfunctional—contraindicated—in many of the urbanized, industrialized, and corporate workplaces of the twentieth century. Possibilities for individual public distinction, not to mention rugged independence, seemed to shrink year by year. White-collar workers, whose numbers had increased eightfold between 1870 and 1910, found their work increasingly routinized and anonymous. “When changes in the workplace caused men to

feel uncertain of their manhood,” writes the historian Anthony Rotundo, “their primary response was to seek new forms of reassurance about it.”¹⁴

Radio, often in very different ways, was a perfect vehicle for such reassurances. When tinkering with machines like radios, men affirmed that they had distinctly specialized—and masculine—skills that required control and discipline to achieve. As ham operators they could join a fraternity that, until the 1980s, was almost exclusively male. And they could escape into the air, away from home and work into a place where men like them, who knew a secret code, congregated in comfort.

The content of male entertainments, from spectator sports to swashbuckler films, also addressed anxieties about threatened masculinity. And radio comedy of the 1930s—which has been persistently cast as something that “cheered America up” during the Depression (as if Depression with a capital *D* is the same as depression with a little *d*)—becomes much more interesting and revealing if we look at it from the perspective of gender. Here, the linguistic slapstick—the puns, wordplay, insults, and malapropisms—that so characterized the form enacted the crisis in masculinity that the Great Depression precipitated. Moving from Burns and Allen to Edward R. Murrow and Lowell Thomas, and then to Red Barber and Harry Caray, we see newly reimagined terrain for men and for America, a region of risk and rivalry, of conquest and victory, yet of comradeship and mutual support.

Radio today seems so trapped in the amber of corporate control that it is easy to forget how much of radio technology and programming came from the bottom up, pioneered by outsiders or rebels who wanted something more, or something different, from the box than corporate America was providing. And what they wanted from radio was more direct, less top-down communication between Americans. Whether they were the ham operators who in 1920 pushed a phonograph in front of a microphone and introduced “wireless concerts” at a time when RCA thought radio would be best used to send Morse code messages between corporate clients, or the guys in their bell-bottoms and tie-dyed T-shirts who took a technology barely in use—FM—and transformed it into the dominant form of radio broadcasting, men have used radio to rebel against the technological and programming status quo in the industry. At times they turned tinkering, listening, and programming into a subversive activity. This rebellion is not just interesting culturally; it has had a profound impact on the business and technical history of the industry.

Radio is an especially rich example of such technological insurgency, in which the design and use of inventions is fought over, contested, and reimagined by a host of actors, including consumers, despite the power of corporate control.¹⁵ Technological insurgency has traditionally come from young men. It

has been especially robust after wars, when the availability of devices developed for military use interacts with a retreat from the rigid codes of masculinity that battle imposes, and we see hobbyists using technology in more life-affirming ways. It flourishes when industries are in flux and corporate attention is elsewhere. Burgeoning youth cultures sustain and expand such insurgencies.

How radio would be used, and its impact on American culture, was never inevitable, and these dynamics were actually devised and redeviced throughout the century, as the industry responded to—and eventually co-opted—insurgencies coming from the grass roots. The radio audience, it turns out, has always been filled with rebels: amateur operators, or “hams” as they were commonly known, who proved that shortwaves weren’t worthless, as the experts thought; teenagers in the 1950s who used their transistors to forge a separate, rambunctious, generational identity in a way Bell Labs never anticipated; the hi-fi enthusiasts of the late 1940s and ’50s who pushed first the phonograph and then the radio industry to develop receiving equipment that offered genuine fidelity listening. Pushing radio to signal farther and to sound more lifelike—or even better than life—has been the ongoing quest of radio tinkers. It was the amateurs who pioneered using radio for broadcasting, not Marconi, its inventor, and certainly not David Sarnoff, the president of RCA, who rewrote history to make it seem like broadcasting had been his brainchild. And it was often young people, whether jazz enthusiasts of the 1920s or rock ’n’ rollers of the 1950s, who pushed radio beyond the confines of suffocating respectability and into more exciting territory. Changing technologies, from shortwave to satellites, interacted with newly invented programming genres and formats, sometimes with the technology pushing forward cultural innovation and sometimes the other way around.

