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Neil Postman's Missing Critique: A Media Ecology Analysis of Early Radio 1920-1935

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Abstract

Radio's first fifteen years were filled with experiment and innovation, as well as conflicting visions of what broadcasting's role in society ought to be. But while there was an ongoing debate about radio's mission (should it be mainly educational or mainly entertaining?), radio's impact on daily life was undeniable. To cite a few examples, radio was the first mass medium to provide access to current events as they were happening. It allowed people of all races and social classes to hear great orators, newsmakers, and entertainers. Radio not only brought hit songs and famous singers directly into the listener's home; it also created a new form of intimacy based on imagination -- although the listeners generally had never met the men and women they heard on the air, they felt close to these people and imagined what they must really be like. Radio was a medium that enhanced the importance of the human voice-- vii politicians, preachers, and performers were now judged by their ability to communicate with the "invisible audience."

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My dissertation employs a media ecology perspective to examine how the arrival and growth of radio altered a media environment that, until 1920, was dominated by the printed word. Neil Postman, a seminal figure in Media Ecology, wrote that this field of inquiry "looks into the matter of how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value." Radio certainly exemplified that description: it not only affected popular culture and public opinion; it affected the other media with which it competed. My research utilizes one of those competing media-- print journalism. Using content and discourse analysis of articles in thirty-three newspapers and sixteen magazines of the 1920s and early 1930s, I examine how print and radio interacted and affected each other. My dissertation also analyzes the differing perceptions about radio as expressed in print by fans, reporters, and such interest groups as clergy or educators. And finally, my research explores some of the critiques of the programs, and compares the reactions of the critics at the mainstream press with those who worked for the ethnic press.

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