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## The Revolt Against Radio: Postwar Media Criticism and the Struggle for Broadcast Reform

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## The Revolt Against Radio: Postwar Media Criticism and the Struggle for Broadcast Reform

### Disciplines

Communication | Communication Technology and New Media | Mass Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

## CHAPTER 3

### THE REVOLT AGAINST RADIO

#### POSTWAR MEDIA CRITICISM & THE STRUGGLE FOR BROADCAST REFORM

*Victor Pickard*

**F**OLLOWING WORLD WAR II, THE UNITED STATES WITNESSED a period of transition and transformation rivaled by few others in its history.<sup>1</sup> This watershed moment saw major institutions open up to reformist impulses, with both national and geopolitical power relations in flux. Media magnate Henry Luce dubbed it “The American Century” as the U.S. emerged as a global leader, a status soon defined and legitimated by the Cold War with the Soviet Union. It is easy to forget, however, that a fleeting window of opportunity appeared before Cold War imperatives and red-scare hysteria firmly took hold—a moment when the country was not yet in the thrall of far-right politics, and some still believed New Deal aspirations could be further realized. This hope was particularly true for the new medium of broadcasting, which saw a wide array of constituencies organize against its corporate consolidation to advocate for a more democratic system.

The commercial broadcasting system in the 1940s was founded on the 1934 Communications Act, which sanctioned commercial broadcasting at the expense of other alternatives (McChesney, 1993). Most broadcasters viewed their primary role as that of selling receivers and airtime to individual advertisers who would then use their rented time-slot to develop programs and promote their product. Hence, programs like “soap operas,” the term given to radio serials after World

1 This chapter draws from Victor Pickard, “Media Democracy Deferred: The Postwar Settlement for U.S. Communications, 1945-1949,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2008, 69-133.



War II, were “sponsored” by specific companies, giving them free reign to air numerous commercials. Despite relatively little documentation in existing scholarship, much evidence suggests that many listeners found this arrangement objectionable. The following chapter fleshes out the major strands of radio criticism aimed at commercial radio’s excesses that peaked in the postwar years and drove a short-lived but vibrant broadcast reform movement. In so doing, it casts into stark relief both the contingencies of our current commercial media system, as well as promises for future reform.

This period in U.S. media history is a largely forgotten one. Although revisions are on the rise (e.g., Fones-Wolf, 2006), most official accounts depict Americans as largely satisfied with their radio by the 1940s (e.g., Baughman, 1992), and the conventional view sees this period as radio’s “Golden Age.” Recovering significant dissent and resistance underscores the crucial fact that the development of the American commercial media system was neither natural nor inevitable, but rather the direct result of suppressing many voices that agitated for granting a new medium its full democratic potential.

### THE POSTWAR UPRISING AGAINST COMMERCIAL RADIO

The years 1945-48 saw media criticism gather critical mass, providing the driving narratives for a vibrant media reform movement. Although a critical strain of intellectual commentary toward radio had existed since the early 1930s from the likes of James Rorty and Ring Lardner (Lenthall, 2002), a leap occurred in the 1940s in the vehemence and sheer number of critical voices. This criticism took shape across grassroots social movements, commentary from varied newspapers and opinion journals, as well as hundreds of letters from average listeners to editors, broadcasters, and the FCC. Dissident intellectuals provided further coherence by extending this critique into trenchant polemics embraced by social movement groups (Ernst, 1946; Siepmann, 1946; Konecky, 1946). Activists organized “listening councils” and letter-writing campaigns in communities across America. Popular criticism reached its greatest expression in left-leaning opinion magazines like *Harpers*, *New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *The Atlantic*, but also appeared in less likely places: general interest journals and specialized publications as diverse as the *Antioch Review*, the *Saturday Review of Literature*,

and the *American Mercury*, as well as business journals like *Fortune* and *Business Week*, mainstream journals like *Reader's Digest* and *Time*, and trade journals like *Variety* and *Tide*. Moreover, this critique also manifested in popular culture in the form of novels and films, including the bestselling book and film "The Hucksters." In a year-end review, the *Times* reported, "The year of 1946 found radio subjected to more obverse and insistent criticism than the industry had experienced in the whole of its previous twenty-five years ..." (Gould, 1946). *Fortune* described this outpouring in 1946 as "The revolt against radio" (1947).

One historian of this period describes the uproar as "the first significant and widespread public debate in American history focused on the nexus of advertising, broadcasting, and the public interest" (Socolow, 283). This debate reflected a deep-seated disgust with commercial radio and spanned both radical and mainstream discourses, giving rise to policy reform efforts such as the FCC "Blue Book," which aimed to curb "excessive advertising" and mandate "public service responsibilities" (Pickard, 2011). One commentator marked the moment by claiming, "Criticism of radio is not new, but in 1946, as the industry enters its third decade richer, more powerful and more excruciatingly vulgar and meaningless than ever before, impatience has reached a higher peak of articulate disgust" (Young, 1946). By 1946, criticism seemed to have reached a pivotal threshold. An irate listener summarized the onslaught against broadcasters:

"The Hucksters," the FCC's so-called "Blue Book," The N.Y. "PM's" campaign, Crosby, Gould et al critics, discussion on ABC's "Town Meeting" ... the adverse editorials and your own listeners' letters, has put your industry-spokesmen ... on the defensive, apologetically insisting that radio *does* operate in the public interest.

