RADIO A BLESSING OR A CURSE?

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The *Forum*, a magazine of social and political commentary, regularly invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. Woodford was a writer of commentary and popular fiction. Harbord, a retired army officer, was president of the Radio Corporation of America.

JACK WOODFORD

"RADIO: A BLESSING OR A CURSE?" March 1929

Do you remember, a few years ago, how we all felt a vague sort of elation when the wonder of radio came to our attention? Ah, at last, we said, here is something . . . something . . . we were not quite sure what. Something overwhelming that was going to broaden American life and culture. Something that was going to bring peace on earth and good will to men. Something that was going to do everything but change the actual physical line of North America. Do you think I exaggerate? Get out the papers of a few years back and read the editorials. [ellipses in original]

And now we know what we have got in radio —just another disintegrating toy. Just another medium—like the newspapers, the magazines, the billboards, and the mailbox—for advertisers to use in pestering us. A blatant signboard erected in the living room to bring us news of miraculous oil burners, fuel-saving motor cars, cigar lighters that always light. Formerly, despite the movies, the automobile, the correspondence course, and the appalling necessity most of us feel for working at two or three jobs in order to be considered successful, we still had some leisure time. But radio, God's great gift to man, eliminated that last dangerous chance for Satan to find mischief for idle hands. There is now very little danger that Americans will resort to the vice of thinking. . . .

The marvel of science which was to bring us new points of view, new conceptions of life, has

GEN. JAMES G. HARBORD

"RADIO AND DEMOCRACY," April 1929

One of the ancient Greeks held that a few thousand souls was the outside limit for the electorate of a democracy—that being the greatest number that could be reached and swayed by a single voice. But the Greeks did not foresee radio, with its revolutionary effects upon the mechanism of democratic government. They did not imagine that the day would come when spellbinders like Demosthenes would give way to a Herbert Hoover talking confidentially to a whole continent. . . .

Now that radio has entered the field of politics, all that is changed. Voters may sit comfortably at home and hear the actual voices of the candidates. Every word, every accent and intonation comes to them directly without the possibility of error or misconstruction. The transmission of intelligence has reached its height in radio, for it goes beyond the power of the printed word in conveying the exact tone and emphasis of each phrase.

Despite these obvious advantages, our political parties were slow to see the possibilities that radio offered. It is reported that at the beginning of the last presidential campaign someone suggested to one of the National Committees [Democratic/Republican] that they make use of radio in their campaigning. A prominent member of the committee replied, "We haven't time to monkey around with these novelties." Yet, before the campaign was over, the two candidates were addressing an audience estimated at

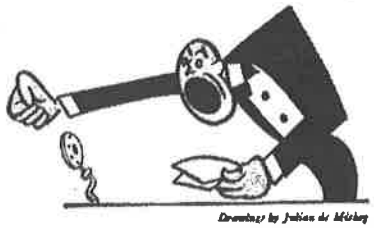
degenerated in most homes into a mere excuse for failing to entertain. Mr. and Mrs. Babbitt,[1] who used to make a feint [pretense, fake] at conversation by repeating to each other and their guests the ideas which they had gleaned from the editorials in the morning paper, now no longer go to that trouble. . . . All the modern host needs is his sixteen-tube Super-sophistication [radio] and a ration of gin. The guests sit around the radio and sip watered gin and listen to so-called music interspersed with long lists of the bargains to be had at Whosit's Department Store by those who get down early in the morning. If they are feeling particularly loquacious, they nod to each other. Thus dies the art of conversation. Thus rises the wonder of the century—Radio!

It would not be so bad if the listeners were taking in something even slightly informing. But I have searched the ether [airwaves] hopelessly trying to find something with some sense in it being broadcast somewhere. I have heard only the rattle and bang of incredibly frightful "jazz" music, played so similarly that it is impossible to tell one piece from another. . . . During the political campaign I heard Mr. Hoover calling himself the Messiah and Governor Smith calling himself the Redeemer, as they read speeches written for them by "ghost writers." For my patience in listening to "News Flashes," I have gleaned information concerning the thug who slew a cop, the man who scattered his votes in every precinct, the organist who eloped with his sister-in-law, the man who bit a dog.

. . . Instead of hearing the pick of the country's brains, we hear potential Presidents explaining how it is possible for them to be both wet and dry,[2] both conservative and liberal, both for and against every issue before the "sover'n [sovereign] 'merican" voters of this splendid nation. And so it will always be. . . .

And yet we believed that radio was about to set up a new culture in America. Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, presidential timber [quality], Aimee Semple McPherson,[3] the Sunshine Boys,[4] all of them crying aloud—that is the culture which the radio to bringing to America. That sort of thing between thirty and forty millions in their radio speeches, and the national, state, and county campaign committees had spent about two million dollars on broadcasting.

