

What Was Broadcasting?

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A Signal Cast Broadly

Like the national debt, the homeless population, gun ownership, and job insecurity, television grew prodigiously in the 1980s. In terms of quantity, a steadily increasing number of channels served a steadily increasing number of audiences who were putting their sets to a steadily increasing number of uses. In terms of quality, programming got simultaneously much better and much worse than it ever had been, establishing a fresh context for the mediocrity that still dominates it (and every other artistic endeavor thus far attempted). Ironically, during this period of prolific expansion in the form, function, and spectrum of television, broadcasting steadily diminished in importance.

This is neither a joke nor an academic language trick, but rather an apparently invisible fact. American culture was conquered and dominated for more than five decades by common-band broadcast transmission. Two technological innovations ended that reign: closed circuit delivery systems (e.g., cable) and self-programming options (e.g., the VCR). The diminishing importance of broadcasting in American mass communication has directly paralleled profound economic restructurings and social polarizations that have reshaped society. A perplexing question crystallizes in the face of this: how can an expansion in the number of cultural options accompany a contraction of democratic values and institutions?

"General interest" broadcasting, much like universal suffrage, retains inherently democratic potentials, even though the process is often manipulated toward anti-democratic ends. The spectacular feat of rhetoric, music, drama, and the other stuff of culture being "cast broadly" to a full complement of citizenry should have marked the crossing of an important threshold in the development of democracy. Structured for transdemographic address, broadcasting solicits rich and poor, egghead and illiterate, gang member and unaffiliated, theocrat and atheist, offering all parties abrupt

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association as members of a single audience, and adding the security of physical isolation from each other in the bargain. Before the rise of the commercial broadcasting networks in the late 1920s, only the great transnational religious networks, such as Christianity and Islam, had ever pitched a cultural tent so wide.

An entire nation-state addressed by its leader as one big audience is a distilled image of the twentieth century, likely to share prominence in CD-ROM textbooks with the camps, the mushroom clouds, and the automobile. The remembered figures of the century will surely be broadcast figures, including radio characters such as Hitler, Churchill, and Roosevelt as well as TV characters such as Cronkite, Reagan, and Oprah.¹ In the case of the radio stars, heads of state imitated a quaint state of technology: the passionate address to the crowd in the public space. By contrast, the TV people have tended to function as spokespersons and interlocutors, calmly promoting the ways of life and points of view of their corporate sponsors. Mussolini did his radio work from a balcony; Pat Robertson makes eye contact from a studio chair.

It is already a cliché to mention that what we have come to call The News was created in print during the nineteenth century as the telegraph allowed newspapers to gather information instantaneously from distant points without having to transport it. The character of the daily news has since that time been altered repeatedly by a sequence of adaptations to electronic media: broadcast radio, broadcast television, cable television, on-line services, and so on. Less attention, however, has been paid to what cumulative effects the resulting *imago mundi* might have on the imagination of history, which now can be thought of as the mega-news.

We have already seen how the audio-visually documented assassination of John F. Kennedy levitated him and his presidency into an historiographical mythosphere once occupied only by the likes of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. By contrast, William McKinley never had a chance. The O. J. Simpson trial is assured a place in the popular history of twentieth-century American jurisprudence that few if any Supreme Court rulings might hope to occupy; Judge Ito has already eclipsed Oliver Wendell Holmes in recognition factor. Father Coughlin will have generated far more usable material than Pope John XXIII, and Billy Graham more than both. Who is likely to be a more dominant presence in the digital archives? Albert Einstein or Carl Sagan? Dr. Freud or Dr. Ruth? Charles Darwin or Pat Robertson? Mother Teresa already has a higher F-score than Albert Schweitzer. In the future the past will belong to the audio-visually reproducible. The giants of the arts and sciences who, for whatever reason, failed to climb the transmission towers of the twentieth century can expect to be remaindered to the specialists' bin.

If the current thrust toward market-specific communication persists, then the kind of transdemographic fame achieved so cheaply in the mass broadcasting environment is less likely to occur. The ubiquity achieved in their time by Jackie Gleason, Jack Webb, or Paul Henning's sitcom char-

acters is becoming a goal coveted primarily by national politicians who must still play by the rules of mass culture because of the legal constraints of universal suffrage, a system instituted during the same year (1920) that the first radio station went on the air.² Whereas the term "crossover" once referred to the launching of a personality or a work from a particular taste culture base to mass distribution, now the term is used more often to refer to the cross-fertilization of two or three taste cultures. Examples from the early 1990s include such coups as Tony Bennett's capture of youth market music share and the revival of cigar smoking among 18- to 34-year-old white-collar males. The Broadcast Era, a period roughly stretching from the establishment of network radio in the 1920s to the achievement of 50 percent cable penetration in the 1980s, becomes more historically distinct every time another half dozen channels are added to the cable mix.

It is the culture of broadcasting that made Elvis and the Beatles possible, and it is the decline of broadcasting that makes such personalities less feasible all the time. In both cases the artists began their careers as demographically particular phenomena. But their wild successes in the niche-oriented record industry, part of the newly splintered culture of broadcast radio, were viewed as indications of their readiness for the masses of all cultures: pre-cable broadcast network television. They emerged from the night spots of Memphis and Hamburg to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. In the cable environment, however, *The Ed Sullivan Show* is no longer possible.

