





# Radio in the Global Age

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*For Henrietta*

# Radio in the Global Age

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*David Hendy*

Polity Press

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# Abbreviations

<b>ABC</b>	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
<b>AOR</b>	Adult (or Album) Orientated Rock
<b>BBC</b>	British Broadcasting Corporation
<b>CBC</b>	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
<b>CHR</b>	Contemporary Hit Radio
<b>CPBS</b>	Central People's Broadcasting Station (China)
<b>CRCA</b>	Commercial Radio Companies Association
<b>CRN</b>	Canadian Radio Networks
<b>DAB</b>	Digital Audio Broadcasting
<b>ENPS</b>	Electronic News Production System
<b>ENPSN</b>	Electronic News Production System Newsletter
<b>FCC</b>	Federal Communications Commission
<b>IRN</b>	Independent Radio News
<b>MCPS</b>	Mechanical Copyright Protection Society
<b>MOR</b>	Middle of the Road
<b>NAC</b>	New Adult Contemporary
<b>NERA</b>	National Economic Research Associates
<b>NPR</b>	National Public Radio
<b>ORF</b>	Österreichischer Rundfunk
<b>OTH</b>	Opportunities to Hear
<b>PPL</b>	Phonographic Performance Limited
<b>PRS</b>	Performing Rights Society
<b>RAJAR</b>	Radio Joint Audience Research
<b>RSL</b>	Radio Services Limited
<b>RTL</b>	Radio Télévision Libre Milles Collines
<b>SABC</b>	South African Broadcasting Corporation
<b>Soft AC</b>	Soft Adult Contemporary
<b>VOA</b>	Voice of America

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# Introduction

## Radio in the social landscape

Marshall McLuhan famously described radio as a ‘hot’ medium. Calling some media ‘hot’ and others – like television – ‘cool’ was the sort of grand concept which helped make McLuhan’s name in the 1960s. And nearly forty years on the idea remains striking in its originality. But not, I would say, entirely convincing. For a start, his classification now seems rather topsy-turvy. Take his definition of television. It is ‘cool’, he suggested, because it gives us a ‘low definition’ sense of the world: the information it provides is meagre, unclear, equivocal. It is, so to speak, like a cartoon compared with a photograph – a mere outline. Radio, however, is ‘hot’ because it is just like a fully-fledged photograph – it ‘extends one single sense in “high definition”’. This all makes radio sound rather powerful. But that was not McLuhan’s view. He saw the future belonging to ‘cool’ media like television. People in the late twentieth century, he suggested, *want* room in their lives for differences, ambiguities, alternative interpretations – and would therefore reject radio’s overheated certainties – certainties which set fire to all ambivalence. So McLuhan believed that radio’s time would pass – it would gradually be displaced by the ‘cool’ media of the electronic revolution, media which do not privilege any voice or point of view (McLuhan 1994; Cashmore and Rojek 1999: 332–4).

Today, though, it appears to many observers that it is television which gives us the world in ‘high-definition’, with its vivid images overpowering us, casting us into a role as passive observers of the world. The rhetoric surrounding radio, however, is suffused with the

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language of McLuhan's cool ambiguity. We talk of radio's ability to 'stimulate the mind's eye' – that in giving us a sense of the world that is entirely lacking in any visual clues, it demands *more*, not less, audience participation (Crisell 1994; Shingler and Wieringa 1998). We talk of radio's ability to keep us company, even to draw us into new relationships, by building up a sense of intimacy with broadcasters and fellow listeners (Douglas 1999). We talk of its ability to be a wider window on the world, to mark out a discursive space where people's voices can be heard and a debate sustained in a way that makes the world and all the people in it somehow more tangible, more *real* (Scannell 1996). We even talk of its powers of emancipation – a cheap and technically easy medium to master, allowing people otherwise excluded from the mainstream media a voice and a role, a real chance of interpreting the world for themselves (O'Connor 1990; Lloréns 1991; Hochheimer 1993).

