CHAPTER FIVE

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Radio: Broadcasting as Dissemination (and Dialogue)

For ye shall speak into the air.
1 COR. 14:9 KJV

In the 1920s and 1930s the radio was undoubtedly a leading source of unmitigated bleat. Radio's early history stages, with some starkness, all the issues facing communication in our time: the longing for an assured delivery and the desire to touch over long distances.

The radio signal is surely one of the strangest things we know; little wonder its ability to spirit intelligence through space elicited immediate comparisons to telepathy, séances, and angelic visitations. At any point on the earth's surface in the twentieth century, silent streams of radio voices, music, sound effects, and distress signals fill every corner of space. In any place you are reading this, messages surround and fly past you, infinitely inconspicuous, like the cicadas in the *Phaedrus,* who sing of things we cannot hear with our unaided ears. The remarkable property of the radio signal (discovered in the 1890s, the same decade when Warren and Brandeis wrote of privacy) is its inherent publicity. Electromagnetic signals radiate "to whom it may concern"; they are no respecters of persons, and they rain on the just and the unjust.

Early developers found the omnipresent quality of the radio signal a defect, seeing only dialogue as a legitimate form of communication. Like the phonograph, radio technology was first conceived as a means of point-to-point communication. Marconi was characteristic of his generation in thinking of the new technology as a wireless telegraph. But the telegraph had single termini; the airwaves did not. The looming obstacle, as with the mails before envelopes and anonymous sending and with the party line years of the telephone, was the lack of confidentiality. Anyone with a receiver set potentially had, as the parable of the sower put it, "ears to hear." Reception of the signal was inherently open-ended. As the adman Bruce Barton wrote in 1922, "Radio telephone messages can never be secret. They go out in all directions; and anyone with a machine tuned to the proper wave length can hear what you are saying to your partner in New Orleans or your sweetheart in Kenosha."[65] The inability to bar unintended recipients was a major hindrance to the profitability of wireless telegraphy and, after the audion tube in 1907, wireless telephony as well. The quest for a confidential channel, some-

65. Bruce Barton, "This Magic Called Radio: What Will It Mean in Your Home in the Next Ten Years?" *American Magazine,* June 1922, 11–13, 70–71, at 70.

times called "syntony" or "selectivity," was a preoccupation of early radio engineers.[66] Wanted was person-to-person connection, not a party line.[67] The quest for "private service on a party line" was an aim for both telephone and radio in this period.[68] Sought was the electromagnetic equivalent of the postal envelope. The term "listening in," the eventual verb for describing audience behavior in commercial radio, even borrowed the notion of eavesdropping on party lines, as if radio audiences were overhearing messages not originally intended for their ears.[69]

An exhibit of the principle that cultural preconception shapes the uses of technology as much as its internal properties do, radio "broadcasting" was not embraced until wireless technology had been in use for a quarter of a century.[70] The origins of the term are obscure, but all fingers point to an agricultural use not far from the *Phaedrus,* the parable of the sower, and the nervous metaphors of Comstock and Warren and Brandeis: the scattering of seeds. In nineteenth-century American literature, "broadcast" was most often used as an adjective meaning scattered. In *Tom Sawyer,* "A sweep of chilly air passed by, rustling all the leaves and snowing the flaky ashes broadcast about the fire." Thoreau wrote that "Nature strews her nuts and flowers broadcast, and never collects them into heaps" (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*). Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* praises the United States for being "essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night." The term *broadcasting* did not at first refer to any organized social practice. The free character of things broadcast naturally fit the radio signal's tendency to stray.

The discovery of radio as an agency of broadcasting is often attributed to David Sarnoff, future head of the National Broadcasting Company. In a now famous 1915–16 memo Sarnoff described the wireless as a household music box.[71] The "ether" would be filled not with the

66. Hugh G. J. Aitken, *Syntony and Spark: The Origins of Radio* (New York: Wiley, 1976), and "Radio Wave Band for Every Country," *New York Times,* 23 August 1921, 4.

67. The development of cryptography before and during World War II made it technically possible to destine messages for a specific address via the airwaves. Alan Turing played a key role in this in Great Britain, as did Claude Shannon in the United States.

68. Phrase taken from "To Stop Telephone-Eavesdropping," *Literary Digest,* 17 October 1914, 733.

69. Covert, "'We May Hear Too Much,'" 203.

70. See Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

71. David Sarnoff, "Memorandum to E. J. Nally," in *Documents of American Broadcasting,* ed. Frank J. Kahn (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 23–25.

cacophony of amateur operators making point-to-point transmissions, but with music "broadcast" to a nation of listeners—who would then want to purchase Westinghouse radio sets. One obstacle, of course, to the development of radio as pure broadcasting was the question of how to make money from a communication circuit that seemed to be a continuous potlatch or gift to the public.[72] Sarnoff lit on the idea that desirable programming would fuel acquisition of radio hardware; he had not yet discovered the eventually victorious, lamentable practice of advertiser support for programs. Sarnoff saw the ether's lack of privacy as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. The lack of a specific addressee, he thought, would be the specialty rather than a defect of radio, speaking to the great audience invisible.[73] Sarnoff's memo was a dead letter in its impact on his Westinghouse superiors, though in retrospect it seems prophetic. Maybe, like Socrates, they were suspicious of forms of communication whose reception was open-ended and whose addressees were anonymous.

