

PROJECT I

(Old Project No. 15)

THE ESSENTIAL VALUE OF RADIO TO ALL TYPES OF LISTENERS

Introduction

Since radio has quite obviously established for itself a permanent and important role in the cultural life of the nation, the Committee believes that before radio can be put to its best use a thorough-going investigation of certain basic problems should be made. Its growth in the past decade has been phenomenal. The techniques of broadcasting have been enormously developed. Radio listening has become a habit with the vast majority of the population.

The growth of the medium has been so rapid that broadcasters and educators have had little opportunity to gather basic knowledge concerning the human factors upon which the success of radio depends. Radio has developed because it has satisfied genuine human needs. But how, precisely, it meets their needs is still an open question and a very important one if the medium is to develop the greatest good for the greatest number. Many studies have been made by educational and commercial organizations to learn more about the specific tastes of the listeners. But such research has, in the main, been directed toward definite educational or commercial objectives with the result that information concerning the real reasons why radio satisfies listeners of various types or what its influences are on subsequent behavior is incomplete at the present time.

If radio in the United States is to serve the best interests of the people, it is essential that an objective analysis be made of what these interests are and how the unique psychological and social characteristics of radio may be

375764

devoted to them.

General questions concerning the essential value of radio to the listeners can be answered only after a series of separate studies have been made, all of which would be directed toward the basic objectives, once they are formulated. Before such objectives can be formulated, it would be essential to analyze, for example, the radio interests of special groups of people to learn what particular value radio holds for each. These analyses might include studies of age, sex, vocational, and class differences, and the specific role which radio now plays in the life of the farmer and city dweller.

To understand fully the part radio plays in the life of the listener, it would be essential to define radio listening in quantitative terms. This empirical definition would answer such questions as: Are certain programs used only as a background for other activities -- to what extent and why? What time is spent in radio listening and what time in reading by different groups of people? What topics do people prefer to have broadcast and what things would they rather read in newspapers and magazines? It may be seen readily that answers to all of these questions would be propaedeutic to the main problems at hand. And on the basis of these answers it would be possible to determine not only what programs are of value and why they are valuable, but what the future direction of program balance should be to provide listeners of various types with both entertainment and education suitable to their capacities and interests.


Techniques for collecting these data have not been fully developed. To achieve the ultimate aims desired in this study, new methods must be devised and tested to procure the answers to our problems. In spite of the research already completed in this field, the creation of new techniques adequate for

375764

the requirements has lagged. The efforts at the outset should be concentrated on the development of techniques to be used later in the general survey. The development and refinement of techniques has been omitted in former radio studies because of the difficulty and cost, as well as the delay in producing immediate results. It cannot be denied that these exploratory steps are fundamental to sound research, if research is to penetrate into new fields and serve as a framework for future investigation.

Problems and Methods

The primary aim of this project is to study the value of radio to all types of listeners. We want to be able to answer such questions as: What is the value of radio to listeners of different age, cultural, socio-economic levels (viz. what role does it play in the life of the listener)? Of different geographical areas? What are the rural and urban differences? What information have people acquired from radio? What changes, suggested programs, and the like, might be offered by listeners of various types? In order to accomplish this objective, however, we must first establish the answers to the following questions for a representative sample of the population.

- 
1. Who listens?
 2. Where listening takes place?
 3. When listening takes place?
 4. What is listened to?
 5. Why people listen?
 6. How people listen?
 7. What are the effects of listening?

However, in view of the lack of methodological techniques for studying such problems, it will be necessary to devote two years to the development and test application of such techniques. During this period existing techniques will be critically examined, present inadequacies will be noted, and new supplementary methods established to attack the basic problems.

Since the major aim of the first two years will be to scrutinize and develop techniques, it is difficult at this time to outline these techniques without benefit of experimentation. However, two plans which may be followed in a preliminary effort to provide means of obtaining the objectives may be cited as examples of the type of exploration necessary.

1. In determining why people listen to certain programs, it would be important to discover how well the listener can report the reasons why. The ultimate method for studying the why of listening may originate in establishing the reliability of the listener's evaluation of programs. For example:

- (a) Determine what radio programs are popular and unpopular in a representative community for a certain "interest group".
- (b) Have the listeners in this group report the program qualities which contribute to the popularity of the programs they like, and, conversely, the programs they dislike.
- (c) Then present programs of measured popularity (based on an "equal" interest-group in another community) and have the listeners:
 - (1) Rate the programs.
 - (2) Check the presence or absence of the elements as determined in Step b. (Printed lists of the qualities would be supplied each listener).

- (d) Determine the reliability of Step c by repeating the program presentation.
- (e) Check the validity of the experimental group (group described in Step a) against the ratings of the "equal" group and on the basis of their "element ratings" on both sets of program features.
- (f) On the basis of Step e, select the top 25% and the bottom 25% of the experimental group and retest them.
- (g) If the breakdown outlined in Step f is maintained, examine the data and subjects to discover what contributed to the ability of certain subjects to isolate the reasons for liking and disliking programs more than others.
- (h) Revise findings in terms of Step g and verify the method on other groups of equal interests.
- (i) Extend the method to other segments of the audience using them for the purpose of building check lists to be used ultimately in determining the reasons why programs are popular and unpopular.

2. In quantifying the influence of radio listening, there are several possibilities depending somewhat on the listening habits of the people under observation. To get at this problem we must know something of the objectives of the program in an effort to measure its effectiveness. For certain programs being broadcast at the present time, this latter question requires some consideration in itself. Perhaps the objectives of the broadcaster are being missed, and yet the program is having its part in changing the behavior of the listeners! If, on the other hand, the objectives of a program are clearcut, the following steps

might be followed:

- (a) Investigate the listening habits of a representative community served by a radio station carrying one or more programs on which economic, social, and political problems are discussed regularly.
- (b) Select a representative group of the regular listeners to the type of program mentioned in Step a (Experimental Group) and an equal number of representative non-listeners (Control Group).
- (c) Measure the attitudes of both groups on topics to be covered in subsequent broadcasts.
- (d) After the topics have been presented or discussed by radio, re-measure both groups to determine the influence of the radio presentations. Unless the Control Group has been affected in the same general direction by printed or verbal discussions of the radio material, one should expect to find no changes in the attitudes of the non-listener group.

Variations of the technique outlined above may be devised for special situations. In some instances methods may be employed which will produce more objective records of post listening activity resulting from the radio experience. If the method already outlined should prove satisfactory in test areas, it would be possible to extend the method to the total population by enlisting the co-operation of consumer survey organizations such as Dr. George Gallup's "American Institute of Public Opinion".

These techniques would be subjected to exhaustive tests in one or two restricted regions containing representative listeners. The study of techniques

375764

alone, with a final critical evaluation of the usefulness of each for the conduct of a broad radio survey on the total population, might well occupy two years of solid investigation.

Application of Techniques

Preliminary tests of the validity of the techniques will be made on certain areas of selected problems. With the techniques developed and refined, it is proposed that the study be reviewed and that after such review, the techniques be applied to the basic problems already outlined.

In summary, the first two years would be devoted to the examination and development of techniques essential to an understanding of the value and influences of radio; the second two years would be devoted to the application of these techniques.

Headquarters for Project

If a grant is made for this research program, it is proposed that the School of Public and International Affairs of Princeton University shall be the recipient. It is agreeable to Professor DeWitt C. Poole, Director, to have the school act in this capacity and administer the funds for this program of research, upon the approval of President Harold W. Dodds.