The listener asserted that "purely business considerations" create an "obviously intolerable limitation ... that definitely prevents American Radio becoming the *effective* instrument of *democracy* that our new national position of world leadership and the many other crucial post-war conditions *now* make imperative" (Miller, 1947).

Also in 1946, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a long article by the *Public Opinion Quarterly* editor lambasting broadcasters' "binge of commercialism." Encouraging listeners "to make their pressure felt" by forming "listeners' councils," the article concluded that "The program which advertisers believe will sell goods has become the god of



the industry,” resulting in “an extraordinary preponderance of mass entertainment ... especially during the good listening hours.” Such low-quality programming, ignored the desires of “minority groups” like “farmers, labor union people, women; lovers not only of fine music but of serious drama and literature, listeners interested in science, in problems of health and social betterment, in international affairs, in the great issues before Congress” (Free, 1946). Others concurred. A Scripps Howard columnist argued that the effects of such commercialism rendered all radio “corny, strident, boresome, florid, inane, repetitive, irritating, offensive, moronic, adolescent, or nauseating” (Quoted in Fones-Wolf, 126-127). “Nobody can be found today who will deny that the radio commercial in its present form is the most offensive breach of good taste the Nation has ever seen,” added a columnist writing for the address newspaper PM (quoted in Konecky, 10).

Despite earlier excitement about this new medium, the sense that radio had failed was palpable. Near the 40th anniversary of his invention of the audion tube, Lee de Forest, considered “the father of radio,” wrote a scathing letter to the NAB:

What have you gentlemen done with my child? He was conceived as a potent instrumentality for culture, fine music, the uplifting of America’s mass intelligence. You have debased the child... You have made him a laughing stock of intelligence... The occasional fine program is periodically smeared with impudent insistence to buy or try... Soap opera without end or sense floods each household daily. Murder mysteries rule the waves by night, and children are rendered psychopathic by your bedtime stories. This child of mine has been resolutely kept to the average intelligence of 13 years... as though you and your sponsors believe the majority of listeners have only moron minds. Nay, the curse of your commercials has grown consistently more cursed, year by year (Time, 1947).

Such powerful indictments against commercial radio in the 1940s were launched by a diverse range of voices. The staggering number of news articles, books, and activist pamphlets that burst forth in the postwar 1940s is difficult to synthesize, but media criticism fell generally into four categories: structural, ideological, commercial and racial critiques.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the nature of this criticism is to not only

2 Although space limitations preclude its discussion here, the racial critique is discussed in Victor Pickard (forthcoming), “The Air Belongs to the People: The Rise and Fall of a Postwar Radio Reform Movement.”

glimpse the intellectual arsenal of the 1940s media reform movement; it reminds us of a rich critical tradition that connects contemporary crises and opportunities with past conflicts. Correcting historical amnesia about forgotten struggles against the American commercial media system recovers resistance and corrects the historical record. It also sets the stage for remaking the system today.

### STRUCTURAL CRITIQUE

Echoed across a broad canvas of journal articles and books, the structural critique saw commercial broadcasting as excessively profit-driven, monopolistic, and advertiser-controlled. Much of this criticism suggested that without immediate structural reform, American broadcasting's potential would be squandered. A piece in the *Antioch Review* phrased it dramatically: "These next few years of physical development are crucial for the salvation of broadcasting's soul." The article declared, "Only by facing realities and contemplating our vanishing freedoms can we be armed for the impending battle of the air" (Timber, 1946). Similarly, a two-part series published in the periodical *Forum* addressed the question "Why Broadcasting Has Failed." The four main failures of broadcasting in serving the public interest, according to the article, were low quality of entertainment; excessive commercialism and advertising; lack of local talent; and lack of public service programs. "To understand why," the article suggested, "one must understand something about the broadcasting business, which is a get rich-quick-stay-rich-easy business." The article stressed that many listeners were unaware that broadcasting, as public property, was amenable to reform—"That the kilocycles on which stations broadcast are not the private preserve of those lucky few who got there first ..." (Knepper, 1948, 7-8).