The effectiveness of radio for political campaigning was demonstrated both to the voter and the candidate by the successful broadcasting of the national conventions and the acceptance speeches of the two candidates. Both of these events were treated as "news" by the broadcasting chains and were furnished to radio listeners at the expense of the broadcasting companies. With the conventions over and the campaigns under way, radio speeches by the supporters of the two parties were classified as political advertising and paid for as such. That it was successful is shown by the statement of one of the papers that "radio deserves credit for stirring up interest in politics never before so strongly manifested in the history of this country. It has revealed characteristics of personality of the outstanding candidates intimately to the calm and calculating judgment of the millions of their constituents from coast to coast.". . .



One change that has been brought about by radio is the elimination of mob feeling from political audiences. The magnetism of the orator cools when transmitted through the microphone; the impassioned gesture is wasted upon it; the purple period ["red-faced" impassioned oratory] fades before it; the flashing eye meets in it no answering glance. Though he be one of thirty millions, each individual in the audience becomes a solitary listener in the privacy of his own home. He is free from the contagion of the crowd and only the logic of the issue which the orator presents can move him.

The *New York Times* commented upon this

[1] I.e., the low-brow middle-class public, as satirized by Sinclair Lewis in the 1922 novel *Babbitt*.
[2] Both against and for Prohibition.
[3] Christian radio evangelists.
[4] Radio musical duo.

is the radio's fodder,[5] and it will continue to be radio fodder until the loudspeaker follows the iron deer[6] into blessed oblivion. New culture indeed. New nothing! . . .

I am not a reformer. I have no "constructive" blather to offer. Far from proposing a scheme for making radio broadcasting bigger and better, or for giving it a shave and a haircut, my only suggestion is that advertising agencies go on killing it. I predict that in two years, at the present rate of advertising exploitation which the radio is suffering, it will be as dead as a Democrat. We can dig a grave for it, alongside the handsome mound now occupied by "Business Ethics," and put up a headstone over both graves inscribed "Killed by Advertising." Probably in another five or ten years we can dig another grave in the same lot for Television. . . .

And the communized loudspeakers! Never has such a curse descended upon America. Stores with loudspeakers sticking out through their transoms,[7] blaring into the streets . . . restaurants with radios that go night and day . . . dentists' offices where the rasp of the drill is welcome relief from the clatter of the loudspeaker . . . barber shops where chamber music, rendered by the Midwest Battery Boys or the Baldwin Locomotive Works Trio, goes with a shave. [ellipses in original]

Anyone not knowing America, knowing nothing of radio, knowing nothing of our national temperament, would conclude, seeing these loudspeakers stuck up everywhere, that some tremendous message of vital import was being given to the citizenry. If he could not understand the English language—and had no idea what we use the language for, principally—he would expect to see a great change come over the ordinary run of folks after this viral message had been blared forth everywhere day after day, week after week.

effect of radio in the last campaign. "Radio has come into its own," it said, "over the doubts, and some cases despite the vehement protests, of the older school of politicians in both parties." For them the great public meetings, with its parades, bands, red fire, and crowd enthusiasm, has been the high point of a national campaign. The spellbinder—gesticulating [gesturing wildly], pounding, striding up and down, stirred to frenzy by the applause of his audience—has been regarded as the great votegetter. But this campaign has been almost a funeral procession for the old-fashioned spellbinder. If we have to sum up the political effect of the radio, we may say that it is the greatest debunking influence that has come into American public life since the Declaration of Independence. . . .

A persistent weakness in our American scheme of government has been the lack of popular interest in politics and the failure of a great number of citizens to vote. The last presidential election, however, with its huge registration, gave evidence of a greatly increased interest in the affairs of government. It is not unreasonable to attribute a large part of this to the broadcasting of political speeches. Radio brought the candidates and the issues within the family circle and made them topics of discussion at every dinner table. . . .

In view of what radio has done for government, it can no longer be waved aside as a "novelty," a box of tricks, or, as Mr. Woodford prefers, an advertising agency. It is the only means of instantaneous general communication yet devised by man. While it brings only sound today, it promises sound with sight tomorrow. I venture the prophecy that in the campaign of 1932 we shall both see and hear the candidates by radio. Even today it links the nations together and works in the interest of enduring peace. The news of any important occurrence is flashed almost immediately to every part of the globe. International broadcasting will soon become a commonplace. Old and new civilizations will throb together to the same intellectual appeal and the same artistic emotions. The thought currents of all humanity will mingle, their flow no longer impeded by dividing oceans.

[5] I.e., worthless product (fodder: cattle feed).
[6] Victorian lawn ornament.
[7] Transom: small window above a door or other window.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

Radio: A Blessing or a Curse

1. How would you describe Woodford's attitude towards the use and benefits of radio?

Provide three quotes from Woodford to support the answer above. Explain each quote in your own words.

Quotes:	Explain in your words:
a.	
b.	
c.	

2. How would you describe James G. Harbord's attitude toward the use and benefits of radio?

Provide three quotes from Woodford to support the answer above. Explain each quote in your own words.

Quotes:	Explain in your words:
a.	
b.	
c.	

3. How do you think Woodford and Harbord would feel about the use of social media in today's society? Be specific.