World War I saw power wrested from radio amateurs by the military, the state, and large corporations. The amateur vision of the ether as a cacophonous public forum in which anyone could take part was losing ground by the 1920s and was preserved largely in the efforts of noncommercial broadcasters, themselves pushed decisively aside by the early 1930s.[74] Herbert Hoover, who as secretary of commerce was probably the chief agent in making American radio a corporate, federally regulated entity, spoke in 1922 against the wireless as a means of person-to-person contact: "The use of the radio telephone for communication between single individuals, as in the case of the ordinary telephone, is a perfectly hopeless notion. Obviously, if ten million subscribers are crying through the air for their mates they will never make a junction."[75] Like Socrates' concerns about writing, Hoover was worried about the inability of "broadcasting" to achieve "junction." The Iowa-born, Stanford-trained engineer is not usually thought of as a particularly erotic thinker, but here eros looms, trying as ever to "bridge the chasm." Imagine the myriad crisscrossing of radio telephone voices crying for their loves, lost in transit, incomplete passes, the very air full of undelivered longings. Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity! Saint Paul's warning to the Corinthians who practiced glossolalia without interpreters could be motto of every broadcaster: You will be speaking into the air (1 Cor. 14:9). Like Paul, Hoover wanted to control the confusion of tongues.

72. Smulyan, *Selling Radio.*

73. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 391.

74. Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

75. Quoted in Richard A. Schwarzlose, "Technology and the Individual: The Impact of Innovation on Communication," in *Mass Media between the Wars, 1918–1941,* ed. Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 100.

Eventually radio became officially defined as an agent of public communication. The key question in the 1920s and early 1930s was its regulatory status: Was radio a common carrier or something else? This question involved the old couplet of dialogue and dissemination. "Common carriage" was a nineteenth-century category that included shipping lines, elevators, and above all railroads. The Interstate Commerce Act (1887) gave the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) jurisdiction over "common carriers," which were ceded a "natural monopoly" in return for which they had to offer all comers equal service and submit their rates to the ICC for approval. The Mann-Elkins Act (1910) and the Transportation Act (1920) expanded the definition of "common carrier" to include "transmission of intelligence by wire or wireless," thus placing the telegraph and telephone under ICC jurisdiction.[76]

But radio had difficulty fitting the point-to-point model. Heather Wessely captures the contrast well: "Rail transport is not a service designed with a potential terminus in every household."[77] Radio spoke into the blue yonder. A key case before the ICC, *Sta-Shine Products Co. v. Station WGBB* (1932), raised the question whether radio broadcasts entailed a "transmission of intelligence." Should the ICC treat radio stations as common carriers, thus regulating advertising rates? The decision declared radio outside the ICC's jurisdiction, since "no service is performed at the receiving end by the broadcasting company, similar to the service performed by common carriers." Broadcasting lacked "the boy in the blue uniform who rings the door bell and who brings the message itself." Common carriers saw to it that people receive their cargoes or messages, but broadcasting made no effort to ensure delivery. "Unless one has a radio receiving set properly attuned, he will never get and is not expected to get the intelligence, whether it be instruction, entertainment, or advertising, sent out from the broadcasting station."[78] By the standards of common carriage, broadcasting was a deformed

76. The relevant documents can be found in Bernard Schwartz, *The Economic Regulation of Business and Industry: A Legislative History of U.S. Regulatory Agencies,* 5 vols. (New York: Chelsea House, 1973). Congressman James R. Mann also wrote the Mann Act of 1910, prohibiting "the transportation of women across state lines for immoral purposes." His legislation dealt with all sorts of common carriers.

77. Heather A. Wessely, "Culture, History and the Public Interest: Developing a Broadcasting Service for the United States" (manuscript, Department of Communication Studies, University of Iowa, 1993), 54.

78. *Sta-Shine Products Company, Inc. v. Station WGBB of Freeport NY* 188 ICC 271 (1932); quotations from 276, 277–78.

communication circuit, since the "transmission of intelligence" was left to chance.

The conclusive definition of broadcasting was left to the jurisdiction of a New Deal agency, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The contrast between broadcasting and common carriage became a cornerstone of United States broadcasting policy in the Communications Act of 1934. According to section 3(h) of the act, "A person engaged in radio broadcasting shall not, insofar as such person is so engaged, be deemed a common carrier."[79] Common carriers operate point-to-point, deliver their goods to a definite address, and must be accessible to anyone and accountable for the tariffs they charge. A common carrier is characterized by "the separation of the content from the conduit" and lacks editorial discretion over the messages private people send.[80] Thus, if you shout obscenities into a phone, the phone company is exempt from prosecution; if you do so into a radio microphone, the station may have to answer to the FCC. Common carriers must be message blind and sender blind, but never receiver blind. Broadcasters, if not quite audience blind, see their audiences through a glass darkly.[81] Broadcasting, as legally defined, involves privately controlled transmission but public reception, whereas common carriage involves publicly controlled transmission but private reception. The two models possess striking symmetry. A common carrier offers universal access to transmission and restricted access to reception, whereas broadcasting offers restricted access to transmission and universal access to reception. Like Socrates in the *Phaedrus,* common carriage seeks to guarantee the delivery of the seed; like Jesus in the parable of the sower, broadcasting focuses on scattering the message to all (even if the actual reception is spotty).