As its vulgar expressions of massness become more exotic, the Broadcast Era may become enshrined as a kind of biblical era of mass communications, a heightened past during which miracles occurred and rules were handed down to carry generations into future millennia. An archival item such as Edward R. Murrow's onsite accounts of the London blitzkrieg, broadcast over the CBS radio network, may assume etiological proportions, a prophetic foreshadowing of Peter Arnet's reports from Baghdad on CNN during the Gulf War. In terms of marketing technology, the Murrow audiotape of 1941, while technologically primitive, was produced at the critical mass of mass culture, while the Arnet videotape of 1991 functioned more as a special interest item for war fans and other parties drawn in by a knowledge of the seriousness of the situation or the involvement of relatives. MTV, HBO, The Nashville Network, and a dozen other cable channels completely ignored the war (i.e., did not carry it), inviting their viewers to do the same.

"Total war" of the old 1914/1939 variety, like the mass culture that spawned it, has splintered into a collection of special-interest conflagrations: a terrorist bombing here, an ethnic war there, a volley of retaliatory assassinations, and so on. In an age dominated by entertainment on demand, the effect of war on any given demographic tribe—whether grouped by age, income, race, religion, leisuretime pursuit, or whatever—is likely to determine the extent and character of coverage. No doubt an audience for war—war regardless of content—will identify itself. That audience may consist of such interested groups as history buffs, chauvinists, pacifists, and weapons enthusiasts. An audience in perpetual denial of such presentations is equally

inevitable. It might include drug or sex addicts, certain religious zealots not concerned with the vanity of secular events, and the maniacally embittered survivors of busted romances. Others, perhaps most viewers, may dutifully integrate the war into their daily viewing habits or perhaps give it some extra minutes of pause while channel-surfing.

Now that broadcasting is slipping to the technological margins of a national communication system characterized by discriminate targeting, it is easy to forget that radio emerged from the laboratory as a wholesaler's market-specific product. First known as the wireless telegraph or radiotelegraph, it was primarily sold as a wholesale military-industrial tool that extended the capabilities of telegraphy to ocean-going vessels, providing revolutionary solutions to shipping problems that had been on record at least since the time of Homer.

For more than two decades following Marconi's celebrated demonstration of 1896, little serious attention was given to the possibilities of broadcasting as a cultural medium. First of all, the original broadcasts consisted of aural dots and dashes and not everyone found decoding a user-friendly activity. Meanwhile, the military applications of the invention were clear enough; the U.S. Navy began lobbying for control of wireless telegraphy as early as 1905, taking note of the promise it was showing in the Russo-Japanese War.

Though no previously existing entertainment company was involved in the early development of American broadcasting, some of the pioneer patents were issued to the United Fruit Company, which established a string of stations—the first radio network—for ship-to-shore broadcasting in the Caribbean basin and Eastern seaboard, the farm-to-market expanse of its tropical fruit business. The company's high-tech communication system was money well spent. Bad weather, over-stocked markets, and other problems endemic to moving around hundreds of tons of bananas were directly addressed.³

With the Radio Act of 1912, the U.S. government in effect claimed ownership of the airwaves, that otherwise empty space hanging over the nation and stretching up into the ionosphere or beyond. To civil libertarians and anarchists such a presumption may seem absurd, something like the claims of Virginia, Massachusetts, and other early coastal colonies to legal hegemony over every inch of the North America occupying their latitude coordinates across the continent to the Pacific. But the concept of government ownership of the air (or "ether" as it was then called) was accepted without much argument. While most of the general public had little idea of the implications of this concession, it appealed to both the *laissez-faire* capitalists and the progressive reformers who occupied the center of American political bureaucracy and debate.

Big business was naturally friendly to the idea of turning something that seemed virtually intangible into a material commodity that could be measured, bought, and sold. A Marxist of the period might say that the commodification of air gave the robber barons something new to rob. But there

were attractions for socialists and fellow-travelers as well. If air was a natural resource, like copper for telegraph wires or forests for newsprint, it could theoretically be regulated for the good of the commonweal. Culture could be put within the reach of the common person. Market or public trust? The Wilson Administration made its position clear when it assigned radio oversight to the Department of Commerce (Bureau of Navigation) in 1913.

Any new means of communication is bound to become a means of personal expression, and even at this early juncture there were active broadcasters whose purposes were neither industrial nor civic. Approximately 8,500 licenses were issued to individuals in the U.S. between 1913 and 1917. The amateurs entertained each other with speech, music, and whatever else they could think of that might send a joyful noise hurtling out into space, and they did so with no apparent means of making money in return. Quite to the contrary, there was an irretrievable ante to be paid by the independent licensees.

Broadcasting emerged as a techno-hobby, a late-night-and-weekend pastime for upscale hardware owners, much like current-day Internet surfing. Comparing the geographical range of backyard transmission equipment became a tinkerer's sport known as DXing. In the spirit of competition, Maine and Texas found something to say to each other. Isolationists, Anglophiles, and supporters of the Kaiser made their points in the original cyber chat-room. It was even reported that the early patent-holder Dr. Lee DeForest courted his wife by installing a receiver in her home and airing his professions of love from a rooftop transmitter.⁴ However, before World War I, entertainment broadcasting was an activity to spend money on, not to make money from.

As always, some were quicker than others to see the possibilities of turning a buck. In a 1916 memorandum filed to his boss at the American Marconi Company (later RCA), David Sarnoff proposed that the wireless telegraph be made into a "household utility in the same sense as the piano or phonograph."⁵ Calling this adaptation of broadcasting to the domestic market a "Radio Music Box," he proposed that it "be placed on a table in the parlor or living room." Sarnoff was moved to speculate on further applications of the technology:

The same principle can be extended to numerous other fields as, for example, receiving of lectures at home which can be made perfectly audible; also events of national importance can be simultaneously received and announced.⁶

Advertising, it must be noted, played no role in Sarnoff's diversification scheme. The economic purpose of the Radio Music Box was to turn a specialized wholesaling operation into a vast retail supermarket by creating an incentive for every consumer to buy a set. American Marconi would then meet the newly created demand by assembly-line techniques. What Henry Ford's Model T had done for personal transportation, Sarnoff's Music box would do for culture and communication: create a mass market.⁷ The sell-

ing of commercial time had no recognized advocates in the radio industry at this time. The revolutionary pivot that would put advertising executives and tradespeople in positions of direct authority over the form and content of drama, music, and other primary cultural activities for the balance of the twentieth century was too distasteful for Victorian sensibilities to support, if not too bizarre to grasp. Sarnoff's idea was to offer the music service gratis, to pull the consumer in off the street to buy a radio; he had reimagined culture as a loss leader for the sale of a home appliance.