And radio does not seem to be facing extinction at the hands of television either. There is a lot of it around. Some 9,000 stations across Europe, another 11,000 or so in the USA, many thousands more in Latin America, and growing numbers in Asia, Africa and Australasia – perhaps somewhere in the region of 40,000 or more stations worldwide when various community stations and pirates are also taken into account. This is much, much higher than the number of television stations worldwide. And while television is an experience still fixed largely in the home, we listen to all this radio in more circumstances and in more places around the world: on a personal stereo as we walk or jog down the street, in the car when we travel to work, in the house while we prepare our meals. In the developing world, radio is a conveniently cheap and portable medium wherever poverty and the absence of an electricity supply places television beyond the reach of most people. It is also a conveniently oral medium wherever literacy is low. Unsurprisingly, then, the number of radio receivers owned in many parts of Africa and Asia is many, many times more than the number of television sets. Radio 'remains the world's most ubiquitous medium, certainly the one with the widest reach and greatest penetration' (Pease and Dennis 1993: xii).

Despite – or perhaps *because of* – this pervasive quality, radio is for those of us in the developed world a taken-for-granted part of our lives. We probably have four or five sets positioned around our homes, and most of us listen for about three hours each day – almost as much time as we spend watching television. We use it – and generally trust it – for news and information about the world, and in the USA talk-radio galvanizes public opinion and influences policy-makers. We talk *to* it, apparently finding it easier sometimes to call radio phone-ins and confide in an anonymous listening audience

than in our own friends and family. Above all, perhaps, we listen to it – even sing along to it – in its role as the world’s most ubiquitous transmitter of recorded pop music. Even as McLuhan first espoused his theory of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ media in 1964, radio was reinventing itself as *the* medium for music and for teenagers, where the young could listen to *their* music on cheap portable transistors away from the rest of the family (Douglas 1999; Fornatale and Mills 1980; Barnard 1989). Nearly four decades on, the repertoire of pop music is infinitely bigger, and the explosion in the number of radio stations appears to offer all of us, from the very young to the very old, the chance to tune in to *our* music. In the constellation of radio services at the start of the new millennium, we cannot help but feel that there is something for everyone.

Yet we do not wonder in awe at this medium any more – why should we when it is simply there in the background, almost all the time? And we don’t read or hear about the radio medium very much either – it rarely makes the front pages, rarely arouses the same sort of heated debates over say, violence or sex or sensationalism, that television seems to engender. It has its stars – the odd Chris Evans here or Howard Stern there – but it is mostly not an industry of big stars, or big money, or big corporate players. It is relatively prosperous – a fast-expanding area of advertising and a sector prone to frenzied take-overs – but in the media pond it is still an economic minnow, and in society as a whole it is largely ignored. In short, its profile in the social landscape is small and its *influence* large.

This introduction is not a manifesto for triumphalism, though. And the book as a whole is not a *celebration* of radio. Certainly, were McLuhan to be alive today he might be forced to admit that radio not only survives, it often thrives. But this, really, is beside the point. The critical question is, what *sort* of radio do we have nowadays? And what role does it play in contemporary society? Another Canadian, Jody Berland, writing almost exactly thirty years after her compatriot McLuhan, looked around her and was struck by the ubiquity, not so much of radio in general, but of one form of radio in particular, namely commercially funded and highly formatted music radio. This, she argues:

place[s] together sound messages that are disparate in terms of their location of origin, their cultural purpose, and their form, in order to create a continuous enveloping rhythm of sound and information. The rhythm’s ‘reason’ isn’t about insight, originality, history, logic or emancipation. It’s about the market. Since the continuous rhythm of sound is more powerful than any single item enveloped in its progression, the reception of particular items is substantially determined by the larger