The Communications Act of 1934 thus installed the ancient notion of dissemination in the heart of a modern technology in the guise of "broadcasting." As it developed, however, the term acquired a double sense. In its generic use, it refers to transmission over the air, but "broadcasting" as a legal term refers not to the diverse practices of the airwaves but to an idealized configuration among speakers and audiences. It conjures visions of the agora, the town meeting, or the "public sphere"; broadcasting is supposed to be more a town crier summoning citizens to assembly than a midway barker inviting the curious to spend their nickels on the freak show. By defining broadcasting in terms of the public interest, the 1934 Communications Act articulated a vision of the audience—a civic one, the audience as disinterested public—that fit the technology's lack of confidentiality and gave a lofty lineage to a set of practices that owed as much to the circus as to the polis. In fact, by the 1930s, commercial broadcasters had developed a number of techniques for routing audiences and managing the junction. The brief shining moment of dissemination was washed over by a flood of dialogism.[82]

79. As Justice White put it in 1979: "The language of § 3 (h) is unequivocal; it stipulates that broadcasters shall not be treated as common carriers." *FCC v. Midwest Video Corporation,* in *Documents of American Broadcasting,* ed. Frank J. Kahn (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 364.

80. T. Barton Carter, Marc A. Franklin, and Jay B. Wright, *The First Amendment and the Fifth Estate: Regulation of Electronic Mass Media* (Mineola, N.Y.: Foundation, 1986), 395.

81. This legal distinction may in part be a post hoc version of the division of labor agreed upon in 1926 between RCA and AT&T, leaving the former with the air/broadcasting and the latter with wires/telephony. See Noobar R. Danielian, *AT&T: The Story of Industrial Conquest* (New York: Vanguard, 1939).

"THEY WILL NEVER MAKE A JUNCTION" William James had compared the brains of sitters at séances to Marconi stations that pick up and amplify impossibly faint and distant signals of departed minds, just as Rudyard Kipling had compared very early radio communications to a séance. The question in both realms was similar: authentication in psychical research, identification and intimacy in early radio. The issue was how to make sure you reach the one you really want to reach. Throughout the interwar years, theorists and practitioners of radio recognized its strange ability, like the telephone, to put speaker and hearer in "contact" without physical presence or personal acquaintance. Radio carried what Rudolf Arnheim in 1936 called "voices without bodies" and breached limits of space, time, and audibility that had once seemed natural. Organizing radio's connection to the bodies of the communicants was a chief prerequisite of its naturalization into daily life. Without attempting anything close to a cultural history of broadcasting here, I will argue that securing mainstream acceptance for radio required means to close the obvious gaps of distance, disembodiment, and dissemination. Hence the history of commercial radio in the interwar years is of central interest for understanding the twentieth-century obsession with communication breakdown and its remedies. This history is a kind of moving meditation on how to reduce radio's uncanniness quotient.[83]

The distance between speaker and audience in radio replayed idealism's separate rooms and telephony's severing of a conversation into two disconnected halves. DX-ing in particular, the quest for a signal from remote stations and still a common sport among ham radio opera-

82. Thus far I have used "dialogism" to mean the ideology that dialogue is the morally supreme form of communication. Here I use it in a different sense, closer to Mikhail Bakhtin, to refer to the multiple voices that layer discourse.

83. My account will regrettably be limited largely to United States sources.

tors, reveals something about the curious ontology of the radio signal and the longings associated with communication at a distance. Communication afar is always erotic in the broad sense—a yearning for contact. The key call in DX-ing is "CQ," from the phrase "seek you." One fictional account of a 1924 family's DX listening describes it as "a sacrificial rite." A son adjusts the dials with excruciating precision to a spot where he hopes to catch the signal of a distant station; instead he hears emanations from the great beyond: "Out of the air comes the sizzle of static. The carrying wave of station after station whistles shrilly, cheerful mischievous devils signaling to presumptuous mortal man from somewhere in the empyrean." It is an evident challenge to find the one true signal, in spite of interference from other stations, the weather, and celestial beings. "Now he catches the murmur of a voice so faint and far that it might be in sober earnest a message from another world."[84] Such "DX-fishing," with its goal to hear the call letters of far-off stations, was a kind of quest for extraterrestrial intelligence *avant la lettre:* the search for the distant transmission amid the shrieks and pops of space. "Behind the music one still hears a wailing of winds lost somewhere in the universe and very unhappy about it."[85] In the early years of radio static was often heard as a sign of distant worlds; "celestial caterwauling," Bruce Bliven called it.[86] Another commentator noted, "The delicate mechanism of the radio has caught and brought to the ears of us earth dwellers the noises that roar in the space between the worlds."[87] Like Dorothy Parker's telephone call to God, or William James's quest to discern the will to communicate, DX-ing is an allegory of faith in our times.

Radio's gaps between transmission and reception could mean comic mockery as well as rites of supplication. As with the telephone, radio invited a new decorum for behavior in conditions of mutual absence.[88] The invisibility and domestic setting of the radio listening experience made for loosened norms of attentiveness compared with those that

84. Bruce Bliven, "The Legion Family and the Radio: What We Hear When We Tune In," *Century Magazine,* October 1924, 811–18, at 814. On the numinous overtones of early radio static, see Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting,* 304–5.

85. Bruce Bliven, "The Ether Will Now Oblige," *New Republic,* 15 February 1922, 328.

86. Bliven, "Ether Will Now Oblige," 328. A wonderful account of the literary and metaphysical aspects of radio static is James A. Connor, "Radio Free Joyce: *Wake* Language and the Experience of Radio," *James Joyce Quarterly* 30–31 (summer–fall 1993): 825–43.

87. A. Leonard Smith, "Broadcasting to the Millions," *New York Times,* 19 February 1922, sec. 7, 6, quoted in Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting,* 304.