Broadcasters' lack of public service was a recurring theme: "The national advertisers whose broadcasts consume very nearly all the precious evening time of the principal networks are probably unfamiliar with [public interest] provisions... Their basic concern is to increase the sale of the breakfast foods, drugs, soaps and cigarettes they manufacture by extolling the virtues of their products in the course of broadcasts designed to attract mass audiences" (Ibid.). This critique dovetailed with growing concern that broadcast media were culpable in the public's misunderstandings of key issues. A much-discussed 1944 article in the *Times* by Hadley Cantril found that a shocking percentage



of people were ill-informed about important foreign and domestic policy issues (1944, 9). "If we do not provide criteria of public service," cautioned a *New Republic* writer, "it is doubtful whether such yardsticks will be established with respect to FM, television and facsimile broadcasting, the commercial application of which is bound to increase rapidly in the postwar period." This would be disastrous for democracy, because "Without such safeguards, these new and revolutionary methods of radio communication will do little more than compete with the comic strip and motion picture for the leisure time of a listening public already overwhelmed by a plethora of light entertainment." And, the article forewarned, "such a public cannot be expected to develop as an informed and thinking citizenry, without which a truly democratic government cannot survive" (Smith, 1944, 13).

### IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Radio had reached a kind of ideological equilibrium during the war, in which progressive views were given unprecedented access to the airwaves. The *New Republic* went so far as to run an article in early 1945 titled "Is Radio Going Liberal?" (Corwin & Reitman). Indeed, FDR used broadcasting as his personal amplifier and Democrats, as the party in power, overall fared well in radio representations. One prominent radio researcher, after finding an imbalance, called for an "equal time" provision between Democrats and Republicans, though not for members of smaller parties like Communists and Socialists because "It is generally agreed that ours is a two-party system" (Kaltenborn, 1946).

As the 1940s progressed, however, ideological imbalance became a frequent lament among liberals. As early as November 1943 an *Atlantic Monthly* news analyst wrote that a premium on audience appeal "in turn puts a premium on sensationalism," and leads to a de facto conservative slant in broadcasting. "The serious news broadcaster ... finds himself under pressure from two quarters. On the one hand, he is tempted to play up the widest possible audience; on the other, he is tempted to slant his interpretation the way he thinks his sponsor might like it to go." Considering the trend of vanishing liberal viewpoints, he observed, "In recent months we have seen ... sponsors snap up the news programs with a conservative slant as they never snapped up the programs with a liberal slant." When a sponsor buys a news show, "he will tend, nine times out of ten, to prefer the kind of analyst who at least does no violence to the National Association of Manufacturers."



Noting the political economic landscape shifting away from the New Deal to the “big wartime profits of American industry,” he suggested that not only were the sponsors “exerting more indirect pressure” but that the public and news broadcasters were “responding to that pressure.” Commentators who reflect the “New Deal line,” he maintained, “now find they get into trouble with their sponsors” (Howe, 1943).

The speed with which a purge of liberal, labor-friendly voices from radio occurred was stunning. A 1945 survey conducted by *Variety* indicated a relative balance between liberal and conservative commentators. However, this quickly changed in 1946–47. By one count, the four major radio networks eliminated two dozen left-leaning commentators in less than a two-year span (Barnouw, 1968, 241; *Broadcasting*, 1946, 22). The casualty list included liberal luminaries like William Shirer, Don Hollenbeck, Raymond Swing, John Vandercook, Don Goddard, Frank Kingdon, Robert St. John, and former NYC mayor Fiorello La Guardia. R.C. Davis’s letter to the FCC was one of many decrying

a very obvious trend among the big broadcasting companies to systematically suppress any and all information of domestic and foreign affairs that does not fit the strait-jacket on the thinking of the boards of directors of the advertisers. The latest—and probably not the last—victim of this crusade to kill free information is William Shirer, a commentator who believed that news is a public trust, not an advertiser’s puff (1947).

The letter concluded: “We the people own the [airwaves] ... they are not the private preserve of huge corporations currently abusing their leased property.” Similarly, noting how “pressure to ‘tone down’ news which is sympathetic to organized labor and to Russia has increased rapidly in the last few months,” a *New Republic* article struck an alarmist note: “To protect our minds and their pocketbooks, networks are dropping liberal commentators from coast to coast.” (Oliver, 1947, 12). Fones-Wolf writes that by early 1948, analysts like Edward R. Murrow and Eric Sevareid were barred by CBS from interpreting the news, and “the network airways had a decidedly conservative cast.” Other than ABC’s Elmer Davis, the “only commentators heard more than once a week on network prime time were the conservatives H.V. Kaltenborn, Earl Godwin, Fulton Lewis Jr., Henry J. Taylor, and Gabriel Heatter” (133).



An article in the *New Republic* titled “Thought Control—American Style” captured what many progressives were feeling by 1947: American broadcasting was increasingly hostile to not only liberal ideas but intelligent discourse in general as broadcasters replaced informative programming with cheaply-produced entertainment. Citing cases where outspoken liberals were dropped even when sponsors lined up to buy their airtime, the article claimed that “most removals” were decided “by the networks themselves,” not the sponsors. Some observers saw “a concerted reactionary drive behind the purge of liberals from the air.” Others saw at work “chiefly a wave of irresponsibility in the radio industry” that was interrupted only by wartime exigencies, afterward returning to “old-time commercialism of the most blatant sort.” According to the article, “Whatever the main cause may be, the result adds up to the same thing, namely the increasing refusal of the networks to give adequate room to anything but stand-pat interpretation of the news” (Oliver, 13).