The Music Box Memo was not treated seriously by management when it was filed, and even if it had been, no immediate action could have been taken on it. Only months later, the U.S. formally entered World War I, and President Woodrow Wilson, by executive order, had all broadcasting equipment impounded, sealed, and placed under the direct control of the Department of the Navy. By contrast, not a single printing press was put under lock and key, ink being explicitly protected by a Constitutional Amendment—and the very first one at that. More significantly, not a single piece of film equipment was seized, even though the movies, like radio, did not enjoy specifically protected status. This refusal to extend free speech to broadcasting set an unblushing precedent for government control of radio (and eventually of television). It was the right of every American to make a speech in a public square; reading that same speech into a radio microphone could bring federal retribution.

After the Armistice, Wilson unlocked the box. The Navy had hoped to retain its management of the federal government's new air supply, but the Harding Administration kicked radio back to the Commerce Department, which was headed by Herbert Hoover. Had the Navy successfully made its case that radio constituted a primarily military-industrial strategic asset, broadcasting might have remained the exclusive domain of admirals, manufacturing CEOs, and backyard inventors. Commercial entertainment broadcasting could have been delayed for years.

Instead it moved hastily along. Westinghouse jumped in first with KDKA, constructing the station's studio in a canvas tent on the roof of its Pittsburgh headquarters. Other starting-line players included General Electric (WGY, Schenectady), AT&T (WEAF, New York) and RCA (WJR, New York). Its prewar reluctance notwithstanding, when RCA did move into home entertainment, it did so in a big way; it dominated the business until the 1970s.⁸ In 1927 the company trumped its competitors by establishing two coast-to-coast network services that would eventually be capable of delivering entertainment programming to every corner of the nation.

The original forms of radio broadcasting—ship-to-shore and backyard—continued to grow. Most countries soon compelled flag vessels to carry full interactive radio capabilities—transmitters, receivers and licensed personnel who could operate them. Amateur broadcasting meanwhile was recognized as a bonafide hobby and a small set-aside was made on the radio spectrum for “hams.” A few philanthropic and educational institutions took to the air

as well. But the growth area of broadcasting as an industry, art, and technology shifted decisively to the commercial distribution of mass communication. Broadcasting took on the task of developing a mass culture, an appropriate software for the functional capabilities of its hardware.

With manufacturer's offering free software to any and all consumers, personal radios sold like hotcakes during the 1920s. The NAB estimates that 60,000 American households had radios in 1922; by 1929, the number topped ten million.⁹ Owen D. Young, the president of RCA, characterized the popularity of mass entertainment broadcasting as the “surprise party” of the radio industry.¹⁰ Young had imagined a different future for the medium, personally lobbying Washington for a federal charter that would grant his company a full monopoly on radio transmission for reasons of national security.¹¹ It is no stretch to find in all this a kind of recapitulation of the genesis of the American film industry: the country club blue-blood had underestimated the appetite of the unwashed masses for culture, while the immigrant child from the Lower East Side of Manhattan (quite arguably America's unwashed masses capital) knew from firsthand experience that such an appetite could not be overestimated.

The “surprise party” would be fun while it lasted, but market saturation was of course inevitable. The long-term challenge to the emerging mass broadcasting industry was this: once a radio in the parlor was as common as a chicken in every pot, how could a buck be made off the thing? Various plans were proposed. Sarnoff, never at a creative loss, advocated a system based on the model being developed in Britain, where set owners paid license fees which were turned over directly to a state enterprise, the British Broadcasting Company. Sarnoff's special twist for the American version, however, would be that the license fees would be turned over to a private sector corporation—his. In essence, the tax-collecting powers of the federal government would be put at the disposal of RCA. The scheme was a show biz variation on Owen Young's national security concept.¹²

While Sarnoff lobbied his plan, however, AT&T, which already had its share of highly-evolved relationships with the federal government, was putting in a creative claim of its own. Radio, Ma Bell pointed out, was part of its “natural monopoly.” Broadcasting? Merely a form of telephone service that did not use wires. But, anticipating resistance to this imaginative interpretation of the new technological environment, the telephone company hedged its bets. As early as 1922, AT&T's New York station began exploring the possibilities of “toll broadcasting,” or charging fees in return for airing commercial messages. Among its first customers were a co-op apartment house development in Queens and American Express.¹³ Eventually the telephone company was persuaded to get out of the software end of the broadcasting business in return for a “natural monopoly” on connecting the stations to the networks.

Radio advertising, which in effect appointed retail sales-people as gatekeepers to the most potent communication system in the culture, did not

appeal to everyone. In fact, it was almost as distasteful to traditionalist conservatives as it was to Marxists. Eugene V. Debs and Secretary of Commerce Hoover, to name one unlikely pair, could be counted among its opponents.

Debs and others on the Left of course saw the privatized airwaves as another public asset stolen from The People by The Capitalists. This is easy enough to grasp. Rightwing opposition to radio advertising might be a bit more difficult to fathom in the neo-conservative 1990s. However, to Old Right conservatives the very idea that the purveyors of toothpaste, floorwax, automobiles, and the like—tradespeople—should have any say at all in the nation's cultural programming was nothing less than abhorrent and far too revolutionary to be counted as conservative thinking.