88. The most sensitive students of the social contract between audiences and broadcast events are Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), esp. chap. 5, and Paddy Scannell, "Public Service Broadcasting and Modern Public Life," *Media, Culture, and Society* 11, 2 (1989): 135–66.

had developed in bourgeois theater. Bruce Bliven noted in 1924 that most political orators, if aware of "the ribald comments addressed to the stoical loud-speaker" of the home receiver, would seek other jobs. "The comments of the family range from Bill's, 'Is *that* so!' down to Howard's irreverent, 'Aw, shut your face, you poor hunk of cheese!'"[89] Home listening allowed oratory to be received in a mood of chronic flippancy. Likewise, one could exit live performances midstream without embarrassing anyone. "If the whole audience 'signed off' (disconnected the instruments) Miss Altenbrite would be none the wiser, and would send her trills just as sweetly through ninety thousand square miles of night."[90] More serious questions were raised in England about whether radio audiences should wear hats or sit when hearing an address from the queen.[91] In each case the question was, How binding is a relationship that lacks any contract of mutuality? What kind of moral or political obligation can ethereal contact compel? What is "communication" without bodies or presence?

Anxieties about contact were not confined to the receiving end; senders also faced the prospect of barriers to communication. Having to speak into a soulless microphone was a common complaint in the 1920s and 1930s from entertainers used to performing before live audiences. The microphone replaced the faces and souls of the listeners. In a 1924 radio address, Herbert Hoover worried again about the lack of junction, complaining about having to speak into "the deadly inexpressive microphone. . . . We need a method by which a speaker over the radio may sense the feelings of his radio audience. A speaker before a public audience knows what hisses and applause mean; he cuts his speech short or adjusts himself to it."[92] Critic Gilbert Seldes in 1927 noted the queasy feeling of the radio performer before an invisible audience in even more graphic terms: "The microphone, which seems so alive with strange vital fluids when you begin, goes suddenly dead; you think that somewhere in the next room the operator has cut off the current; that everywhere everyone has tuned out. You wonder who these people are who may be listening, in what obscurity, with what hostility. And when you listen to the radio yourself, you know no more."[93] Seldes was concerned, like other critics of dissemination, about the loss of "strange vital flu-

89. Bliven, "Legion Family," 817.

90. Bliven, "Ether Will Now Oblige," 329.

91. Scannell, "Public Service Broadcasting."

92. Radio Talk by Secretary Hoover, 26 March 1924, box 48, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library; quoted in Wessely, *Culture, History and the Public Interest,* 44–45.

93. Gilbert Seldes, "Listening In," *New Republic,* 23 March 1927, 140–41.

ids," the current's being turned off, the enigma of the missing audience. He found himself in the position of speaker to the dead. His concerns—the unknown listeners, the lack of interaction, the speaking into the air—replicate the larger fears of solipsism and communication breakdown raging through the art, literature, and philosophy of the interwar years.[94] Indeed, the philosophical concerns of a Bradley or Hocking, that the other may be utterly inaccessible, recur in the mundane setting of the radio studio. Broadcasting restages the scenario of idealist philosophy: communicating deaf and blind through impermeable walls. Both broadcasters and audiences ran the risk of sending dead letters to each other. The twentieth century is full of discourses produced in what Paul Ricoeur would call situations of exploded dialogue.

COMPENSATORY DIALOGISM How to compensate for the fact that people could be in touch without appearing "in person" was an acute question in the early history of radio and its development into a huge commercial entertainment empire. New forms of authenticity, intimacy, and touch not based on immediate physical presence had to be found. The hunt for communicative prostheses—compensations for lost presences—was vigorous in the culture of commercial radio in the 1920s and 1930s. Broadcasters quickly recognized the risk of alienating the affections of listeners and invented diverse strategies to replace what had apparently been taken away: the presence of fellow listeners, a conversational dynamic, and a personal tone. Commercial broadcasting was quite self-conscious about overcoming the listener's sense of being stuck in a mass audience without mutual interaction or awareness, with one-way flow of communication and anonymous styles of talk. New discursive strategies were designed to compensate for the medium's structural lacks. The aim was to restore lost presence.

"The pivotal fact," writes Paddy Scannell, "is that the broadcasters, while they control the discourse, do not control the communicative context." That the site of reception lies beyond the institutional authority of the broadcaster "powerfully drives the communicative style and manner of broadcasting to approximate to the norms not of public forms of talk, but to those of ordinary, informal conversation." He stunningly argues that radio broadcasting marked not the beginning but the end of mass communication as the address of large undifferentiated

94. See Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *The Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

audiences.[95] Intimate sound spaces, domestic genres, cozy speech styles, and radio personalities all helped bridge the address gap in radio. In clear contrast to the regulatory language of the FCC, which stipulated that all broadcasting be done in the public interest, one observer noted that on the radio you "are not speaking to the Public. You are speaking to a family much like the families that live on the next block."[96] A 1931 article in the *Journal of Home Economics* put it bluntly: "Radio is an extension of the home."[97] Little wonder the light domestic drama and the soap opera have been the staples of broadcasting: like their audiences, the genres are set in living rooms. If official policy defined radio as a public space, those who actually used the new medium knew better. The styles of address in radio talk that evolved in the United States were a far cry from the stump orator or the Enlightenment public sphere. The heroes of radio in the 1930s were crooners, comics, and avuncular politicians, people who knew how to "reach out and touch" their audiences. The system's lifeblood was advertising, and audiences were its product. Some kind of interaction with them was crucial. Audience ratings and radio research aimed to play Eros by bridging the chasm.[98] The fostering of "we-ness," dialogical inclusion, and intimate address have remained at the core of broadcast discourse to this day.