This purge did not go unnoticed by the public, media, and Congress, but the reactionary tide against all things left-of-center proved to be devastating for radio’s liberals. Cold War imperatives provided cover for right-wing forces to drive progressives from the air. As a result, few issues suffered as much as labor. The *CIO News* referred to commercial radio as “moneyed masters” who let loose “their mechanized hounds of the press and radio ... after the American working people and their unions.” (Quoted in Fones-Wolf, 2006b). One radical pamphleteer argued that “Big Business interests—the monopoly corporations, the old-system standard (AM) broadcasting giants, and the big-money publishers and newspaper owners ... have taken FM from labor and the people...” (Konecky, 1-2). One of many letters to the FCC expressed frustration with radio’s anti-labor slant: “It is regrettable that a means of disseminating knowledge such as the radio should be utilized so exclusively for sheer advertising and propaganda purposes ...” The letter pleaded, “Let labor and capital both be heard equally. Only in this way can the uninformed public gain fair knowledge of the issues it must vote for and decide on” (Nations, 1946).

### COMMERCIAL CRITIQUE

Focusing primarily on content, the commercial critique of radio held that American broadcasting typically provided low-quality, homogenized, unintelligent programming. Many critics discerned an

underlying pattern: cheaply produced programming crafted to just barely pass the lowest quality threshold and still be acceptable to large audiences. Broadcasters typically employed established names instead of developing new creative talent. This held true especially with soap operas and other widely syndicated programs, giving rise to questions of indecency, loss of local programming, and homogenization. The most passionate indictment by far was aimed at excessive commercialism in the form of invasive on-air advertising, particularly the widely reviled “singing commercials” and “plug-uglies.”

### *Poor Programming Quality*

A recurring media critique focused on poor programming quality. For example, an article by the culture critic Gilbert Seldes lamented how societal imaginations of “the mass” were driven by “repetitive gestures on the producing end and passive enjoyment for the consumer.” Given the commercial imperative of reaching the largest audience possible, Seldes argued that broadcasters’ “first principle” was “Radio ought never to serve any interest except that of the mass” to the detriment of an “intellectual minority.” The sole exceptions had been the “sustaining programs” provided when radio gave in to a “variety of pressures,” proving that “society is not a monolithic mass: it is ... pluralistic.” “Where there is no mass,” Seldes claimed, “there is no danger of a master.” But broadcasters abandoned pluralism in favor of a more “established zone of interest.” Thus, broadcasts of symphonies and powerful documentaries were becoming relics of the past. Seldes, urged broadcasters to consider America’s pluralism, a richly diverse composite of “many large groups, many small ones, and individuals belonging to several major and several minor groups at the same time.” He argued that “The purpose of entertainment is to make people listen to the commercial; when entertainment has reduced the listener to a passive, noncritical state, the announcer moves in with his clubs or machine guns or soothing syrup and finishes the job.” Our “great entertainment industries,” he warned, “are creating before our eyes a cultural *proletariat*: the intellectually disinherited, the emotional homeless, whose function is only to answer the telephone and say what program they are listening to.” He concluded, “No matter what is said about program content, the commercial is sacred—it’s the sponsor’s private property” (1948).

Similarly, Lewis Gannett, book critic of the *New York Herald Tribune*, wrote in the *Atlantic* a “meditation” on the “hopelessly diseased



state of the American radio public." After spending six months overseas, where he listened to the "sedate programs of the BBC," he returned to American broadcasting, and his "ears were horrified" to hear "enough laxative advertising to convince a visitor to this country ... that the chief wartime occupation of the USA was performed in its W.C.'s." Gannett gathered that "we were a nation of sufferers from acid stomach, chronic headaches, inadequate elimination, and general physical incompetence." Indeed, "The only way to escape the constant oleaginous chatter on these topics," Gannett reckoned, "was to turn off the radio altogether." He pondered if, upon military personnel's return to the U.S., they would not be "plumb disgusted with radio commercials" (1945a). The outpouring of supportive letters caused Gannett to wonder, "Perhaps the radio commercials didn't express the basic metabolism of America after all." He urged that "if more of us stood up and shouted what we feel as we hear, night after night, the shoddy nastinesses of everyday radio commercials, the industry would listen" (1945b, 117).

The *New Republic* also linked poor program quality with structural characteristics of commercial broadcasting: "The radio has become increasingly a device to sell foods by any means fair or foul while the question of usefulness to the public is more and more neglected ..." Thus, "As a result the amount of time available for non-commercial sustaining programs is down almost to the vanishing point; ... either cancelled entirely or relegated to bad time when they have practically no listening audience ..." The article concluded, the U.S. is "almost the only great nation on earth which permits the homes of its citizens to be invaded by vulgar and often false claims of private individuals and corporations seeking to make money" (1945).