More than the movies, mass magazines, or television (and up until the Internet), radio has been the mass medium through which the struggles between rampant commercialism and a loathing of that commercialism have been fought out over and over again. There has always been a dialectical relationship between oligopoly control of radio programming and technology on the one hand and technological insurgencies defying this control on the other. Listeners both acquiesced to and rebelled against how radio was deployed by the networks.

It is this contradictory stance toward mainstream culture, the absolute centrality of ambivalence to the American consciousness, that radio, with its hodgepodge of daily delights and outrages, spoke to and heightened. One moment you were elevated, the next, insulted. Whether we consider the debate about network versus local programming in the 1920s or the intense battles

over radio and rock ’n’ roll in the 1950s, we see in this sweep of history a series of ongoing cultural wars, between the wish for a national culture and the desire for cultural diversity, between the urge to conform and the need to rebel, and between a longing for collectivism and the seductions of narcissistic individualism.

Radio has given full expression to these distinctly American tensions while necessarily exacerbating them. This stems, in part, from a fundamental contradiction that characterizes radio. There is a rift between the inherent technical properties of radio and the economic system in which it was—and is—embedded. The deeply personal nature of radio communication—the way its sole reliance on sound produces individualized images and reactions; its extension of a precommercial, oral tradition; its cultivation of the imagination—all work in stark contrast to the needs of its managers, who seek homogenized responses, and need a like-minded audience instead of idiosyncratic individuals. With television, which is less personal and much less reliant on the imagination, this tension barely exists. With radio, the audience has been continually pulled between the liberating technical properties of the device and the confining properties of how it has been financed and managed. As a result, there has been a cyclical, twenty-year pattern in radio’s history, beginning in the mid-1920s, when rebellion and anarchy were ultimately tamed and co-opted on the air, only to reappear through different technologies, formats, and subgroups of listeners.

If radio histories were one’s only guide, one would believe that television did “kill” radio in the postwar years. But anyone who lay in bed at night listening to Elvis Presley, the Chiffons, the Chambers Brothers, or Elvis Costello knows otherwise. With the advent of television and the collapse of network programming on radio, the medium turned to more local and more specialized audiences. And one of the fastest growing and most loyal audiences was teenagers. This marriage between radio and the young was cemented first by the invention of the transistor and second by the proliferation, thirty years after its invention, of FM radio in the late 1960s. As radio became more portable—and between 1949 and 1960 the number of portable sets made by U.S. companies quadrupled, while the number of imported Japanese transistor sets increased sevenfold—it accompanied people everywhere, to the beach, to work, in the backyard, and on buses, cars, and subways. *Life* magazine in 1961 proclaimed teenagers especially to be “hooked on sound.” For young people, listening first to fast-talking, hip DJs and later to their more somnolent FM counterparts on “free form,” radio meant walking that line between conforming with the most defiant exemplars of your own generation and rebelling against the homogenized conformity of middle-class adult culture.

What outraged or troubled certain members of the establishment about the teenagers' love affair with radio was that white teenagers—millions of them—were listening to and falling in love with African American music and performers. What used to be safely sequestered as “race music” was now sneaking in through the bedroom windows of suburban households, threatening a cultural miscegenation that made self-appointed moral guardians apoplectic. And here we see another critically important thread in the history of radio: its central role in providing a passageway between white and black culture. Radio—more than any other mass medium—simultaneously reinforced and profoundly destabilized white supremacy and racial segregation in the United States throughout the century.

From *Amos 'n' Andy* and jazz to rap music, radio has supplied white people that private place, that trapdoor into a culture many whites imagine to be more authentic, more vibrant, and richer than their own. Through radio whites could partake of the spirit of black culture without being forced to witness or experience its deprivations and injustices. Whether what they heard was itself an imagining, a simulation—as with *Amos 'n' Andy*—or an accommodation to white norms—as with the Supremes—many whites felt they gained access to something previously hidden, forbidden, and much more genuine than the calculated homogenizations of the culture industry. Since radio simultaneously reinforced and perpetuated racial stereotypes while also making African American music enormously popular, we need to contemplate the consequences of this auditory voyeurism, for black and white listeners, and for black performers.

