

# Radio and Society



Radio and Society:  
New Thinking for an Old Medium

Edited by

Matt Mollgaard

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P U B L I S H I N G

Radio and Society: New Thinking for an Old Medium  
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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3607-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3607-4

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies at Auckland University of Technology for awarding me a research grant to complete this project. I would also like to thank Jennie Watts who did initial editing on most of the chapters in the book. Thank you to J. Mark Percival for good advice on the title. I would like to acknowledge colleagues for their encouragement and support and also all the radio scholars, practitioners and enthusiasts I have got to know over the years; you have always been great company. Finally, thank you to Reina and Hugo for being so patient.

# INTRODUCTION

This book features new scholarship for an old medium – radio. For over a century enthusiasts, scholars, practitioners, governments, businesses and listeners have helped to mature the original electronic mass medium – taking it out of the laboratory, into the back shed, out into the world and everywhere people are. There is still no mass medium as ubiquitous as radio, as it permeates our lives in so many ways. Our houses, cars, public spaces and phones all have receivers and we can now hear radio content online too. Count the radio receiving devices around you now; then try to extrapolate from that a rough estimate of all the devices that can receive radio for the entire world. The number is practically infinite anyway, as more receivers, clock radios, cars, mobile phones, computers and other devices that receive radio content are produced across the world every day.

Despite the advent of television, the explosive growth of the Internet, the spread of digital gaming platforms, the revolution in mobile entertainment options and the vast amount of content available in digital databases, radio receivers continue to be built and used. Radio stations are still broadcasting and radio remains a critical part of the media environment. The growth in radio broadcasting in developing nations reminds us that radio is far from being irrelevant and outmoded, as it is still a relatively cheap, easy to make and to access communications technology. In fact, radio has more than survived the critical challenges of the Internet, the computer and digital mobile entertainment; it has co-opted them as new platforms to expand its reach even further. Even the monolithic Apple Inc. has had to include radio receivers in its beautifully designed and cutting edge digital entertainment devices. Notably, the Internet has provided radio operators with a vast new storehouse and transmission platform for their outputs, free of the temporal and geographic constraints of the pre-Internet age.

Radio continues to face critical challenges. The same pressures of commerce and politics, the debates about the utilities of public and commercial broadcasting and ongoing discussions about the power of the media influence radio today - much as they have for the last century.



Radio is still perceived as powerful, influential and capable of creating societal change as well as commercial profits. This tension is being played out in debates about the value of broadcasting to different sections of society against the background of an evolving cornucopia of new media options in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The place of radio in this new environment has become contested as never before in that what was understood as radiogenic content—auditory electronic mass media communication—is now able to be recycled, re-imagined and remediated on completely new platforms and devices and without the need or even the desire to broadcast that content.

What “radio” *means* is far more complex than a century ago, and scholarship is reflecting this complexity, exploring the nuances of history, technology, society, commerce, politics and creativity that have been and remain so influential on the medium and its audiences. New ways of talking about radio and what it does and might do are emerging, driven by a desire to understand the reasons why this simple, old and easy media technology is still with us, despite many predictions of its imminent demise during the last 100 years. It can be argued that there is perhaps a sense of common cause, almost a wry sense of satisfaction at times, amongst radio scholars and practitioners at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This medium that has been regularly challenged by newer technologies and often dismissed as usurped continues to captivate media doers, thinkers and users. It has spread itself into the new digital platforms and has been reinvigorated by them, while adding to them in turn. Radio is now developing synergies with visual aspects of the media, creating hybrid forms of practice and content previously unimaginable. This is another way that radio offers incredibly rich ways to interrogate media forms and how we make and use them, all the while continuing to provide different spheres; large and small, commercial and public, free and fettered, as it always did. Radio is still here, it is still interesting and importantly, it is still being developed.

