



INFO

The Theory of Listener-Sponsored Radio

by Lewis Hill, 1951



While studying at Stanford University in 1937, Lew Hill became interested in the ideas of the Quakers and became a pacifist. When he was drafted in 1941, he registered as a conscientious objector. In 1945, Hill resigned from his job as a Washington DC correspondent and moved to California, where he founded the Pacifica Foundation. He served as Pacifica's head until he died in 1957.

Listener sponsorship is an answer to the practical problem of getting better radio programs and keeping them. But it involves, as a theory of radio, an analysis of the problem as well as an answer to it. The theory advances not only an economic innovation for broadcasting but an interpretation of the facts of life in American radio. And actually it begins in a concern with some of the facts of life in general.

I imagine we can agree that if a sound is worth passing through the magnificent apparatus of a microphone, a transmitter, and your receiving set, it ought to convey some meaningful intelligence. There are innumerable ways of wasting time and generating nonsense, and there are also uncounted ways of making money, many of which may be pursued in broad daylight. But the elaborate machinery and the peculiar intimacy of the radio medium have better and more basic uses. The theory I want to discuss rests on two particular assumptions: first, that radio can and should be used for significant communication and art; and second, that since broadcasting is an act of communication, it ought to be subject to the same aesthetic and ethical principles as we apply to any communicative act, including the most personal. Of course we know that in American radio many obstacles stand in the way of these principles. When I have examined some of the obstacles, I shall try to indicate briefly how listener sponsorship offers a means of surmounting them.

What does stand in the way?

When we ask this question we usually think at once of the advertiser or of the mass audience. We feel that one or both of these demonological figures must account for the mediocrity and exploitation which on the whole signify radio in the United States. And since, as we know, no one can reform the advertiser or confer with the inscrutable mass, we are more or less accustomed to thinking of improvement as utopian.

We seem generally to ignore, when we criticize radio, the moment and situation in which someone

actually broadcasts. I refer to the person who actually opens his mouth or plays his fiddle. I mean to include also the individual who holds the stop watch, the one who writes the script, and perhaps the man who controls the switch. And I am definitely referring to these individuals as individuals--for after all, willing or not, they have that dimension. Now these are the people who actually start the production that comes out at the other end. Even if someone else has decided why there should be a broadcast and what should be in it, these are the people who make it. Yet we never hear these people mentioned in any serious social or moral criticism of American radio. They do not appear in the demonologies of the advertiser and the mass. They constitute most of the radio industry, but are perhaps the last people we would think of in trying to place the fundamental responsibility for what radio does.

This curious fact reveals more about the problem than any number of surveys of public taste and advertising venality. And this is the point at which our theory has to begin. We start with the forgotten man of broadcasting--the man who broadcasts.

Let me instance the announcer, not only to seize the simplest case, but because he will serve as the gross symbol for the writer, the musician, and all who try to make a living in the program end of radio. You will recall without difficulty, I hope, this fellow's nightly solicitude toward your internal organs. In his baritone way he makes a claim on your attention and faith which few of your closest friends would venture. I know of no better explanation of this man's relation to you, to his utterances, his job, and his industry, than one of the time-honored audition tests given to applicants for announcing jobs at certain of the networks. The test consists of three or four paragraphs minutely constructed to avoid conveying any meaning. The words are familiar, and every sentence is grammatically sound, but the text is gibberish. The applicant is required to read this text in different voices, as though it meant different things: with solemnity and heavy sincerity, with lighthearted humor, and of course with "punch." If his judges award him the job and turn him loose on you, he has succeeded on account of an extraordinary skill in simulating emotions, intentions and beliefs which he does not possess. In fact the test was especially designed to assure that nothing in the announcer's mind except the sound of his voice--no comprehension, no value, no choice, and above all no sense of responsibility--could possibly enter into what he said or what he sounded like. This is the criterion of his job.

The significance of this situation is strangely neglected, as I have said, although the commonplaces of industrial life that best explain it are much discussed. We all know, for example, that the purpose of commercial radio is to induce mass sales. For mass sales there must be a mass norm, and the activity must be conducted as nearly as possible without risk of departure from the norm. But art and the communication of ideas--as most of us also appreciate--are risky affairs, for it can never be predicted in those activities just when the purely individual and abnormal may assert itself. Indeed to get any real art or any significant communication, one must rely entirely on individuals, and must resign himself to accept not only their uniqueness but the possibility that the individual may at any time fail. By suppressing the individual, the unique, the industry reduces the risk of failure (abnormality) and assures itself a standard product for mass consumption.

We know these commonplaces, but it is truly staggering to contemplate what they imply and cause in American radio. Should you inquire why there is no affinity between the serious arts and radio, you will find that this is the reason.

America is well supplied with remarkably talented writers, musicians, philosophers, and scientists

whose work will survive for some centuries. Such people have no relation whatever to our greatest communication medium. I have been describing a fact at the level of the industry's staff, it is actually so notorious in the whole tradition and atmosphere of our radio that it precludes anyone of serious talent and reasonable sanity from offering material for broadcast, much less joining a staff. The country's best minds, like one mind, shun the medium unless the possessor of one happens to be running for office. Yet if we want an improvement in radio worth the trouble, it is these people whose talent the medium must attract. The basic situation of broadcasting must be such that artists and thinkers have a place to work--with freedom. Short of this, the suffering listener has no out.