These sentiments also registered in more mainstream media. The popular radio host Fred Allen presented an irreverent burlesque of commercial radio on his show, which gained major print media attention. "There was no mistaking the tune. With apologies to Gilbert & Sullivan, Fred Allen, radio's comic Pooh-bah, this week joined the growing ranks of the industry's flagellants with a withering burlesque: *The Radio Mikado...*," *Time* magazine reported in an article that opened with one of Allen's songs: "You want to know who we are, We're the hucksters of radio ... We're vice presidents and clerks, Confidentially, we're all jerks ...." (1946).<sup>3</sup>

3 See also Alan Havig, "Critic From Within: Fred Allen Views Radio," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 12, no. 2 (1978), 328–340.

It was not just large papers and political weeklies that leveled bold media criticism in the mid 1940s. The *Evening Bulletin*, in Providence, Rhode Island, editorialized that “It is no compliment either to the American intelligence or to its character that these radio voices indulge in such unmitigated tripe, with the excuse (we hope) that this is what the people want ....” It asked: “Why do the radio people do these things? Can it be that as a nation we are as bad and as moronic as they would make us out to be? Are we the fantastic fools and they the stern and hard-headed realists? Are they really reflecting the mores of this great nation...?” (1944). A torrent of letters sent to the FCC, Congress, and radio networks reflected many of these criticisms. After breaking down the time allocated to commercials and vapid commentary of a typical broadcast, a concerned listener wrote: “Do not delude yourself, Mr. Reece, the American listening public is not getting what it wants on the radio—it is, on the contrary, taking unbelievable amounts of mental punishment which it is apparently powerless to prevent” (Ruff, 1946).

### *Disgust with Soap Operas*

Many critics singled out daytime programming as the nadir of commercial logic. An exposé appeared in the March 1946 issue of *Fortune* with a devastating portrayal of the quintessential daytime program: the soap opera. With the caption “Manufactured at low cost, it pleases advertisers and flatters women,” the article noted that “about 20 million women listen each day to the more than forty soap operas on the air.” While “apologists” refer to them as “daytime serials or serial dramas,” others “speak of them as soap operas, soapers, washboard weepers, and cliffhangers.” And while defenders see soap operas as “good storytelling,” critics reply that “at best it is tedious bilge and at worst it is stark, revolting morbidity.” “The soap opera’s foes usually end by denying that it is what the housewife wants,” the article observed. “She wants something better, they say, and listens to soap opera only because she has been conditioned by years of trash.”

Soap operas’ benefits for advertisers were two-fold. First, they were “habit-forming” because “women would come back to the radio day after day to see what would happen.” Second, they were “economical” because “money could be saved on talent” given that soap operas were “a fraction of the cost of a musical program having comparable appeal.” Noting that soap operas were actually “an advertising agency



production,” the article described how “the agency acts as general manager or producer, and gets 15 percent of the gross cost for its work” by purchasing “a serial as a ‘package’ from a writer or, more commonly, hires the writer, actors, organist, director, and announcer, and supervises the whole affair.” Thus, a network’s role could be limited to approving scripts and keeping one person in the control room. “The serial story itself,” the article observed, “is mere bait to persuade the housewife to listen to the commercial announcement.” These commercials typically ran over three minutes within 15-minute daytime programs, often receiving more attention and resources than the programs themselves, “delivered by well-paid announcers, men at once chatty and orotund, confidential and pontifical, sweet and portentous.” The article observed, “A few commercials are even purposely irritating because of an advertising theory that certain kinds of exacerbation have sales value” (Ibid.).

Examining formulaic plot constructions, the *Fortune* article emphasized how broadcasters did not simply give people what they wanted: “working people almost never appear,” and if politicians are introduced as characters, “their political views are foggy, if stated at all.” Women are typically presented in these dramas as virtuous, subservient to men but commanding a “homely wisdom” that men depend on. The article cited data suggesting that women did not love soap operas but “only listen because they can find nothing better to listen to.”<sup>4</sup> Based on content analyses of daytime programming across all networks, the article concluded that “the level of day-time radio is abysmally low, primarily because advertisers aim at the lowest common denominator.” Noting that “radio has profited hugely by using the people’s air,” it conceded that “improvements must in all probability be made without altering the structure of American radio.”<sup>5</sup> The article concluded: “Something ought to be done about this excessively shabby art, but not much is likely to be done very quickly unless the people insist—or

4 The article cited Department of Agriculture findings that half of all rural women listened to serials, but only a quarter liked them. Another quarter disliked them intensely, and the remaining half had no strong opinion. ABC in 1943 found that 36% of women surveyed thought there were too many serials. Even among serial listeners, 28% thought there were too many.

5 It proposed creating a public fund like those available to the board of education to pay for musical and educational programs sponsored by local boards.

the networks belatedly recall—that the air belongs to the people and ought to be used for their benefit” (Ibid.).