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discourse of radio programming, which teaches us addiction and forgetfulness. In commercial radio, the pleasures of location and identity, of specific recognitions or discoveries, are sacrificed to the (real) pleasures of the media's 'boundless hospitality,' which defends itself against anarchy by being totalitarian in its mode of address and in its structuring of programme, genre, and rhythm. (1993b: 211)

There are interesting echoes here. What Berland sees as radio's 'totalitarian mode of address' conveys something of McLuhan's 'hot' media which extend 'one sense in "high-definition"' (1994: 22). Berland's listeners are overwhelmed, again much like McLuhan's are excluded by the complete lack of ambivalence in a medium's message. Berland's answer to the question, what sort of radio do we have nowadays, suggests that although we might have travelled a long way since 1964, we might have ended up somewhere close to where we began. The American author Susan Douglas puts it in similar, though perhaps more vividly personal terms:

Whether you're in Providence or Albuquerque, the music . . . is the same. . . . Formats allow us to seek out a monotone mood with only the tiniest surprises. . . . DJs differ in their sense of where things are headed. Some feel that the industry is so powerfully centralized and consolidated, so in the grip of [audience] research, consultants, and investment groups, that insurgencies are no longer possible. They are pessimistic that radio stations will ever again regard listeners as music lovers instead of niche markets. They note that those, especially young people, who are looking for community-building communication technologies that allow for independent, unconventional expression, are deserting radio for the Internet. . . . But I, and millions like me, don't have a radio station to listen to anymore. (1999: 347, 354, 356)

Douglas surveys a media landscape changed almost beyond recognition since the early 1960s. Radio in America has always been run on commercial lines, of course, in contrast to the more pluralist mix of commercial, state-controlled and public-service stations across Europe and elsewhere. But, as Blumler describes it, in using a term borrowed from the economist Joseph Schumpeter, there has been 'a gale of destruction' unleashed on electronic media systems throughout the advanced industrial world in the last three decades (1991: 194). A relatively stable pattern, in which a large number of small commercial local radio stations, perhaps co-existing with some national networks, and broadcasting a fairly wide range of programming to mass audiences, has been disturbed. State regulation has given way in leaps and starts to market regulation, and technological changes – satellite delivery systems, automation, computerization

and so on – have unleashed a quickening process of change in contemporary society as a whole. One recurring aspect of these changes is the sense in which the world is ‘rapidly being moulded into a shared social space’, and ‘globalization’ is the conveniently permeable term often employed to encompass this process in all its aspects. Globalization, as many writers warn, is a term in danger of becoming the cliché of our times, but it does perhaps ‘capture some of the lived experience of an epoch’ – an experience characterized by ‘the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness’ (Held et al. 1999: 1–2).

Radio, so long thought of as a predominantly local medium, would appear at first to fit rather uneasily within this broader debate. But if this book has a unifying theme it is this: that radio, though very often local, and so very cheap and easy to set up for oneself, and with so many qualities all of its own, is *nonetheless* a medium that is fully part of the electronic mass-media environment. It may have different qualities to television – most obviously that it is a *sound*-based medium, not a visual one – but it is similarly engaged in the task of mass-producing something called ‘broadcasting’, a time-based activity, domestic in scale and rapid in turnover, pulling together news, information, entertainment, music and so on day-after-day and year-after-year. It may be television’s poor relation, but there is still money to be made in radio, and many of the same processes – the growth of multinational corporations, the splitting of audiences into niche markets, the drive to reduce costs and maximize profits – can, I think, be used to explain many of its characteristics. It may evoke nostalgic associations with the music of our youth or a harmless amateurism characterized by radio ‘hams’, community stations and heroic pirates, or even a spirit of experimentation and artistry in sound, but it is first and foremost an industry – an industry that may bring pleasure and contribute much to our cultural life, but an industry all the same, and one with global dimensions and a global reach that gives it an influential place in shaping our cultural lives. It is a medium I love – a medium I know a little personally from the inside – but focussing on its ‘unique’ qualities, even talking too much of a ‘Golden Age’ of radio, as many aficionados are tempted to do, would be to do it a disservice, I think: it would make it *too* special, *too* different, and as a result keep it rather isolated from interesting contemporary debates.