It may be clearer why I indicated at the outset that listener sponsorship involves some basic concerns. This is the first problem it sets out to solve--to give the genuine artist and thinker a possible, even a desirable, place to work in radio.

Unfortunately it will not do to go halfway in the effort. Many have tried. The story of American radio is sprinkled with episodes in which some ambitious producer, momentarily out of touch with reality, has tried. These episodes remind me of someone's recent comment about purchasing a house under the Federal Housing Administration. This, he explains, is a system which makes it possible to convert an imaginary equity into a vested illusion. There are still in the industry many a frustrated idealist, many an embittered artist, whose last efforts foundered in the sales department, but who hope someday to own a program. Since our first object is to avoid that chronic industrial frustration, we have to give a somewhat elementary interpretation to the idea of freedom in radio.

The answer of the KPFA project on this point is not necessarily the only good answer, but it is explicit. It requires that the people who actually do the broadcasting should also be responsible for what and why they broadcast. In short, they must control the policy which determines their actions. If I may, I will emphasize that neither a "Public Be Damned" nor a "Down with Commerce" attitude enters into this formulation. The problem was, you remember, not whether you as a listener should choose what you like or agree with--as obviously you should and do--but how to get some genuinely significant choices before you. Radio which aims to do that must express what its practitioners believe to be real, good, beautiful, and so forth, and what they believe is truly at stake in the assertion of such values. For better or worse these are matters like the nature of the deity which cannot be determined by majority vote or a sales curve. Either some particular person makes up his mind about these things and learns to express them for himself, or we have no values or no significant expression of them. Since values and expressions as fundamental as this are what we must have to improve radio noticeably, there is no choice but to begin by extending to someone the privilege of thinking and acting in ways important to him. Whatever else may happen, we thus assign to the participating individual the responsibility, artistic integrity, freedom of expression, and the like, which in conventional radio are normally denied him. KPFA is operated literally on this principle.

Well, then, who in present-day America might be expected to permit such a broadcasting group to earn a living at it, and on what terms?

You already know the answer that KPFA proposes, and you may have wondered why I choose to present it as a theory, as though there were alternatives to listener sponsorship. Certainly when we develop the idea of broadcasting to this point, the listener is the only one discernible who has a real stake in the outcome. But while that may be an adequate reason for a subscription plan, I think there is a better and more rewarding one.

I have already examined the problem of getting the creative product on radio before we worry about how it is to be evaluated. It must have occurred to you that such a principle could easily revert to the fabled ivory tower. Some self-determining group of broadcasters might find that no one, not the least minority of the minority audiences, gave a hang for their product, morally responsible or not. What then? Then, you will say, there would be no radio station--or not for long--and the various individualists involved could go scratch for a living. But it is the reverse possibility that explains what is most important about listener sponsorship. When we imagine the opposite situation, we are compelled to account for some conscious flow of influences, some creative tension between broadcaster and audience that constantly reaffirms their mutual relevance. Listener sponsorship will require this mutual stimulus if it is to exist at all.

KPFA's present air schedule is a modest example. It embraces four main categories--music, drama and literature, public affairs, and children's programs. The schedule has two sources in almost equal balance as to their importance and influence. On the one hand, these happen to be subjects of primary interest to people working at KPFA. On the other hand, they happen also to represent the articulate interests of well-defined minorities in the audience of the San Francisco Bay Area. The correspondence is not accidental. A constant exchange between the staff and the audience enriches the schedule with fresh judgment and new ideas, materials, and issues. Thus members of the staff work out their own ideas and, if you like, categorical imperatives, with some of the undistracted certitude one feels in deciding what he will have for dinner, subject to the menu. Listener sponsorship makes possible this extremely productive balance of interests and initiatives.

The fact that the subscription is voluntary merely enlarges the same point. We make a considerable step forward, it seems to me, when we use a system of broadcasting which promises that the mediocre will not survive. But the significance of what does survive increases in ways of the profoundest import to our times when it proceeds from voluntary action. Anyone can listen to a listener-sponsored station. Anyone can understand the rationale of listener sponsorship--that unless the station is supported by those who value it, no one can listen to it including those who value it. This is common sense. But beyond this, actually sending in the subscription, which one does not have to send in unless one particularly wants to, implies the kind of cultural engagement, as some French philosophers call it, that is surely indispensable for the sake of the whole culture. When we have a radio station fully supported by subscribers who have not responded to a special gift offer, who are not participating in a lottery, who have not ventured an investment at 3 per cent, but who use this means of supporting values that seem to them of basic and lasting importance--then we will have more than a subscription roster. It will amount, I think, to a new focus of action or a new shaping influence that can hardly fail to strengthen all of us.

We are concerned, of course, with a supplemental form of radio. Listener sponsorship is not a substitute for the commercial industry. But in every major metropolitan area of the country there is room for such an undertaking. I believe we may expect that if these theories and high hopes can be confirmed soundly in a pilot experiment, the idea will not be long in spreading.

KPFA happens to be the pilot experiment. No one there imagines he is the artist or thinker whose talent ultimately must be attracted to radio. KPFA is the beginning of a tradition to make that possible. The survival of this station is based upon the necessity of voluntary subscriptions from 2 per cent of the total FM audience in the area in which it operates. We are hoping to succeed for several reasons,

not the least among which is the realization that our success may inspire others to experiment for the eventual betterment of the broadcast product.

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