Echoing this critique were numerous complaints to the FCC about daytime radio fare, including its disservice to women. One self-described “house wife” wrote to Commissioner Durr that after illness left her bedridden and subjected to daytime programs whose quality was “abysmally low,” she was compelled to campaign for better radio. She urged Durr, “Please keep up the fight. If it means government control better than [advertiser] control” (Ragsdale, 1946). In addition to soap operas, a nursing magazine editor was upset about the lack of children’s fare. Noting how “awful” she and other housewives found soap operas, she asked “Why isn’t there anything available for the two to five year olds, especially in the morning hours? The youngsters aren’t buyers, but their mothers are. And how grateful we’d be if some of the soap opera time would go into programs for our youngsters!” She continued, “not only is the great bulk of women capable of absorbing better stuff than they’re getting, but that they would welcome programs that would enable them to grasp world affairs better—and thus hold their own in the family dinner discussions” (Geister, 1946).<sup>6</sup>

### *Disgust with Advertising*

Many critics feared advertising’s effects on radio content. Noting that most radio advertising came from a select group of agencies connected to automobiles, drugs and cosmetics, processed food, and tobacco, media critic Morris Ernst lambasted advertisers’ undue influence, citing NBC president Niles Trammel’s infamous remarks before Congress in December 1943: “The argument is now advanced that business control of broadcasting operations has nothing to do with program control. This is to forget that ‘He who controls the pocketbook controls the man.’ Business control means complete control and there is no use arguing to the contrary” (159-160). Jack Gould, the *Times* radio critic, wrote of similar consequences. “The fact remains,” Gould contended, “that the whole course of network broadcasting in recent years has drifted more and more toward control by the advertiser rather than by the chains themselves.” “As a result,” Gould argued, “the emphasis has been primarily on the commercially ‘safe’ and ‘selling’ aspect of radio’s

6 See also Jennifer Wang, “The Case of the Radio-active Housewife: Relocating Radio in the Age of Television,” *Radio reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, 343-366.





function. Since the advertiser understandably is primarily concerned with putting over an idea or a product, he is most wont to devote undue thought to the concurrent problems of over-all sound programming and taste." Gould argued that advertisers' control over media degrades everyone involved—from media producers to the audience. He concluded that such conditions would remain until "the networks reassert their own independence and decide to call the tune rather than dance to another's." Gould suggested that although the "broadcaster often has argued that it is not his function to 'reform' the public taste ... it certainly is the broadcaster's responsibility not to lower it" (1945).

Other data from this period bear out the widespread disgust felt toward advertising. The Committee on Consumer Relations in Advertising reported that nearly 75 percent of people polled felt that radio advertising was worse than any other type (Knepper, 9). *Variety* magazine noted that commercial interests had begun to aggressively air political message points, including the "telephone hour" show having "taken up the cudgels against pending legislation for expansion of rural telephone service" (1945a). An article in the *Saturday Review* noted that "[Radio's] endless bombardment of the nation's ear—with stimuli whose chief aim is to sell the goods and occasionally the ideas of sponsors—takes seemingly little thought of public responsibility" (Wecter, 1946). That radio was selling ideas as well as goods draws attention to sponsors' promotion of an ideology as well as products—an ideology that privileged private enterprise over the public good.<sup>7</sup>

### *Opposition to "Singing Commercials" and "Plug-Uglies"*

In 1942 a *Reader's Digest* article titled "Radio's Plug-Uglies" presented its 7 million recipients with embarrassing transcripts from typical radio advertisements about bodily functions and hygiene products. The article apparently tapped into a wellspring of anger, eliciting 80,000 letters from listeners disgusted with various forms of advertising (Siepmann, 33). In response to the growing offensiveness of these "plug-uglies" (a phrase referring to a political gang or group of thugs), a group of fed-up NYC listeners formed the Plug Shrinkers Club to campaign for the cessation of these offensive commercials (*Reader's Digest*, 1942). Marjorie Kelly described the phenomenon in the *Washington Post* in 1943

7 Fones-Wolf and others demonstrate how business interests waged an all-out public relations war to elevate their ideology to the level of a guiding national narrative.



as “Those ‘terrible commercials’” that “continue to be a favorite American gripe.” Kelly wrote, “Despite the anguished howls of thousands of listeners, the earnest attempts of forward-looking broadcasters to keep commercials inoffensive, and the efforts of advertising agencies to sell sponsors on the idea that short, listenable commercials can be effective, a vast number of plug-uglies remain on the air, infuriating the public and undermining respect for American radio.” Listeners responded with comments like “They’re too long, they’re repetitious, they’re silly and an insult to our intelligence.” Also annoying were the “cowcatchers,” the designation for preceding plugs for a sponsor’s minor products before a radio program, and “hitchhikers,” which referred to a plug for a second product by the shows’ sponsor after promoting the featured product. Media reformer and scholar Charles Siepmann noted that such “new language has had to be invented to keep pace with [advertisers’] enterprising innovations” (1946, 135-136).