It is easy to castigate the industry for its long history of intransigent racism: the record of exclusion speaks for itself. But the record isn't this simple. Here I disagree with the media historian Michele Hilmes, whose emphasis in *Radio Voices* is on radio's role in “constructing a national norm of ‘whiteness.’”¹⁶ Yes, this was one of the things radio did. But on the radio (as elsewhere in popular culture), white ridicule of black culture and of African Americans mixed with envy, desire, and imitation: with what the University of Virginia scholar Eric Lott has called “Love and Theft.” By the time Norman Mailer wrote his famous (and infamous) piece “The White Negro” in 1957, there were already dozens of white DJs trying to pass for black on the air and plenty of white listeners who adored what *New York Times* editor Mel Watkins has labeled “racial ventriloquism.” And white Americans didn't make *Amos 'n' Andy* radio's first major hit series only because they were all racists and wanted their prejudices reinforced. Radio may have been used throughout its history to reaffirm the supposed superiority of whiteness. But it has also been used, since the 1920s, to challenge, laugh at, and undermine this flimsy conceit. Borrowing from Toni Morrison,

Hilmes argues that African Americans on the radio served as “our nation's primary ‘projection of the not-me.’”¹⁷ This was true. But not always, and not for everyone. For often at the very same time, African Americans, especially through their music and slang, also served for whites as projections of “wish-it-was-me.”

With the increasing privatization of American society, where we watch political speeches, take in concerts, shop, attend sporting events, and go to the movies all from the sequestered, solitary comfort of our living room sofas or computer monitors, there remains the powerful, atavistic desire to be part of a larger group, lose ourselves in a crowd, exchange ideas with strangers, and get a more immediate sense of ourselves as part of a nation. While radio can never substitute for what once was, it does, in a small and indeed atrophied way, speak to this desire. The yearning for some form of public discourse, for a place where less slick and less mainstream opinions could be articulated, the desire to be heard: all these shaped the success of talk and call-in radio. National Public Radio, with its more liberal listeners and agenda, and certain (but not all) call-in shows that are more conservative are mirror images of each other in a way, speaking to the desires of people who see themselves as outside of and often at odds with the hypercommercialized, hypercynical mainstream and who want public articulation of a different kind of truth.

Finally, contemplating the ongoing relationship between radio and American consciousness, we have to consider how the rise of television, at the expense of radio, has stunted the American imagination. It is easy to romanticize the glory days of radio and to idealize radio listeners over television viewers. So let's be clear that over the past seventy years radio has had more than its share of political demagoguery, crass, relentless commercialism, and superficial public programming that helped reinforce racism, sexism, and elitism. The shameless radio coverage of the Lindbergh trial in 1935 was every bit as revolting as what we had to witness with the O. J. Simpson case.¹⁸ Having acknowledged this, however, and without falling into a glazed-eye nostalgia about Burns and Allen, Lowell Thomas, or Alan Freed, it is important to reflect on the relative cognitive impact of the different mass media. And the conclusion I believe one will come to is that while radio, banalities and all, expanded the imagination, its successor, television, constricted it, and we are the worse for it as individuals and as a culture.