The glad-handing joviality of much of American commercial radio culture in the 1930s and beyond was not, of course, a natural outgrowth of the technology but a cultural adaptation to specific political economic conditions. Broadcast culture could have remained starkly impersonal; up to the mid-1920s, for instance, most announcers were literally anonymous, known largely by code names, in what was a conscious policy of station owners to suppress radio "personalities" (lest their fame lead to greater salary demands, as of course occurred).[99] Announcers could have remained in the paradigm of telephone operators, passive

95. Paddy Scannell, "Introduction: The Relevance of Talk," in *Broadcast Talk*, ed. Paddy Scannell (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1991), 1–9, at 3.

96. Morse Salisbury, "Writing the Home Economics Radio Program," *Journal of Home Economics* 24 (1932): 954–60, at 957.

97. Morse Salisbury, "Signs of the Times," *Journal of Home Economics* 23 (1931): 847.

98. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, "Introduction," in *Radio Research, 1941* (New York: Sloan, Duell, and Pearce, 1942), vii, make this point explicitly. On the historical centrality of the ratings to the broadcasting industry, see Eileen R. Meehan, "Heads of Households and Ladies of the House: Gender, Genre, and Broadcast Ratings, 1929–1990," in *Ruthless Criticism: New Perspectives in U.S. Communications History*, ed. William S. Solomon and Robert W. McChesney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 204–21.

99. Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 163–67.

channels for connecting other people, which was in fact more the model for the BBC. Instead, a policy of "unmitigated bleat" ensued.

One prong of the policy was a new chatty tone. Intimate forms of talk were to replace the harsh open-air soapbox voice. "The normal tone of transmission," wrote Rudolf Arnheim, "has to be that of a light, intimate conversation between broadcaster and listener." Many speakers "bellow through the microphone to an audience of millions," but Arnheim seriously doubted that radio appealed to the millions as masses: radio "talks to everyone individually, not to everyone together. . . . the radio-speaker should proceed softly and as if 'à deux.'" Arnheim prescribed bonhomie rather than bombast.[100] One writer said of educational radio, "I don't want a lecture, I just want a chat in my everyday language."[101]

Dialogic forms were another technique of simulating presence. In such techniques as crooning, direct address of listeners, dramatic dialogue, "feuds" between stars, fan letters, fan clubs, contests and promotional giveaways, or radio comedy, the remote audience was invited to become an imaginary participant in the world of the characters and of its fellow auditors. Radio comedy discovered the live studio audience and the stooge as solutions to the lack of live rapport. The in-house audience was a sounding board for the comic, and the stooge served as "straight man" for gags, both incorporating an internal circuit of sending and receiving in the broadcast. Since a mutual loop of talk could not be achieved with the dispersed listeners, it was simulated within the radio program. Radio programs not only transmitted voices but pretended to receive them back from the great audience invisible. Entertainers learned how to work one end of the telephone line when the other was piped into the millions. The ventriloquistic technique of keeping up both sides of the conversation persists in broadcast discourse. Perhaps the best emblem of such dialogism is the immensely popular comedy duo of the late 1930s and 1940s, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. Two voices in dialogue, both produced by the same body. Two characters, one of them a dummy. It would be hard to find a more perfect symbol of radio's communication circuit.

Finally, techniques were explored to provide listeners with a sense of membership in a live audience. As Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport noted in their very astute *Psychology of Radio* (1935), "No crowd can exist, especially no radio crowd, unless the members have a 'lively

100. Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio* (1936; New York: Arno Press, 1986), 71, 72.
101. Salisbury, "Signs of the Times," 851.

impression of universality.' Each individual must believe that others are thinking as he thinks and are sharing his emotions." A "consciousness of kind" had to be raised, via "social facilitation," such as the sound of laughter, applause, interaction, coughing, ahems, heckling, or other audible signs of a live assembly. Tapping into the older contrast between crowds and publics, and anticipating the more recent notion of imagined communities, they argued that radio audiences were distinctly "consociate" rather than "congregate" assemblies: united in imagination, not in location. But they also noted that a very different "social contract" prevailed in each type of collectivity; they did not forget the insuperability of touch.[102]

Ironically, the concept of "mass communication," as minted in the 1950s, suggests only the ways that mass media seem to fall short of face-to-face talk: vast audiences, one-way messages, and impersonal address.[103] What it misses is the very lifeblood of commercial media culture as we have come to know it. The early history of broadcast talk consisted largely in the attempt to create a world in which audiences would feel like participants. Today both the programming and reception of most commercial media, in the United States at least, actively cultivate a sense of intimate relations between persona and audience. Media culture is a lush jungle of fictional worlds where "everyone knows your name," celebrities and politicians address audiences by first names, and conversational formats proliferate. The conventional concept of "mass communication" captures only the abstract potential for alienation in large-scale message systems, not the multiple tactics of interpersonal appeal that have evolved to counter it.[104] Early broadcasters saw "mass society" looming and tried to stop it.