This book is a collection of contemporary research that explores different aspects of this complex and fascinating media form. The chapters herein cover a broad range of radio topics, from early radio histories to modern developments created by the potentials of the digital age. Several chapters engage with critical debates about the role of government, business and communities in how radio is used in our societies. Other chapters provide important new insights into making radio and radio as a cultural force. Chapters also provide developments in research methodologies

that can help us gain further insights into historical and contemporary radio issues. Of course, none of these things exist in isolation from each other and it is hoped that the reader will get a sense of the interwoven influences and potentials of radio; as it has been, is and will be. It is also hoped that this volume provides platforms for more engagement with radio research as a rich, vibrant and fruitful way to further our understandings of the media and ultimately, ourselves.

The book is arranged in a generally chronological and thematic manner, in order to provide different insights into key aspects of the evolution of radio and also to give context to current debates. The book starts with two chapters that explore the earlier years of radio. Peter Hoar provides an account of the challenges that the new technology of “wireless transmission” brought to New Zealand society. This chapter reflects on how the technology of radio was transformative, threatening and ultimately fascinating for those who encountered it in its early stages.

Anne MacLennan further develops these early encounter themes by tracing the links between Canadian newspapers and the growth of radio during the 1930s. The symbiotic relationship that developed between the old and new media forms provides new insights into how they reacted to one another and also how audiences perceived their roles and used them to react to change.

Richard Rudin then takes us to the 1960s and the encroachment of private enterprise on the state radio monopoly in the United Kingdom. This chapter explores how elitist perceptions about commercial radio and its threat to the post-war political, social and cultural consensus in the United Kingdom created conflict and drove detractors of commercial radio to mount a concerted campaign to influence the public and the government away from granting licenses to commercial operators. Here we see the interwoven influences of elites, the press and the government on broadcasting policy, as well as the emergence of another threat to the status quo – “pirate” radio.

Another attempt to break a governmental broadcasting monopoly by “taking to the high seas” is the focus of the next chapter. I argue that pirate radio in New Zealand (in the form of Radio Hauraki), was successful in establishing a new commercial status quo, and that the mystique of pirate radio played a critical part in the lack of debate around the almost total deregulation of broadcasting and the overwhelming commercial nature of

radio in New Zealand. This chapter interrogates some of the myths and effects of the pirate broadcasting era and shows the very different outcomes of the pirate radio challenge for New Zealand, despite similarities with the experiences of the United Kingdom that Rudin explores.

Tom Morton takes us to Australia and the development of an Australian music scene, which is fostered by Australian radio from the 1970s on. This is confronted and explored in a series of radio documentaries, structured as a cultural history of the “Australian sound”. Here we see the intersections between music and radio, but also the contemporary potential of sound broadcasting as storytelling and remembering. This chapter also interrogates narratives and ways of mapping the past as well as how radio can help reinvigorate that history for audiences now.

Sam Coley discusses music and radio documentary too, while also exploring ideas of fandom and how fans use the Internet to repurpose collectable material and to display their devotion. By taking us from the height of David Bowie’s musical career, to discovering a previously unheard Bowie song and then to documentaries made 25 years later and remixed by Bowie fans, Coley interrogates notions of fandom and also radio content on the Internet, providing us with insights into how the Internet can expand radio’s potential, but also how audiences can re-imagine radio content, given the right tools and motivations.

The next three chapters take us into the contemporary radio station to discuss what influences are acting on what we hear. Harry Criticos questions what is lost when a combination of government policies, ownership changes, commercial pressures and technology allows radio companies to network their stations together, losing local content and input. This chapter reveals some of the disadvantages of losing local radio influences, programmes and workers, as well as discussing the commercial pressures that privilege regional and metropolitan content over localness in the contemporary radio environment.

J. Mark Percival also takes us behind the scenes by exploring what makes “good” radio music. Radio music programmers have a profound influence on popular culture and their decisions can make or break entire careers or even genres. Percival talks to the programmers to find out how they imagine they make these critical decisions and critiques their approaches to choosing the songs they allow on their radio stations. These practices are virtually invisible to listeners and musicians; this chapter is a

unique insight into how music gets selected for airplay on the radio.