Herbert Hoover's support of the free market would become the stuff of legend during the Great Depression. But his faith in laissez-faire economics did not extend to the arts. The regulation of culture was best left to academics and clerics. Hoover went so far as to tell the Radio Conference of 1922 that he found it "inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service and for news and for entertainment and education . . . to be drowned in advertising chatter."¹⁴ Seventy-five years later, acceptance of the direct hegemony of trade over culture is the fundamental distinction separating Neocons from Traditionalists.

In Britain, where class prerogative allowed traditional cultural gatekeepers greater entrée into the corridors of power, the BBC had been created precisely to avoid such a disaster for English culture (and theoretically for Scottish and Welsh culture as well). In the United States, a far less secure intellectual class made little noise on the subject. A look at scholarly reaction reveals that radio figured more prominently in the imaginations of physicists during the 1920s than in that of rhetoricians or critics. This failure of American intellectuals to take an early activist interest in the aesthetic formulation and cultural impact of radio broadcasting would be repeated thirty years later with television.

Gilbert Seldes was a notable exception to the general neglect of responsibility. He recognized radio drama as a form of national theater almost as soon as network broadcasting began. When TV arrived, Seldes would find himself at the fore-front, alone, once again. As early as 1937 he published a piece in the *Atlantic Monthly* under the sci-fi title, "The 'Errors' of Television."¹⁵

The Closing of the American Circuit

The period during which broadcasting thoroughly dominated mass communications and culture in the United States lasted for approximately sixty years. Historians usually divided it into its two most apparent components: radio (c. 1925–55) and television (c. 1955–85).¹⁶ The rises, descents, and plateaus of the two broadcasting media have many parallels:

- Each technology was the product of private-sector corporate competition that was accelerated by war-time government research-and-development money.

- Each was retailed to the public as a free home entertainment system whose transmission and production costs would be borne by advertisers, leaving only the cost of the receiver to be paid directly by the user.
- Each saturated the entire nation, region by region and household by household, with centrally controlled, rigidly proscribed programming genres, rhetorical idioms, and content boundaries.
- Each established itself as a primary venue of American culture in an astonishingly short time.
- Each was displaced from its preeminent position by its own technological offspring.
- Each survived its brief golden age by reconditioning its programming to supplement, complement, and otherwise accommodate the new medium that was eclipsing it.

In short, broadcast television forced broadcast radio to define a subordinate role for itself in a new communication environment; thirty years later cable television forced broadcast television to do the same. Broadcast TV then can be seen as a transitional bridge between the primitive system of audio-only broadcasting and the currently expanding spectral frontiers of closed circuit and self-programmable video. As such, broadcast television shares conjunctive and disjunctive relationships with both. Perhaps the generational progression of the three communication technologies has provoked so little critical comment because of the almost obsessive focus of writers on the traumatic cleavage that subordinated print to audiovisual media in all areas of American life (except formal education) over the course of the twentieth century. It is perhaps only natural that writers have been more sensitive to the marginalization of literacy than to the particulars of how it was accomplished.

Marshall McLuhan was an exception to this rule. Writing at the chronological and spiritual heart of the Broadcast Era, he offered himself as an unabashed eyewitness to the technological amendments to Western epistemology that were deemphasizing the functions of print in day-to-day life. One of the very few intellectuals not suffering chronic denial over the crucial ebb of literacy during the 1950s and '60s, he was well prepared to watch the new electronic culture shepherd its audience from radio-centered to television-centered lives.

Despite the space-age mythology that grew up around him, McLuhan was essentially a literary person, a conservative of the old school who found electronic popular culture "monstrous and sickening," personally preferring the rarefied ink of Joyce, Eliot, or Hopkins.¹⁷ But as a traditionalist, his interest in media effects was shaped by a strong concern for the future of language in general and English in particular. Whereas his critical contemporaries (Dwight Macdonald, T. W. Adorno, et al.) harped on "mass culture" and focused almost exclusively on the cultural dislocations caused by the shift away from print, McLuhan was at least as interested in finding the continuities that bind media as he was in their disjunctive relationships. A

Cambridge Ph.D. in English led him to a vision of TV as an elliptical return to the "normal" focus of human perception—which was audio-visual—after some three odd centuries of abstract literacy.

Fond of publicly testing ideas-in-progress, McLuhan rarely took the trouble to distinguish the local and ephemeral from the universal and eternal in his "probes," as he called them. For example, he linked radio and television as two "acoustic" (or sound-dominated) media. Despite the addition of visual image, McLuhan found watching TV an essentially aural experience.¹⁸ This observation, however, may have been more topical than structurally intrinsic. McLuhan was, after all, a member of the cusp generation of TV watchers, and most early television was conceived and produced by (former) radio artists to attract (former) radio listeners. McLuhan himself often pointed out that the first content of any new medium is a previous medium.

Of more enduring interest is the distinction McLuhan found separating the two forms of broadcasting:

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one . . . like TV. Hot media are . . . low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience¹⁹

Radio, as a hot medium, forces the listener to imagine the source of communication (i.e., to create a visual image). Among people who can both hear and see, ear data naturally stimulate a need for eye data, a sensory cueing sequence not difficult to trace to survival needs in the woods or the city. One hears a new sound; one looks to see what it is. This, in McLuhan's view, is not full involvement with the image, but rather a distraction from the sounds the listener is actually hearing. By imagining the missing visual component, the listener abandons the real sounds coming from the radio (or "the sound image") to embark on an instinctual search for sense, order, security, or whatever your religious inclination demands you call it. This turns radio images (words; music, tone, volume, inflection, signal quality, and so on) into mere cues for the construction of personally imagined faces, bodies, movements, settings, sound-making implements, and so on. The listener is not participating in radio; radio is participating in the listener, stimulating idiosyncratic memories and reconstructions. The listener is in truth abandoning the authentic sound coming out of the radio.