Radio, then, needs to be reconnected with the mainstream of media and communication studies. It is a medium through which we can explore issues of policy, technology, identity, ideology and culture, just as fruitfully as by studying the other media – television, cinema or the press. Our efforts, though, must have one clear proviso. We cannot jump from accepting radio’s relevance in broader media

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debates towards any attempt at a ‘Grand Theory’ of radio. Perhaps such an attempt would be dangerous enough for *any* of the mass-media, but for radio it is particularly unwise. First, the sheer *quantity* of radio around us presents an insurmountable empirical task: a lifetime’s study would not allow us to listen to more than a fraction of output, so any analysis will end up being very partial. Secondly, the *range* of activity at any given time, too, is huge – tiny pirate and community stations, so-called ‘micro’-radio stations, large national networks, multinational satellite services, syndicated chains and groups, a burgeoning number of Internet-only radio stations – all broadcasting almost anything from non-stop urban rap to business-news: these strikingly different phenomena cannot easily be grouped under the one heading of ‘radio’ and *explained* in the same way. Thirdly, radio can sometimes be an extraordinarily *dynamic* medium – changing too quickly to let us ‘see’ it properly. Douglas talks of radio’s ‘technical insurgency’, of how, because ‘corporate control is never complete’ in such a do-it-yourself technology, it has reinvented itself so frequently:

It was just at those moments when programming seemed so fixed – in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and again in the late 1960s and early 1970s – that off in the audio hinterlands programming insurgencies revolutionized what we heard on the air. When social movements and radio have intersected, previously forbidden and thus thrilling listening possibilities have emerged. (1999: 357)

Radio, then, is simultaneously more taken-for-granted than television and paradoxically a larger, more diverse, more changeable, field of study. I will not, then, offer a theory of radio here, nor even attempt anything approaching a comprehensive global survey.

What I *do* hope to achieve in the space of this book are two things. First, to sketch out some connections between the many tightly-focussed ‘micro’ studies of particular radio stations or programmes around the world with some of the ‘macro’ ideas contained in more general studies of media, communication and society. It sometimes involves a leap of faith to discuss in the same breath American and British radio, let alone aboriginal radio in Australia and pop music on the Internet. Nonetheless, to do so reminds us that some more systematic attempt at what Beck (1998) calls ‘mid-level’ study needs to be made of radio in the future. It also reminds us, perhaps, that not all radio is the radio that *we* listen to, or would even *like* to listen to. Secondly, despite the complexity with which I have characterized the radio landscape as a whole, I hope to draw out some of the central paradoxes of the medium. Recurring themes are discernible. One

dichotomy which weaves itself through the chapters of this book, for example, is that between the ‘unifying’ powers of a medium like radio, and the ability it apparently has to pull us apart into separate audience ‘niches’. Scannell has written extensively on radio’s (and television’s) ability to carve out a public sphere, not just in an austere political sense but also in terms of providing a space for *shared* fun and sociability (1991, 1996). As radio’s technical reach around the globe has expanded, so too has the scope of this public sphere. Globalization makes the world a *smaller* place for those who produce radio – everywhere is within their reach; it simultaneously *expands* the horizons of listeners, who can ‘experience’ distant events and people and music in a way that previous generations could not. But there is something else happening too. There is a process in which more and more stations help divide the listening communities into a larger number of separate communities, defined it seems by ever narrower tastes in music or talk. We may still listen, Berland intimates, but we ‘in fact *hear less*’ (1993b: 211). The questions at hand, then, are these: how do such contradictory processes unfold? Does radio connect us with wider ‘imagined’ communities in a way that somehow frees us from the geography of where we live, or does it take away the ‘shared experiences’ once regarded as a central feature of broadcasting and that once seemed to bring us together? Does radio in the global age give us a larger window on the world, or expose us dreadfully to the homogenized and banal output of a few multinational media chains and record companies? Is radio as a whole defined by these conflicts, or are we talking of different kinds of radio? We may not be able to answer all these questions, but asking them is a start.