Helen Wolfenden grapples with one of the great clichés of radio performance, the constant advice to “just be yourself”. This chapter explores one of the great dilemmas that face radio broadcasters, especially new ones: how to be one’s self, while performing. Wolfenden discusses critical elements of finding and selecting selves to be, being “authentic” and what performance for the audience means to radio broadcasters. This chapter reveals the complex nature of what is actually happening for the broadcaster as a person and a performer when the microphone is turned on.

Tony Stoller takes us into the halls of government. Stoller is an insider, having been intricately involved with the development and deployment of digital radio in the United Kingdom. Here he reveals how broadcasting policy can be made with almost no deep critical oversight and also how technological fervour can create unexpected outcomes for governments, broadcasters and listeners. This chapter can be read as a somewhat cautionary tale, complete with insider insights and nuanced observations of how policy makers can be enraptured, and even captured, by new technologies and the desire to be seen to be embracing them.

The next chapter is also from an insider. Brent Simpson has spent many years working in the Low Power FM scene in New Zealand and is a strong advocate for community broadcasting. Simpson explores the open-access Low Power FM system in New Zealand, which is unique in the world. Using an “Open Commons” approach, Simpson asks if the utility of Low Power FM is being fully realized in New Zealand and critiques successive government’s reluctance to reinforce the sector, arguing that it has demonstrated potential to do more good for New Zealand citizens. This chapter challenges policy makers to utilise broadcasting legislation to engage with the LPFM sector more fully.

Matt Grimes and Siobhan Stevenson give us insights into how community-driven radio can help to rehabilitate and involve individuals and groups in society. Their research reveals the power of radio to help those on the margins empower themselves and others through their stories and through working together to produce them, as well as helping them pick up transferrable skills. Working with prisoners and the Travelling community, Grimes and Stevenson help us to understand the power of radio to make those that are ignored, forgotten or despised feel empowered, listened to and part of a wider society. Their research methods provide

new ways of designing projects to work with those who would greatly benefit from being acknowledged and supported in telling their stories.

Janey Gordon also explores research methods in the next chapter. Gordon discusses approaches to researching the audiences of community broadcasters in an inexpensive but in-depth and valid way. This chapter discusses qualitative and quantitative methods for gaining good information about radio audiences that can be used to fine tune programming and services. The chapter includes the results of a recent audience research project at a community radio station in the United Kingdom and how these methods could be used by others seeking reliable insights into their audiences at minimal cost.

The final chapter looks at how a large radio company is adapting to the realities of the Internet age. Pierre C. Bélanger explores how a major Canadian radio broadcaster is re-orientating itself towards the web and how that affects what people in the organisation do in order to participate in a “dynamic web strategy”, which goes beyond the broadcast and into the personal spaces of the web and increasingly, Internet-connected mobile phones and computing. What is revealed is that the business model for traditional broadcasters is rapidly changing, and that work practices, content creation and also delivery should reflect this. Bélanger puts forward a strong case for developing the human and technological resources to reach increasingly distracted audiences in the spaces and on the platforms they are using now and will be using in the future.

These chapters represent a small but significant collection of the increasing amount of new work being generated by scholars interested in the longevity, ubiquity, utility and flexibility of radio. There is much more to be done for sure, but it is hoped that this volume gives the reader a sense of the richness and potential of radio studies, as well as the passion for extending understandings of the medium held by many scholars of the media today.



## CHAPTER ONE

# MORSE, MAGIC AND MODERNITY: RECEIVING RADIO IN NEW ZEALAND 1900–1914

PETER HOAR

Radio is a medium that is not so much forgotten as taken for granted. It is always there, always on, in our cars, in our houses and on our iPods. The medium's mixture of voices, music and often jarring advertisements is part of the background noise of contemporary life. It may seem obvious what "radio" is, what it does, and what it means.

But our modern understanding of the term can be problematic when we try and understand the history of the medium, let alone any other audio technology such as phonographs, telephones or film. We tend to hear these audio technologies through the noise and interference of our modern meanings of the terms used to name them. As Marvin pointed out, "Media are not fixed objects: they have no natural edges" (1988, p. 8).