We don't usually think of having visuals as being a greater constraint than not having them. After all, there is a hunger of the eyes, a desire to see for yourself, the notion that seeing a person or witnessing an event is more complete than just listening. And in many ways this is true. But the small screen requires visual economy, and because of both its technical constraints and the nature of

its economic support, it relies on easily conveyed visual stereotypes that reduce uncertainty and confusion. We see the same “types,” the same scenes over and over. And the play our own minds are allowed, the room our own imaginings are given, necessarily shrinks. In fact, our imaginings become irrelevant. The musician and writer Ben Sidran has astutely noted, “The advantages of orality have rarely been recognized by Western tradition.” It’s time for this to change.¹⁹

In all too many popular accounts of the history of technology, we get an overly simplified “before-and-after” story, in which some machine—the cotton gin, the car, the computer—revolutionizes everyday life. Advertisers past and present have, in selling their clients’ products, actively promoted the notion that it is technological change that causes social change (and, in this case, always for the better).²⁰ The mirror opposite of this also empowers technology—let’s say, the nuclear reactor—to transform America, but for the worse. In the mid-1990s we’ve been witness to all sorts of overheated and contradictory predictions about the Internet: it will re-create political and cultural communities in cyberspace; it will bring pornographers, stalkers, and credit-card scammers into our homes, corrupting our kids and ransacking our privacy. Utopian and dystopian visions, each stark and unrealistic, collide.

But machines can and do accelerate certain trends, magnify cultural weaknesses, and fortify certain social structures while eroding others. Americans—torn as we are between our passion for “progress” and our desperate desire for tradition—love and hate what machines do to and for us, often at the same time. We in America have an embarrassing history of naively embracing new technologies as if they could solve all our problems, and produce world peace in the bargain, then excoriating them when they fail to do so. This inclination to invest certain machines, especially communications technologies, with extravagant hopes about their potential to extend democracy, reasserts itself repeatedly in America.²¹

And few technologies have been more freighted, time and again, with such dreams and disillusionment than radio. With all the breathless predictions today about how the Internet will democratize communication and flatten hierarchies among Americans, to bring about a new republic in cyberspace, we should remember that radio—at least as it was envisioned around 1924—was going to provide culture and education to the masses, eliminate politicians’ ability to incite passions in a mob, bring people closer to government proceedings, and produce a national culture that would transcend regional and local jealousies. Because radio has taken so many forms over the century and is such a flexible, adaptable, and relatively inexpensive technology, it has been used both to buttress and to challenge the economic, political, and cultural status quo in America. It has been neither the particular technical qualities of the

device nor people’s goals and ambitions but rather the often unstable, unpredictable marriage between the two that has determined radio’s relationship to social change in this country.

What is also critically important to remember about machines and American history—and this is certainly true of radio—is that no technology’s consequences are singular or pat: they are messy, contradictory, and not easy to document. As Claude Fischer has pointed out in his prize-winning social history of the telephone, *America Calling*, the telephone simultaneously eased and stimulated people’s anxieties.²² The phone made it possible to know much sooner whether someone has arrived safely after a journey, or is doing well after surgery, or is stranded someplace and needs a ride. But the phone also invaded people’s once well-protected privacy, eliminated control over whom one spoke to when (until the advent of the answering machine), and accelerated the arrival of bad news. It is here—in the fluid, barely charted flow between technology and its users—we can explore how people continued to reinvent radio and how it, in turn, sculpted and resculpted the people—the culture—that turned it on.

Machines, of course, do not make history by themselves. But some kinds of machines help make different kinds of histories and different kinds of people than others. That is what we should weigh as we review the role listening in has had in making our society what it is—and what it isn’t—today. Radio made history as corporations and individuals used it, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in opposition. Technological change is an ongoing, often unpredictable struggle, and the most noteworthy changes often happen when the industry is in transition and users are feeling rebellious. Radio is currently experiencing a breathtaking corporate consolidation as fewer and fewer companies own more and more stations; many DJs and announcers feel their autonomy suffocated. But history teaches us that as final as this may feel, the struggle over radio listening will continue; too many of us are restless once again.

The year 1999 marks radio’s anniversary in the United States—one hundred years since Guglielmo Marconi came from England and demonstrated, during the highly popular America’s Cup races, that Morse code signals could be sent “through the air” without any wires. In that one hundred years Americans have embraced the invention in a variety of ways, redesigning how it looked, where it could be taken, and what it conveyed to its listeners. In turn, the invention reshaped America. It is time to reassess the importance of this device, and to reflect on how we have changed radio and how it, in turn, has changed us.