Radio does not embrace (or "involve"); it propels. To use radio, the listener must create a kind of cyber-image on an internal screen (or what in quainter times was called the imagination). This description of the mechanics of human perception may help account for such otherwise bizarre phenomena as the popularity of ventriloquism and dancing on network radio during the 1930s and '40s. A full range of sensory involvement with radio is impossible because of its demand for an internally-generated cerebral picture that rationally satisfies the externally-generated sound.

This need for focused mental activity at the expense of full sensory involvement (only the ear counts) makes listening somewhat like reading, which also uses only one sense to collect data (the eye) and makes even

greater demands for imaginative thought because both sound *and* picture must be internally generated from the suggestions of ink. Degree of intellectual activity tends to be a measure of status in Western civilization, putting reading at the top of the list. It also explains the relatively high status of radio among TV-age intellectuals (a status it did not generally enjoy during the radio age). "The arts without intellectual context," wrote T. S. Eliot as radio was moving over for television, "are vanity."²⁰

Since only aural cues are available from the radio, the sensorium (as McLuhan called the full range of sensory capacity) contracts from its multiple capabilities to concentrated focus on the ear. The internal energy expended on forcing rational context on physical sensation—the working imagination processing the data provided by a single sense—generates the "heat." This correlates well with the nostalgic folk wisdom that scolds TV with the axiom, "You still need an imagination to enjoy a radio drama."

TV, a "cool" medium, delivers images whole. This leads to greater sensory (as opposed to rational) participation. Video communication requires little or no active contribution from the viewer's cerebral capacities to satisfy the need for primary meaning. Offered no direct challenge or role in immediate comprehension, the conscious mind is invited by television to give itself freely to the image and to seek the unimpeded savor of visceral response. Man Thinking, to borrow an image from Emerson, yields to Viewer Kicking Back. Furthermore, reassured by both aural *and* visual satisfaction, other sensory capacities are free to playfully simulate visceral involvement with the televisual image.

McLuhan was especially keen on TV's extraordinary effect on involving the viewer's tactile sense. The meteoric rise of television as a primary medium of pornography almost immediately following the introduction of the VCR seems to bear him out. The relaxation of abstract cerebral activity allowed by televiewing is further augmented by the cool setting it typically allows. Pornographic cinema has pretty much been put out of business by home video. While the sleaziness of the dark public space was no doubt an attraction for some, millions more were impeded from enjoying audio-visually stimulated masturbation by those conditions. Film is simply too hot a medium for this purpose; full participation in the image is blocked by threatening social and even legal concerns. The VCR turned the trenchcoat into an antique symbol overnight.

But pornography is merely one example of the many tactile options afforded by television. The medium is commonly used to achieve numbness or even narcosis in hospitals, airports, and geriatric institutions. Some years after McLuhan's death the personal computer screen added the tactile pleasures of hand-eye coordination afforded by the joystick and the mouse button. By requiring so little collaborative imaginative energy to convey meaning, TV is extremely, perhaps overwhelmingly, user friendly. The need for control (ego) is ameliorated in favor of the pleasure of automatic response (id). The high degree of low effort participation allowed by TV viewing is its "coolness."

Ed Sullivan Is No Longer Possible

In contrast to the perceptual gulf McLuhan found separating televiewing from radio-listening, the two have a fundamental ideological similarity when specifically used as broadcast media, a bond that has been revealed in the context of closed-circuit prevalence. Broadcasting by its nature is an evangelical activity, whether it is used to preach the gospel of consumerism (commercial TV) or the gospel of ethical culture (PBS). A broadcast typically invites everyone who can receive its messages to sympathize, empathize, learn the creed, buy the products, and join the fold.

In contrast to broadcasting's intrinsic catholicism, narrowcasting is structurally biased toward sectarianism. It balkanizes the massive inclusionary twentieth-century public created by broadcasting into exclusionary tribes, castes, sects, interests, and "lifestyles." Narrowcasting is more suitable for preaching to the converted than for the kind of street-corner appeal apropos to over-the-air transmission.

A quintessentially Modern system, broadcasting presents the democracy of indiscrimination. It makes a standing offer to all. In the wired world, however, such cultural broadside seems clumsy, corrupt, naive, and vulgar (in no particular order). Narrowcasters eschew the commercial carpet bombing of broadcasting strategy in favor of surgical demographic strikes. Viewers are sorted and flattered with various suggestions of inside respect for their special identities of age, sex, race, leisure pursuit, and so on. Ironically, narrowcasting turns even religious evangelism, one of its founding interests, into sectarian cheerleading. Who watches the religious cable networks in the first place? Agnostics? Atheists? Skeptics? Unitarians? Viewers carrying such profiles have likely erased the Family Channel, the Trinity Broadcasting Network, and other religious services from their sequential tuning memories (those of them, that is, who can follow the operating manual).

It is unlikely that the severe social dislocations and polarizations that have taken place in American society since the end of the Broadcast Era are merely coincidental to this carving up of the nation-as-audience into a nation-of-audiences. Whether cable TV is cause, effect or both in the deterioration of public life that has accompanied it is by no means clear. But the subject seems ripe for probing.