Our modern understandings of words such as "radio", "recording" or "film" are not those of the past. In New Zealand, as elsewhere, early "radio" was understood as wireless telegraphy i.e. an extension of the sort of single point to single point communication used in telegraphic communications, or letter writing. These days, radio is usually assumed to be one-to-many transmission, or broadcasting. Radio transmissions before the 1920s were in Morse code and heard through earphones. The earphones may remain today in some cases, although most modern radio listening actually happens in cars, but Morse code is not what we hear today. Modern radio broadcasting involves an unbroken wall of sound (speech, music, sound effects) designed to keep listeners ready for the commercial messages that fund most radio broadcasting in New Zealand. But the sounds of radio in New Zealand between 1900 and 1914 were the

sparse and sporadic “dits” and “dahs” of tapped out Morse messages set against, and often lost in, the whooshing, buzzing, clicking, howling, humming, sometimes screaming, and always present sounds of electromagnetic waves interacting in the Earth’s atmosphere. The heavenly harmonies of the music of the spheres turned out to be static.

Calling this audio experience “listening to radio” seems to muffle the historical experiences involved and deafens us to the cultural meanings and significances that these media once had. This highlights what Wurtzler pointed out: “The distinctions between media forms were not as clear as media-specific historical scholarship might suggest” (2007, p. 11). This historical enquiry in turn destabilizes our use of terms for modern media such as the “Internet” or “mobile phone” and problematises current debates about media and technologies (Hendy, 2008; Lacey, 2008).

Debates about media and technology are lacking in New Zealand historiography (Smithies, 2005-2006). General histories make token references to technologies such as refrigerated shipping when these are involved with larger stories about agriculture and economic change. Media such as radio, television and cinema are dutifully noted as important parts of social and cultural life but the significant roles technologies have played in New Zealand’s past tend to be downplayed (Belich, 2001; King, 2003; Smith, 2005). Specialised histories about New Zealand’s media have concentrated on institutional developments. These have often tended to have a nationalist focus built on teleological foundations. Their narratives describe a progress from isolation, obscurity and simple origins through to a triumphant “now” where New Zealand film, music, radio, and other cultural products are as good as any in the world and proudly reflect specifically local conditions and circumstances (Day, 1994, 2000; Staff & Ashley, 2002; Pivac, Stark, McDonald, 2011).

Thinking about radio in New Zealand before 1914 undermines such certainties about progress and isolation and also blurs the edges of the word “radio” itself. Radio places New Zealand squarely in the middle of modernity. The ways in which people learned about radio and understood it also decentre New Zealand as a subject. National history, conceived and inscribed as national identity, as an organic and normative formation, is in itself a practice of colonization. Teleological and nationalist histories tend to reinforce this cultural colonization. By thinking about the world in New Zealand, rather than New Zealand in the world, it may be possible to undermine these normative historiographical practices. Cultural histories



about media and technology are particularly suited to such a decentring process and this chapter is an attempt to do this through some of the meanings that radio had in New Zealand before 1914 (Gibbons, 2002, 2003; Byrnes, 2010). One important idea about radio in those days was that it was a threat to New Zealand's security as Eric Battershill discovered in 1913 when he found himself in court facing serious charges.

Battershill was a schoolboy living in Hastings, a small town in New Zealand's North Island, and he had a great interest in electronics and a great skill for tinkering with gadgets. By combining these talents and with some technical information from books and magazines, he built from scratch a radio set that could receive signals from thirty kilometres away but could not transmit. He was a typical amateur radio user in the years before the Great War. Typical in that he was a boy. The only woman we know of being directly involved with New Zealand radio in this period was Margaret Bell. She, with her brother Francis, operated a radio set at the Shag Valley sheep station deep in the South Island province of Otago (Dougherty, 2007). But the majority of radio amateurs were male and they were often schoolboys, such as Eric, who were following their interests in science. Tinkering with the audio technologies of modernity, such as phonographs and radios was a male dominated activity, both in New Zealand and in other countries where experiments were being made with radio transmission (Douglas, 1987, pp.190-92). Ingenious a tinkerer as he was, Eric found himself in the Hastings court as his radio activities were illegal. He had no licence to operate his set. Radio in 1913 was very much a matter of state control.