HOC EST CORPUS, HOCUS-POCUS But it could not be stopped entirely. Despite the many compensations to make up for the loss of face-to-face communication, including a tonal shift toward snugger modes of address and the simulation of personal interaction, the relationship of body to body could not be restored fully over the ether any more than a telephone marriage could be consummated by wire. A creepy surplus remained. The unease about the new spectral bodies of broadcasting

102. Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper, 1935).
103. Charles R. Wright, *Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective* (New York: Random House, 1959), 11–14, offers a classic definition of "mass communication" in this way.
104. Donald Horton and Richard R. Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance" (1956), in *Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World,* ed. Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 188–211.

could not always be suppressed. A few genres—horror drama, for instance—played radio's uncanny potential to the hilt. The Shadow knew that under commercial broadcasting's carefully wrought artifice of intimate familiarity lurked the loneliness of the long gaps, the eerie calls of distant voices, and the touch of oozing ectoplasm, strange flesh from afar. American radio in the 1920s and 1930s was explicitly a "live" medium, and the effort to breathe life into the spirits emerging from the loudspeaker after a long journey often involved the strangest of resurrectionist techniques.

Liveness in radio was the effort to break the connection between death and distance. The term "live" arose as life's uncontested dominion, its naturalness, ended. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives such phrases as "two live plants in flower pots" (1856), a locution presumably motivated by plants such as immortelles, flowers that retain their color after death, and "live cattle" (1897), presumably in contrast to the slaughtered. In both cases, "live" explicitly contrasts with something dead. "Live" could also mean "containing unexpended energy," as in a live shell, cartridge, or match. A "live wire" carried electrical current and could provide power or shocks. An 1875 dictionary of mechanics defined a "live-axle," one year before the telephone and two years before the phonograph, as "one communicating power; in contradistinction to a dead or blind axle." Finally, the more recent term "live action" means the filming of actors and events as opposed to animation, titling, or other kinds of image manipulation. "Live" is the prosthetic form of life, something that announces its authenticity against potentially deceptive substitutes. Its fundamental sense is contrastive: "live" means "not dead."

"Live" also means "communicating power," and such is crucial to modern communications. Because life could be simulated by recording and transmitting media, liveness became something eagerly sought. Notions of life were important in the terminology of early moving image technologies: zoetrope, bioscope, vitagraph, cinema (from Greek *kineo*, to move, as in "kinetic"), motion pictures, and movies. By the 1920s, "live" came to mean simultaneous broadcasting. A sociologist in 1928, predicting a greater future for the radio than the phonograph, made the explicit equation of simultaneity with life and recording with death: "The radio does not transmit 'dead' material as does the phonograph, but present and 'living' events."[105] In a "live" performance, the body is present in the flesh. "Live" means that contingency is still possible, that

105. E. W. Burgess, "Communication," *American Journal of Sociology* 33 (1928): 125.

the energy is actual, and that a new and singular event can take place. Here again, in the bowels of the new machines of simulation, the old marker of authenticity—the mortal body itself—reappeared.

Freud wrote *Civilization and Its Discontents* in 1929, amid such transformations in the shape of the solo body and the body politic. For Freud, eros and civilization were forever at odds. Eros was the force of coupling and was essentially dyadic, but civilization demanded a larger scope and lowered intensity of affective bonds. "Sexual love is a relationship between two individuals in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing, whereas civilization depends on relationships between a considerable number of individuals." He could have been talking about the mass address of radio, but he was not. He thought the work of civilization was inevitably to bind individuals, families, nations, and races into larger and larger libidinal units. But the stinger in his story was that an authentically democratic eros was impossible: its price was repression. Nature had loaded the deck against human happiness; the scale of our affections was mismatched with the demands of social order. Civilization sought to rechannel our finite libidinal energy onto its approved objects.

We ought to count Freud as one of the most prescient thinkers of mass communication, of what happens when dyadic form (communication) is technologically stretched to a gigantic degree (mass). His comments on modern media featured the stubborn fact of human embodiment, our twin entanglements in biology and culture. He made a point more commonly associated with McLuhan thirty-five years later, but with a more tragic twist: that media are extensions of the human body. Each medium for Freud was an attempt to cover a human lack, to fill the gap between ourselves and the gods. Telephony has extended our ears, allowing us to hear our distant loved ones, as photography and phonography have substituted for memory. And yet we are none the happier. Finitude recurs with a vengeance. "Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic god. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown onto him and they still give him much trouble at times." Freud knew what struggles it took to fit our bodies into the new auxiliary organs of the media.[106]

In addition to the deep reasons for nervousness about radio—its distance, deathliness, disembodiment, and dissemination—there were sound substantive reasons as well. Radio was the latest chapter in Ameri-

106. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (1930; New York: Norton, 1961), 39–45. During the writing of the book, Freud wore an irritating prosthesis in the roof of his mouth as a consequence of his throat cancer.

can hucksterism. Resistance to advertising on radio was widespread in the 1920s and 1930s and waning but still strong in the 1940s.[107] Radio called forth not only entertainers and journalists but confidence men whose goat-gland operations and mind cures promised health and rejuvenation to the millions. What Cooley thought had disappeared was back with a vengeance: the need to differentiate between the ghosts and the frauds.