Beginning in January 1945, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* garnered much national attention for a months-long campaign in a series of editorials and articles advocating for an end to interruptive plug-uglies and other offensive radio commercials. One article likened the campaign to “earlier crusades to keep the public domain from being cluttered by the excesses of American publicity” when “a painted sign recommending ‘St. Jacob’s Oil’ on the rocks at Niagara Falls in 1860 led the New York legislature to pass the first law restricting outdoor advertising” (Wecter, 1946). On February 17, 1945, under the title “Radio Chains Don’t Want Reform,” the *Post-Dispatch* informed readers of the big four networks’ advertising policies in a report that spanned several columns: “The *Post-Dispatch* editorial campaign against radio’s commercial ‘plug-uglies’ in newscasts advised the networks ... [to eliminate] interrupting plugs and objectionable sponsorship in news broadcasts.” These included “remedies for kidney trouble, body odors, hangovers and the like....” As to “Middle commercials” that “interrupt recitation or comment on the news in dead center to permit an effusive description of the sponsor’s product,” the networks see “nothing reprehensible in the practice.” “A related nuisance,” the *Post-Dispatch* continued, “is the ‘self-announcer’ newscaster who springs from a news report to commercial blurb, frequently tricking the listener’s attention.” Despite minor improvements, “the practice of using the same voice for news and commercial persists” (1945b).



The *Post-Dispatch* campaign gained wide national attention and led to some concrete outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, although some individual stations voluntarily complied, the networks largely ignored the campaigns, despite endorsements from print media like the *Times* and the *New Republic*—and even the pro-industry *Broadcasting*. Responding to a *Times* article that urged networks “to put aside the indiscretions of youth,” the *Post-Dispatch* opined, “The truth is that the networks ought long ago to have reached maturity. Their income now is higher than ever, and they can well afford to reject news commercials which annoy the public” (1945c).

Eighteen days after first launching the campaign, the *Post-Dispatch* reported widespread support from leading radio newscasters who de-tested the “hideous” practice of interrupting newscasts, especially when reporting on important issues such as war-related news. The article claimed support from FCC Commissioner Wakefield as well as leading advertisers, with du Pont’s advertising director quoted as saying “I am sure something must be done by the industry or will be done for it.” Implying governmental intervention, the article stated that “Broadcasters should remember the White-Wheeler bill; they criticized it angrily enough when it appeared in the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee last spring. This measure would have forbidden *all* advertising in newscasts. The bill is dormant but not dead” (1945a).

The *Times*’s Jack Gould joined the growing chorus, describing the *Post-Dispatch* campaign as “an editorial campaign against two of the most prevalent evils in connection with the presentation of news on the radio. They are the interruption of news broadcasts with a commercial spiel and the sponsorship of such programs by ‘objectionable advertisers.’” Gould wrote that the *Post-Dispatch* believed “the public is entitled to hear its news, particularly war news which may vitally involve loved ones, without being forced to listen to a plug for a product.” According to Gould, the public’s reaction to the *Post-Dispatch*’s “thesis” had been “immediate and virtually 100 percent favorable.” He wrote that “Listeners, commentators and a few of the more thoughtful advertisers have voiced their full support,” but industry had done

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8 Announcing an end to all middle commercials, one station manager informed the *Post-Dispatch*’s editor that the editorials raised awareness of plug-uglies. “You are to be congratulated .... Radio stations certainly have been derelict in not improving newscasts...” Paul Bartlett, *Post-Dispatch*, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1945.

little more than “finger-pointing,” although some had “professed to be uneasy about” the state of their industry (1945).

General manager Ralph Smith of the ad agency Duane Jones, which was airing over 2,000 weekly commercials, defended radio advertising in the *Times* (Time, 1945). Without a trace of irony, Smith explained the class politics behind commercials: “Persons who complain about commercials are as a rule disgustingly healthy or so strongly fortified financially that grocery bills are no problem.” According to Smith, “commercials are not written for such as these. Commercials are written as a form of service to persons who hope to cut budgets or find new methods and products of personal value.” Smith claimed that except for the “critical minority who are either professional or amateur objectors,” people enjoy commercials and benefit immensely from information contained within them. “People listen to radio commercials by choice, regardless of where they are placed in the program,” he claimed. Implying that a handful of killjoys were trying to prevent average listeners who “love to look at the ads in the papers and hear the ads on the radio” from enjoying their simple pleasures, Smith ended with an appeal to American principles: “Freedom of speech is one of the Four Freedoms Americans are fighting for!” (1945). Few people were convinced. An article in *Time* magazine mocked “Adman Smith’s” efforts: “just take a moment and look around your home for the various items that have made your life easier, happier. ... Dozens and dozens of these things, you’ll find, were recommended to you over your radio. ... So today, let’s tip our hats to radio’s forgotten man—the radio advertiser” (1945).