A germinating example of this historical congruence can be found in the climax of the anti-segregation civil rights struggle and the rise of various forms of neo-separatism that ensued. This movement from an ideal of public citizenship to an ideal of consanguine solidarity occurred during roughly the same window of time that includes the climax of the Broadcast Era and the ensuing ascendancy of cable TV. Many integrationists who had given their energy to grand inclusionary causes such as breaking Jim Crow, insuring universal suffrage, and establishing citizenship-based rather than race-based education systems were shocked by the abrupt tide of the new separatism. The academics among them especially went into a state of active denial, re-imagining this backlash against integration as a progressive inno-

vation: cultural pluralism. CP, it was contended, would stimulate pride and self-confidence in minorities and at the same time educate myopic majorities. Some theoreticians held that CP might bring about a re-lateralization of cultural exchange between racial and ethnic groups as a remedy to the top-down verticalism of commercial mass cultural programming.²¹

In practice, however, the new focus on the cultivation of micro-identities came at the direct expense of more inclusionary identities, such as polis, nation, and civilization. The absolutely inclusionary identity—humanity—was particularly hard hit.

The spectacle caused by isolation from macro-identity has been mostly bizarre and atrocious: anti-abortion "pro-lifers" murdering doctors; anti-racists establishing segregated lunch tables in university cafeterias; anti-vivisectionists valuing life too much to consider the interests of the sick; the administering of racial quotas by advocates of fairness. Far from empowering the citizenry, cultural pluralism has deprived society of citizens.

CP has proved its greatest effectiveness as an instrument of social control, perhaps *the* definitive framework for maintaining the status quo in an information-based, consumption-oriented society. Cultural pluralism turned out to be a Post-modern performance of a reliable old technique: divide and conquer. The 500-channel prophecy promises more of the same.

In terms of aesthetic quality, the Broadcast era of the mid-twentieth century presented the same problems, writ mass, that have plagued democratically minded art fans since the eighteenth century revolutions in America and France. Tocqueville observed that as the total number of consumers of any product (art included) increases, the percentage of what he called "fastidious consumers" decreases.²² To increase the total number of consumers is the logical, not to say structural goal for a technology designed, quite literally, to "cast a signal broadly." When broadcasting is successful on its own terms, a decline in the influence of the fastidious can be taken for granted. There is of course evidence from the Broadcast Era that contradicts this point—I have tried to include some of it in this book—but the paucity tends to prove the rule.

Broadcasting in the United States developed as the most unadulterated form of mass culture in history. Such purity is not likely to be seen again. By the late 1920s the broadcasting industry had defined its cash product as sheer human tonnage; the goods were delivered to the customer in bales and bushels for more than half a century. Any aesthetic quality that programming might manifest—whether judged high, low, or otherwise—could be considered no more than a byproduct of the transaction. When the demand for quantity did happen to yield Hi-Q (let's say, Edward R. Murrow, *Playhouse 90*, *The Honeyymooners*, *Green Acres*, or *Hill Street Blues*), that was a cause for celebration and self-congratulation: a shining case for freemarket capitalism's compatibility with a fine democratic culture. Here, ladies and gentlemen, was Madison Avenue making real the visions of Walt Whitman. When the system yielded something less, which it did prolifically, well, tough shit.

If there is a particular quality among audiences that the masters of the Broadcast Era grew to value and cultivate, it was "non-fastidiousness" precisely in Tocqueville's sense. The best audience for broadcasting emerged as an audience with as little discriminatory capability as possible in matters of taste (the programs) and rhetoric (the commercials). Sarnoff's hedge against the total mass culture of broadcasting, the Blue Network, proved unnecessary. Maestro Toscanini retired and the NBC Symphony Orchestra was disbanded. Divested of "high culture," the Blue Network became ABC.

This ordering of priorities gave rise to an institutionalized focus in broadcasting on the production of programs that could attract enormous audiences in which "fastidious" consumers shrank to statistical insignificance. If a network television program in 1961 alienated a couple of million people with the banality of its dialogue, the moral obtuseness of its plot or the decibel level of its laughtrack, what did it matter? The three-network oligarchy split the difference and the "rejection" hardly showed up in the numbers. If and when an egg-head was captured by TV's coolness (and let's face it, sooner or later most were), he or she didn't have many places to go on the dial.

PBS was established in the late 1960s as a holding pen for such viewers. Sarnoff, Paley, and other leading commercial broadcasters were enthusiastic contributors to public television. Why not let the taxpayers pick up the obligations of commercial licensees? Under the new conditions of narrowcasting, however, there is no such thing as a marginal audience for commercial television. Now that they are prepared to make a profit from its audience, commercial interests are anxious to privatize PBS and get government off their backs.

The appreciation of originality and complexity had always been the province of the few, and remained so despite the theoretical opportunities for change offered by broadcasting. Simplicity was ever the watchword in both drama and news: good was better than evil; beauty more attractive than ugliness; safety more desirable than danger. The more vulnerable the audience to oversimplified, outrageous, absurd, or non-sequitorial claims about the general uses and specific attributes of salable products—the better.

The hunger for fictional, non-fictional, and purposely confused narratives that would present life as some kind of comprehensible or less frightening experience was not new. Vertically organized religions and oral folklore traditions had addressed themselves to satisfying it for millennia. Since the Enlightenment, a canonical secular culture had emerged among the reading middle classes that served much the same purpose. But broadcasting brought with it a commercial incursion into domestic space that was unprecedented.

The parlor magazine rack, a nineteenth-century invention, had established a beachhead for advertising in the household. But broadcasting began an onslaught that finished the home as a viable refuge from commerce. The incursion of advertising into the home begun by the newspaper and magazine was turned into a full-scale invasion by radio. By the time visual image, color, stereo, remote control, big screen, cable, VCR, and online computer

services had been added, the very clothing on people's backs had become flourishing advertising media. Broadcasting was instrumental in creating this revolution. It shifted the primary concern of American society from productivity to consumption.