Many of the most successful performers exploited liveness, in the sense of either simultaneity or nondeath, to cut through public anxieties about fakery and duplication in the radio world. A token of the live body was extended across the waves to assure truthfulness. During one of his first fireside chats, for instance, the consummate radio performer President Franklin Delano Roosevelt "suddenly burst forth with 'Where's that glass of water?'" After a pause to drink, he explained to his listeners: "My friends, it's very hot here in Washington tonight."[108] Erik Barnouw's embellished account of the episode calls this "a simple human action that may have been sophisticated showmanship."[109] The gesture was powerful because a "simple human" need was enough to interrupt a presidential address. In the Elizabethan language of the king's two bodies, the body mortal briefly trumped the body politic.[110] By letting his audience in on his thirst and thus revealing the finitude he shared with them, FDR proved his sincerity. He was "one of us." FDR not only wove policies, he interrupted their enunciation to affirm something more profound. Polished words would be too slick. Imperfection was the guarantee of truth in a medium in which the polio-stricken body of the president could be converted into a Voice that reassured Americans everywhere. The intrusion of thirst is a classic reality effect, an undercutting of the medium that actually plays to its strengths. Take, he said, *hoc est corpus meum.*

FDR, like other radio performers who secured the trust or adoration of their audiences, learned—to use James's distinction—to assert the "will to communicate" over the "will to personate." A synecdoche of one's unique human individuality could lift the veil of the commodity.[111] The body and its pain became the last frontier of authenticity, the bedrock immune to fakery, a source of private fact. The flesh provided the ultimate ethos. The religious notion (much older than the mass media per se) that a larger social body could be formed by distributing tokens of an individual body recurs in radio. We ought not to forget that "mass" in "mass communication" can be taken as a noun as well as an adjective.[112]

Like Freud, Theodor W. Adorno thought all such compensations ill-fitting annoyances. There was no more formidable critic of the commercialized culture of sincerity. Simulated community among colisteners or staged interaction between audiences and radio stars were, he thought, so much hocus-pocus (a term that derives from a cynical misunderstanding of the phrase from the Latin Mass, *hoc est corpus*). Adorno's view of media audiences was more subtle than the frequent caricature as brainwashed zombies or infantilized masses. The danger of radio was not its rabble-rousing, but its individualizing ability, its skill at tucking the listener into a cocoon of unreflective security or sadistic laughter. Mass culture did not instill passivity; rather, it shunted enormous energies into shock absorption. Solidarity within the audience was at best a fetish, as was audience participation in the radio world. His rogues' gallery of "regressive listeners" jitterbugging their way into false ecstasy is the epitome of idolatrous interaction with distant objects. The radio ham, for instance, "is only interested in the fact that he hears and succeeds in inserting himself, with his private equipment, into the public mechanism, without exerting even the slightest influence on it."[113] This extraordinary description (an accurate rendering of Adorno's German) complains of the perversion of an authentic and fertile erotic dyad. As in Seldes's description and the *Phaedrus,* the specter of wasted seed recurs. Like Freud, with whom he found much to dispute, Adorno took the dyad as the insuperable site of genuine eros. The libidinal structure of radio, however, could only be either solitary or plural. Ever the Hegelian Marxist, he thought authentic interaction could occur only when one subject encountered another in its objectivity. Radio address had to

107. Smulyan, *Selling Radio,* and Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Patricia L. Kendall, *Radio Listening in America* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948), 59–80.

108. "The President Broadcasts: Confronted with Mikes, Cameras, and Radio Engineers, Roosevelt Pauses for a Glass of Water," *Broadcasting* 5, 3 (1933): 8. This outburst is not recorded in the official record of the fireside chats. Thanks to Joy Elizabeth Hayes for advice on FDR and radio.

109. Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933–1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 8.

110. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

111. Allison McCracken, "White Men Can't Sing Ballads: Crooning and Cultural Anxiety, 1927–1933" (manuscript, American Studies Program, University of Iowa, 1998).

112. John Durham Peters, "Beyond Reciprocity: Public Communication as a Moral Ideal," in *Communication, Culture, and Community: Liber Amicorum James Stappers,* ed. Ed Hollander, Coen van der Linden, and Paul Rutten (Houten, Netherlands: Bohn, Stafleu, van Loghum, 1995), 41–50.

113. Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader,* ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (1938; New York: Continuum, 1982), 270–99, 286–99, 293. See also Adorno, "Analytical Study of the NBC *Music Appreciation Hour,*" *Musical Quarterly* 78, 2 (1994): 325–77 (written 1938–41).

be structurally insincere owing to the generality of its solicitations. Like Marx on money, Adorno saw in radio a form of pimpery. As Adorno's colleague Leo Lowenthal complained, attempts at personal address involved a slippage between general and individual address: "Especially for you means all of you."[114] Like Socrates, Adorno is concerned about mass eros as one prominent communication disorder.

If Adorno's radio studies exposed the failure to craft symbolic participation at a distance, Robert K. Merton's (1946) study of the all-American singer Kate Smith examined a successful ritual performance. Smith's smashing success at mass persuasion in a one-day war bond drive on 21 September 1943 stemmed, Merton argued, from what audiences perceived as her sincerity. Many Hollywood stars had gone on the air to raise funds for the war effort, but few had achieved Smith's success. Merton borrowed George Herbert Mead's definition of sincerity as a speaker's use of "verbal symbols which evidently affect himself as he intends them to affect his audience. Sincerity provides for a mutual experience."[115] For Merton, Smith was not just staging an interaction; her audience really was getting something from her.

The key to her link with the audience was her "propaganda of the deed." Smith did not exempt herself from the sacrifice she asked of her audience. Her own live radio performance, eighteen hours in a single day, put her body on the line, just as she asked her audiences to put their money on the line. Doing a physically exhausting radio campaign without complaint allayed suspicions of fakery well enough to bind a national audience in a moment of crisis. A recorded performance would have lost the crucially persuasive presence of the live body. If, somehow, it was revealed that it had all been transcribed and her responses to listener calls had been fabricated, Smith's sincerity would have vanished, even if the two performances were identical. The audience may have believed in the metaphysics of presence, but bad metaphysics may still be the basis of persuasive rhetoric. Smith was a sacrificial surrogate who modeled behavior for the listening audience in the best style of ancient expiation. Her lack of sex appeal, Merton found, was also part of her credibility. Kate Smith was not Rita Hayworth; no glamour corrupted her sincerity. The irreality of Hollywood faded, as Merton argued, in the drama of a voice in a race against exhaustion. From the Greeks

114. Leo Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines," in *Radio Research, 1942–1943*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton (New York: Sloan, Duell, and Pearce, 1944), 507–48, 581–85.