Harlow Shapley channeled the public’s disgust toward plug-uglies and singing commercials in a Harvard address that excoriated broadcasters for their “propaganda against government regulation” and for employing the “totally false use of a trite slogan—freedom of speech ... to ask the government not to try to protect us.” Instead, broadcasters should worry less about government control and “worry about the much more dangerous control by national advertisers and by a few advertising agencies.” Shapley exhorted his fellow intellectuals and scientists to oppose the vast resources of the advertisers and their allies across various powerful industries with “a budget of good will towards American culture in the post war world. You may even help to preserve higher standards for FM,” especially from “that current vulgar inanity—the singing commercial” (1944a).



Shapley's critique resonated widely. A *Times* editorial opined: "Life in America does threaten to become pretty sad if something is not done soon about those commercial jingles which drive Professor Shapley crazy with millions of others." Responding to the firestorm, NBC president Niles Trammel offered Shapley an opportunity to express his "reactions to certain phases of the broadcasting enterprise." Shapley happily complied by describing a recent experience of "listening with immense appreciation" to the composer Toscanini and the "superb NBC orchestra" as if "communicants in a majestic ethereal cathedral":

And then suddenly ... a revolting, leering vulgarian defecated in the altar before us all, desecrating the cathedral, destroying the ecstasy of the communicants, defaming the symphony and the artists... Before we could defend ourselves, a squalling, dissonant, hasty singing commercial burst in on the mood. The impostor used the same medium of music used by the high priest Toscanini. The vast audience would have been quite willing at that time to hear General Motors tell of further concert plans, or even tell with dignity suitable to the occasion about the products of General Motors. ... But what we got was a hideous jingle about soap; and we could not protect ourselves. The great art had been prostituted in the interests of immediate cash return to the broadcasting industry and its commercial patron (1944b).

Shapley widely distributed copies of his letter, including to NBC advisory board members. Building upon the "record of the fight of the timid public against the bold advertising monopolies," he forwarded his exchanges with industry representatives to FCC Commissioner Durr (1944c). Durr commended Shapley's "one-man crusade" but reminded him of advertising's larger systemic problems that exceeded one particularly annoying quality. Nonetheless, he welcomed that "Listeners are ... beginning to ask embarrassing questions" and felt "hopeful" that public pressure could eventually achieve "a pretty good system of broadcasting" (1944). That same week, *Business Week* reported "Radio listeners may take hope that the epidemic of singing commercial which began with the Pepsi-Cola's 'Nickel, nickel, nickel, nickel'... is finally running its course" (1944).

#### MEDIA REFORM DEFERRED

Alas, even if commercial radio may have eventually relented on some of its more egregious practices, radio ads did not disappear. While

“plug uglies” may no longer terrorize the airwaves, even the most casual listener today will note that crass commercialism remains undeterred. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that broadcasters were somewhat chastened by postwar media reform efforts (Ehrlich, 2008); however, by and large, commercial radio emerged from the 1940s further inoculated against structural interventions.

What went wrong? Despite having the potential to connect with a critical mass of support, popular media criticism often failed to make the crucial move from the “symptomatic” (discussing the excesses of commercial radio) to the “structural” (discussing its underlying causes). Part of this trend can be attributed to the purge of those activists and critics most prone to such structural criticism; namely, radical leftists who were mercilessly redbaited within cultural industries as well as many social movements. In addition to fueling the communist hysteria that discredited progressive state regulation and helped demobilize reform movements, mass media institutions themselves often helped tamp down criticism of commercial radio by failing to cover it. Morris Ernst noted, “The greatest single asset of the networks in their drive for continued monopoly of thought lies in the ignorance of the public ... perpetuated by the failure of the networks to allow any debate or discussion [on media ownership and advertising]” (159-160).

In this context, progressive policy initiatives like the FCC’s Blue Book were negated or deeply compromised (Pickard, 2010). With the spectacular defeat of progressive regulation, commentary on the state of radio continued to be noticeably anguished. However, as attention increasingly shifted to television, and many of the more strident progressive and radical voices were red-baited and blacklisted into silence, much of the more hard-hitting postwar radio criticism dissipated. Nonetheless, this criticism provides a window into the depth and breadth of opposition against commercial radio during its presumably “golden age.” Indeed, that its failings were the subject of primetime radio burlesques and the focus of print media—ranging from small-town newspapers to national dailies and political weeklies—should call into question received notions about commercial radio’s popularity and acceptance. Varying intensities of media criticism have continued to the present day, driving media reform activism like the microradio movement as well as recent campaigns for a new public media system.

What this history also shows us is that alternative visions of a public service-oriented media system were deferred for another, more



opportune moment. The American broadcasting system we have inherited today could only emerge by ignoring the discontent toward commercial radio of significant swathes of the listening public. While scholars are beginning to recognize this pivotal moment, more research is needed. As we recover this history, we call into question the very legitimacy of the current media system. Critical historical work that denaturalizes commercial media by showing how its ascent resulted from subverting the public interest is a first crucial step toward reforming this system.

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9 "DP" refers to the Clifford Durr collection located in the state archives in Alabama, Montgomery.

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# *A Moment of Danger*

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