All this may have been good for business, but partisans of the arts found it bad for culture. The bad dream of the Old Right had come true; the tradespeople were indeed in charge. As for the Left, it proved a fatal nightmare; the consciousness of the People had become the product of a privately-owned factory. The objections that were raised to such a system were mostly set in print and therefore not well known. When complaints were made by a T. S. Eliot or a Norman Thomas it was easy to dismiss them as the subjective judgments of antidemocratic snobs and social engineers who can't or won't get the jokes.

With full TV saturation in reach by the end of the 1950s, the broadcasting industry was only too glad to cultivate images of its opponents as snobs, eggheads, and patronizing dogooders. In 1957, for example, this editorial pronouncement was made by *Television Age*, a trade publication:

Television is a mass medium—a medium for the masses, not for that minority of superior gentry with spherical crania who dwell in ivory towers of pseudo-intellectualism and drool over Strindberg.²³

Leading industry executives, mostly graduates of exclusive and expensive colleges, did what they could to equate criticism of the quality of TV shows with attacks on democracy. Robert Sarnoff, working in Dad's shop, dismissed the naysayers as "dilettantes" enamored of "phony social philosophy in plays about beatniks and characters full of self-pity."²⁴ Dr. Frank Stanton of CBS went so far as to tell the FCC that for broadcasters to recognize criteria other than ratings in their programming decisions would be tantamount to "turn(ing) our back on democracy." An affiliate station owner was quoted in *Variety* as complaining of high-brow "autocrats who would set up a cultural tyranny."²⁵

This model of thinking has outlived the Broadcast Era to become a template through which the "natural" order of an information society emerges. The old differentiation of "high culture" and "popular culture" is rephrased as a distinction, between "culture" and "entertainment." In matters of entertainment, business is perceived as serving the public, while the arts-and-education establishment is seen as teasing the public about culture. (Non-establishment artists and educators are seen as just plain nuts.) As a result, opposition to television is opposition to the free market and, by easy extension, opposition to freedom itself. It may seem ironic that at the same time most people readily admit that "TV is bad for you." But examples of this kind of contradiction are everywhere: alcohol, tobacco, firearms, and so on.

Invoking the Frankfurt School or the Cambridge Anglo-Catholics in discussions of contemporary culture (i.e., TV) is like expecting baseball players on Old-Timers' Day to perform as they did during the careers that got them invited.²⁶ The Traditionalist Right worships individualism and pro-

motes conformity. The Left (Old, New, or Middle-aged) promotes unpopular stances in the name of popular will. An understanding of this futility of superimposing print-based Left-Right arguments on contemporary media analysis is the foundation of what has become neo-conservatism. Neocons relate to television and entertainment much as old-fashioned conservatives related to religion. The movement has its true-believers and its cynics; the former accept the spiritual legitimacy of consumerism, the latter are willing to tolerate and even cultivate a measure of bread and a surfeit of circuses for the sake of preserving general order.

The economic viability of television is more easily proven than are the medium's capacities for cultural attainment. The businessfolk can prove their point with charts and graphs—documents that carry the force, if not exactly the mantle, of reason and even science. As for the artfolk, a paralyzing addiction to moral relativism hasn't helped make a case for aesthetic worth as the rightful concern of a democratic society. The primary justification for the arts in public life had been defined: investment opportunity.

Those who believe it is something more or other than that must be prepared to answer some questions. What do you have in mind? The advance of the human spirit? The improvement of the soul? The betterment of humankind? These concepts have been reduced by relativism to the status of voodoo. People with faith in that kind of stuff might have better luck calling the Psychic Friends Network. The balance of anarchy and order—always the meat-and-potatoes issue in getting through the day—depends on reason negotiated from material objectives, not from the pleasure of a vision. Walt Whitman could not see a difference between the two; today hardly anyone suspects similarities.

Narrowcasting, though also principally aimed at the selling of things, avoids many of the "hyper-democratic" by-products that broadcasting inevitably yields in its commitment to maximum distribution. The broadcaster makes a pitch to an entire nation, people, or culture. To the narrowcaster, this kind of sheer quantity is occasionally a virtue but rarely a paramount goal. The narrowcaster seeks not all, but a rightly constituted group: a subculture, a segregated element, a gang, or an affinity center of some sort which contains its own variations on right and wrong, which has its own interests to pursue and to protect and its own acknowledgment that its principle of organization is a fundamental asset.

The definitive footage of America's Broadcast Era is a montage of extraordinary moments of national galvanization: a JFK press conference; *The Ed Sullivan Show*; homeboy walks on the moon; *Roots*; Nixon resigning; thousands of shticks, gestures, and logos familiar across the neighborhood lines of the transdemographic village. Broadcasting was a national theater for a nation that emphatically refused to have one. This kind of thing

can still be attempted in the narrowcasting environment, but only on well promoted special occasions: the final episode of *Cheers*, the Gulf War; certain championship sporting events.²⁷ For any single event, channels that do not carry will always outnumber channels that do carry. Is the civil defense system prepared for these new conditions?

A Martian is addressing the UN General Assembly. All the channels in the basic cable package that bother with news coverage (maybe ten of the fifty) are carrying it live. But just in case I'm not in the mood, I can exercise my freedom to change the channel. HBO's got *Close Encounters*. The Comedy Channel is showing clips of stand-up routines about aliens. On *The 700 Club*, Pat Robertson is revealing the prediction of the alien's visit in scripture. *Beavis and Butthead* invite the space dude home and make fun of dated videos such as "Major Tom" and "Rocket Man." USA is sticking with professional wrestling, though a Martian contender may soon challenge the champ. Bravo is taking no note of the event. Top management at the Sci-Fi Channel debates whether this thing will be good for business or destroy the company. Highlights of the Martian's speech are bound to replay for days on Headline News. C-SPAN will surely rerun the whole thing. Each tribe beats its own drums to spread the news. The Broadcast Era is kaput.