115. Robert K. Merton, with Marjorie Fiske and Alberta Curtis, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York: Harper, 1946), 105.

onward, suffering has been taken as a guarantee of truth; the words of the dying are still given special testimonial value. Pain is often still taken to limit the motive to fabricate.[116] Kate Smith had found the mother lode of communicative authenticity: the body speaking from its pain.

If Adorno punctured incessant manipulation, Merton discovered achievements that transcended it. Merton wanted to save us from anomie; Adorno wanted to save us from abuse. Adorno saw in broadcasting a botched attempt at reconciliation; Merton saw a felicitous suspension of unbelief, a momentary clearing in the cloud banks of cynicism. Characteristically, Adorno eschewed the "pseudoindividualism" of mass appeals, whereas "pseudo-Gemeinschaft" worried Merton; their ideal is evident in what they most fear is corrupted. In sum, conflict versus integration, ideological unmasking versus symbolic togetherness, direct participation versus collective representation—the debate between Adorno and Merton represents the intersection of the two great rival traditions of modern social theory, Marx and Durkheim. For Adorno, solidarity was impossible unless it rested on real interests or personal bonds. Participation required bodily involvement or expenditure. For Merton, mass rituals could be vicarious interactions for which "direct" personal involvement was irrelevant. Adorno and Merton debated, in short, whether mass *communication* was possible. Symbols could be dispersed to vast numbers: the question was the kind of relationships they forged. Merton left judgments of sincerity up to the audience; Adorno thought this stance was a recipe for mass deception. The debate about the social use of radio, much more than the ill-starred collaboration of Adorno and Paul Lazarsfeld, is the key conflict in the history of mass communication theory in this century.[117] The question turns not on administrative versus critical visions of research, but on authenticity versus fakery in communicative ties across distances.

The politics of mass communication theory turn on one's vision of the possibility of media-made community. The question is, Can you take part without being there in the flesh? Can an audience be said to participate in a remote event? The bodily context of all communication

116. Page DuBois, *Torture and Truth* (London: Routledge, 1991); Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

117. The intellectual pivot of debates about the stakes of mass communication research was long the botched effort to fuse the critical theory of Adorno and the empirical research of Lazarsfeld at the Princeton Radio Project, 1938–41. See Todd Gitlin, "Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm," *Theory and Society* 6 (1978): 205–53; David E. Morrison, "*Kultur* and Culture: The Case of Theodor Adorno and Paul F. Lazarsfeld," *Social Research* 45, 2 (1978): 331–55; and Elihu Katz, "Communications Research since Lazarsfeld," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 (1987): S25–S45.

is inescapable. Merton's argument that symbols working at a distance can afford authentic sociability has an elective affinity with the interests of the media industries, whose economic well-being depends on convincing audiences to trust the sincerity of distant testimonials. Yet Adorno's thesis that all distant relationships are false can give us no antidote to the mutual distrust that eats at us all, for which relationships are untouched by distance (as he well knew)? The analysis of the falsity can be interminable. Adorno's negative dialectics constantly undermines the dream of reconciliation between people—in the name of that dream. Removing false hope is a fine service so long as it does not damage our animal faith, since all action rests on strategic illusion. The decision as to which thinker is right may turn on whether we are more afraid of being suckered by power or deprived of hope.

In the apparently innocuous questions whether Kate Smith can be sincere over the air and whether such a performance can afford a "mutual" experience, then, is found the intellectual and political heart of mass communication theory, the question of mediation—in other words, the possibility of interaction without personal or physical contact. Adorno finds the idea of audience participation in the radio world the worst kind of projection; Merton finds it to be a ritual act of solidarity with real consequences. Merton believed in the possibility, at least on extraordinary occasions, of an expanded social body, joined at a distance. Adorno was suspicious of any attempt to expand the human symbolically or technically. For him no "auxiliary organs," as Freud called media, could heal the body's displacement in mass communication; they were at best clumsy prostheses to restore a bodily wholeness that may never even have existed. Merton's erotics—his vision of how bodies can be coupled—allowed for real communication across distance; Adorno's insisted on the face-to-face, seeing only illusion or perversion in distended ties. In Maxwell's terms, Merton believed in action at a distance; Adorno believed that all immediacy was laced with infinitesimal gaps.

These questions are rich in implication for our public and private lives today. Democracy and eros remain the twin frames for popular reception of each new medium. Talk about the Internet today, for instance, is rife with dreams of new bodies politic (participatory democracy) and horrors of new bodies pornographic (children preyed on). The meaning of communicative connections, large scale and small, is an ongoing conundrum. We continue to play out Maxwell's options: bodies joined at a distance and bodies that, even when pressed tightly together, are not in absolute contact. If success in communication was

once the art of reaching across the intervening bodies to touch another's spirit, in the age of electronic media it has become the art of reaching across the intervening spirits to touch another's body. Not the ghost in the machine, but the body in the medium is the central dilemma of modern communications.