### The structure of this book

In talking of ‘recurring themes’, I hope to suggest that no one aspect of radio can be fully understood without some reference to three interrelated aspects of the medium: first, the ways in which it is *produced*, secondly the form and content of its programming – what media analysis generally calls the medium’s *texts* – and thirdly the interpretations and reactions of its consumers, the *listeners*. No discussion of the music played on radio, for example, can make much sense without some parallel discussion of the economic forces at play within the media and music industries. Or, for that matter, without some discussion of the way we listen to radio and extract some meaning from its programmes. In broad terms, then, this book adopts the same structure used by similar studies of popular music and of

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television (Longhurst 1995; Abercrombie 1996). Except, that is, in one minor respect: that I have preferred to discuss the ‘consumption’ of radio, the way listeners listen to it, *before* moving on to discuss more directly the meanings attached to its output and its wider cultural impacts. This is not an attempt to ‘make a statement’, merely to point out that, in radio at least, it appears to me that the listeners – whether as free and active citizens or as more passive members of a mass-audience ‘market’ – provide such a central perspective on all that follows, that to treat them as mere consumers and not as *in some sense* also the ‘producers’ of radio is to misunderstand the medium and, so to speak, put the cart before the horse.

Specifically, then, chapter 1 looks at the way radio is produced as an industry, and focuses on the changes taking place which affect production on a large and global scale. Chapter 2 narrows the focus to look at the way radio is produced on a day-to-day basis within stations and programme-teams – in particular, it looks at the way the freedom of radio producers is constrained by a range of aesthetic, financial and organizational factors. Chapter 3 discusses the listeners to radio – *how* we listen, and how the *way* we listen in turn shapes the production of programmes and the meanings they may convey. Chapter 4 attempts to explore some of the innate qualities and meanings that can be attached to various types of radio – and, in particular, to the talk and the music we find commonly broadcast; it also tries to draw together some of the threads of debate on radio’s relationship with our sense of time and place in the age of ‘modernity’. Finally, chapter 5 is an attempt to map out some of the cultural impacts the medium appears to have in contemporary society in three main areas – in democratic culture, in our sense of identity (whether defined linguistically, geographically or ethnically), and in its ability to shape our musical tastes.

Though the book as a whole has aspirations to be holistic in tone, it will have many omissions, for all the reasons I have discussed. Even so, the hope is that readers can test some of the specific or abstract ideas explored here against their own radio listening, and alongside the many thousands of programmes and stations I have never listened to, let alone written about.

# 1

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## Industry

This chapter aims to analyse the ways in which radio is organized as an industry. This must be a starting point for any analysis of radio as a medium, since the commercial, political and technological context within which radio is produced has a direct bearing on the form and content of the programming that we hear on our radio sets. The major difficulty is that any attempt to characterize the structure of a media industry is to aim at a fast-moving target, since radio, like television, is changing quickly in terms of how it is owned, produced, distributed and consumed. The chapter is therefore designed, not so much to establish the *existing* patterns of radio, but to establish the *dynamic* forces which are shaping the medium at the start of the twenty-first century. First, the chapter offers different ways in which the radio industry can be categorized in global terms. This includes an examination of the basic economics of radio and the way in which this helps define its public or commercial goals. Secondly, it identifies two main forces for change: commercialization and rapid technological development. Many media analyses of the television and film industries have taken ownership as a central issue, arguing that a *concentration* of control into the hands of an ever smaller number of ever larger multinational conglomerates has created *globalized* patterns of production, programming and viewing. Although there are clearly parallel processes at work in the radio industry, exaggerated by many of the technological developments, this chapter will argue that the outcomes are likely to be somewhat different. The third part of the chapter therefore focusses on how the industry can be understood in terms of two apparently contradictory processes: on the one hand, the *consolidation* of ownership and programme formats

into a few dominant ‘brands’, and on the other hand, the *fragmentation* of radio into what appears at least to be a larger number of stations and new players aiming specialized programming at ever smaller audiences. In so doing, the chapter aims to identify the relevance to radio of certain ideas raised by political economy and cultural theory.