Appendix: Broadcast Network Prime Time Viewing Suggestions 1984-96

The Simpsons (Fox, 1989-present) brings the white noise of consumption-centered life to thundering crescendos.

Law and Order (NBC, 1990-present) is so well-written that following daily reruns may improve attention span.

NYPD Blue (ABC, 1992-present) offers better acting and writing than most live theater, and it's a lot cheaper.

There are surely other series from this period that will be worth watching in the future for all kinds of reasons, but these share the virtue of being humane.

Notes

1. By characterizing all six of these examples as "broadcast figures," I do not mean to gloss over the differences separating radio and television characters. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1962), for example, McLuhan writes, "Had TV come first, there would have been no Hitler at all" (p. 261).
2. The Westinghouse Corporation's Pittsburgh station, KDKA, is generally recognized as the first regularly operating commercial station offering daily radio service to the public in the United States. It is still in operation today.
3. Sterling and Kittross, 2nd ed., p. 35.
4. *Empire of the Air*, prod. Ken Burns (Radio Pioneers Film Project, 1991). It might also be noted that Dr. and Mrs. DeForest were divorced within a matter of weeks, perhaps an omen of things to come in terms of love in the information age.
5. Sterling and Kittross, *Stay Tuned*, 2nd ed., p. 43.
6. Ibid.
7. See *The American Automobile: A Brief History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965): In 1908 Ford sold 5986 Model T automobiles at \$859 a car; in 1916, with the price down to \$360, the company sold 577,036.
8. Ironically, the undoing of RCA was another home entertainment project, this one at the end of the Broadcast Era: the video laser disc. Hoping to beat its competitors to the starting line in self-programmable television, the company introduced a stylus-based system. The system never caught on. Instead it was overwhelmed by the success of the Japanese VHS and Beta videotape systems. In 1985, after a \$500 million loss, RCA was forced to give up on its videodisc system; General Electric swallowed the company whole in less than a year. See Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 2nd rev. ed., pp. 505-10.
9. Sterling and Kittross, *Stay Tuned*, 2nd ed., p. 656.
10. As cited by William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 24.
11. Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 2nd rev. ed., p. 24.
12. Various frameworks were proposed in the United States during the 1920s for rationalizing "natural monopolies" in a system that otherwise professed dedication to the "free market." See Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974) for the most audacious and successful of these plans.
13. Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 2nd rev. ed., pp. 40-50.
14. Herbert Hoover, Speech to First Washington Radio Conference, 27 February 1922, as quoted in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, p. 76.
15. Gilbert Seldes, "The 'Errors' of Television," *Atlantic Monthly* (May, 1937): 531-41.
16. The parameters of these two thirty-year periods are approximate but by no means arbitrary. By 1925, there were 571 radio stations broadcasting in the United States and over a third of American households were equipped with receivers. RCA

was already planning its National Broadcasting Company for a 1927 coast-to-coast debut. As for television, the freeze on new stations that began in 1948 ended in 1952 and as a result a flurry of new transmitters followed. Between 1952 and 1955, the number of TV stations rose from 108 to 422, and almost two-thirds of American households had purchased sets. Also, 1955 was the year Dumont went dark, leaving the three-network broadcasting system that would utterly dominate television until the end of the Broadcast Era. (All figures taken from Sterling and Kittross, *Stay Tuned*, 2nd ed., Appendix C1-B, Appendix C8-A.)

17. Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), p. 43.

18. McLuhan discusses the "acoustic" nature of television in *McLuhan: The Man and the Message*, a 1985 CBC documentary produced by Stephanie McLuhan and Tom Wolfe. It is conceivable that had McLuhan lived to see three developments he might have changed his mind on this:

- the improved home television image (color, stereo, big-screen, etc.);
- evolved visual skills and techniques used by television artists;
- a shrinking appetite for narrative by audiences preferring montage and other forms of visual stimulation to catharsis, the restoration of harmony, or other traditional dramatic climaxes and satisfactions.

19. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd ed., especially Introduction to the Second Edition, vii-xi, and Chapter Two, "Media Hot and Cold," 36-45.

20. T. S. Eliot, "Notes Toward the Definition of Culture," *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p. 95.

21. Born in the midst of the "cultural pluralism," the Internet creates an instant gulf between Users and Non-users and then sorts Users by their biases. It has proved an excellent communication system for rightwing extremists. Given the relatively high level of literacy—reading, writing, thinking in sentences, typing—necessary to operate the system, mass usage is not likely in the foreseeable future.

22. In commercial broadcasting the "product" is audience attendance, which is manufactured wholesale under the auspices of the broadcasters and then delivered by them to retailers. Art—drama, music, rhetoric, and so on—can be understood in this context as a byproduct of that process. Tocqueville's characterization, however, is still applicable.

23. As cited in Boddy, *Fifties Television*, p. 237.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., pp. 236-37. Ironically, many of these same charges of "elitism" are today leveled not by the entertainment moguls but against them, often by religious fundamentalists.

26. I have covered the characterization of "Left vs. Right" as a medium-specific print debate in some detail in "Mass Memory: The Past in the Age of Television" (Chapter Two), *Bonfire of the Humanities: Television, Subliteracy, and Long-Term Memory Loss* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

27. In coining the term "global village," McLuhan may have had the entire globe in mind; indeed, since his death, that concept has become technologically feasible and progressively easier. However, I am using the term "global" somewhat metaphorically to refer to the transdemographic nation rather than the planet.