### The global structures of radio

The radio industry has always been a relatively small player within the media as a whole. Head and Sterling estimated that in the late 1980s, some 60,000 worked directly in radio in the USA, compared with about 168,000 in broadcast and cable television and more than 900,000 in a single corporation like General Motors (1990: 210–12); by the mid 1990s, the number working in radio had reached more than 100,000, but was also starting to fall again (Keith 1997: 31). In the UK, the number employed was put at about 3,800 in the early 1990s (Woolf and Holly 1994; Murrioni et al. 1998) though this appears not to have included those working within the BBC who served both radio and television, nor those in commercial production houses and independent companies, and the real number is now probably nearer 10,000 – still low compared with an estimate of about 36–40,000 employed in the UK television industry (Goodwin 1998: 158–60). And the largest radio operators, if they are not subsumed within bigger broadcasting or media organizations, have significantly smaller turnovers of revenue than their television counterparts: the BBC spends about a quarter of its income on its domestic radio services – typical of similar organizations across Europe, and the sort of funding provided for National Public Radio by the USA’s Corporation for Public Broadcasting (Ledbetter 1997: 121). Capital Radio, the UK’s richest commercial radio company had an annual turnover of about £78 million in 1996 compared with Carlton Television’s £1.67 billion (NERA 1998: 21; Carlton 1998: 1). The radio industry in Europe as a whole has an annual turnover of some \$8.8 billion – in the USA it is now over \$15 billion – though again, these figures are a fraction of the size of that for television (Tyler and Laing 1998: 5; RAB (US) 1999).

Yet, if the profits to be made from radio are relatively modest, the industry is much more pervasive than television. In the USA alone, where there are some 3,500 television services, there are well over 11,000 radio stations – in other words, about three times as many (FCC 1999). Even much smaller countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and Greece have some 500 or 600 radio stations each. There

is a decisive economic basis for this profusion: at any level, radio is significantly cheaper to produce than television. One hour of network radio costs the BBC about one-twentieth of the outlay on an hour of network television (see table 1.1). A local commercial station, with smaller overheads, could broadcast 24 hours a day at an average cost of well under £1,000 per hour (Graham 1999). A 'micro-radio' or pirate operator could start transmitting radio with a one-off investment in equipment of little more than one thousand pounds. The radio industry as a whole, then, consumes a much smaller share of resources than the television industry, but produces more output through many, many more outlets.

### Industrial sectors

Amid this bewildering array of activity, some general patterns are discernible. One broad distinction that can be drawn is between four overlapping activities in radio – regulation, servicing, broadcasting and production. The regulation of radio springs originally from the need to manage the relatively scarce resource of the world's electromagnetic spectrum so that at the very least there is little or no interference between the signals from different stations. Internationally, the spectrum is managed between countries by the International

**Table 1.1** Cost per hour of 'originated' programmes on BBC services: a comparison between network radio and network TV, 1997–8

<i>Radio network</i>	<i>Cost per hour of programming (£)</i>
Radio 1	2,700
Radio 2	3,400
Radio 3	5,200
Radio 4	10,200
Radio 5 Live	5,300
Average	5,360
<i>Television network</i>	<i>Cost per hour of programming (£)</i>
BBC 1	120,000
BBC 2	80,000
Average	100,000

Source: BBC Annual Report and Statement of Accounts, 1997/8