New Zealand had been the first country in the world to enshrine legislation controlling the radio medium. The New Zealand Wireless Telegraphy Act, passed on 26 September 1903, predated the British Wireless Telegraph Act of 1904. The New Zealand Act was designed to establish a government monopoly over the nascent medium and it imposed draconian penalties on those who breached it. Unlicensed operators faced their confiscation of their laboriously constructed equipment as well as a possible £500 fine (Wilson, 1994, p. 92). New Zealand depended on shipping for its survival and the government of the day understood the role that wireless telegraphy could play in safeguarding marine trade. There was a precedent for government ownership of communication technologies in the form of the telegraph system and the expanding telephone network that were both managed by the New Zealand Post Office. The Act addressed concerns about privacy in the new realm of wireless

communication. The Postmaster-General, Sir Joseph Ward, spoke of the insecurity of “Marconigrams” that circled in the ether until some unscrupulous or perhaps curious private person intercepted them instead of the intended recipient (Day, 1994, p.14). Not only was personal privacy at stake, but so also were important matters of state and Empire. Thus the New Zealand government began the slow business of establishing a chain of radio stations with the first being established in Wellington in 1911. By 1914, there was a systematically designed chain of these stations that provided for wireless telegraphs to be sent overseas as well as maintaining communications with the ships that were the basis of the country’s economy (Wilson, pp. 95-96). Wireless telegraphy was a communication medium such as the telephone and telegraph system that was maintained by New Zealand government for the overall good of the country.

Amateur and non-official radio operators were shut off from the airwaves, not only by the 1903 Act but also by the Post and Telegraph Amendment Act of 1913. This latter Act was even stricter than the first in that it made it an offence to construct a device even capable of sending and receiving radio signals. The 1903 Act had criminalised act of unauthorised radio transmission or reception but the 1913 Act penalised even the potential for such activity. Harry Bell, Minister of Internal Affairs, made the point of this legislation loud and clear when he told the Legislative Council that “Private wireless stations are a nuisance wherever they are; and frankly, it is not intended to permit them” (Dougherty, 1997, p.21). Up against this rigid system of carefully controlled and disciplined wireless telegraphy, it might seem that young Battershill was in deep trouble.

The prosecution in Battershill’s trial raised a point that had been an important part of the drive to place wireless telegraphy under governmental supervision. It was a kind of slippery slope argument but it certainly seemed to highlight what was at stake in the trial. It was the security of the realm; what Battershill was “doing for his own instruction might be done by others for reasons serious to the country and Empire such as the interception of wireless messages from overseas. Such plots might produce results of the utmost gravity” (“Boy and His Wireless Apparatus”, 1913, p. 10). This theme of national and Imperial defence had been taken up by a New Zealand newspaper article in 1912 which had pointed out the vulnerability of the telegraph system to attack and called for all British possessions to be in wireless contact and so form “an enduring line of defence between the Empire and the outer world” (“A Girdle of Wireless”, 1912, p. 6). According to the official view, Battershill

seemed to be threat to national security rather than a backyard hobbyist, tinkering with the latest communication technology.

The defence scoffed at this idea and maintained that the wireless regulation legislation served only to stultify the talent of scientifically minded youths such as Battershill. No harm had been done and he had been encouraged in his technical endeavours by his teachers at Napier High School. In the event, he was discharged on condition of not using the apparatus again. Eric Battershill seems to fade out of the radiophonic history of New Zealand after his trial. Whether he carried on experimenting with radio is unknown. His trial is of note in that he was charged in the first place and that the threat posed by wireless telegraphy was being taken seriously at a time when international tensions were heightening due to the naval arms race between Great Britain and Germany. Previously, the wireless regulations were hardly enforced at all.

Sometimes, unofficial and unlicensed wireless activities received official recognition and commendation despite the flouting of the draconian 1903 Act. This was the case of the so-called “three clever boys” in 1908 who were operating illegal wireless equipment at Dunedin, in the South Island (“Three Clever Boys”. 1908). Far from being taken to court and being threatened with large fines, these young wireless operators were rewarded with a notice of congratulations from the Premier Joseph Ward. The story behind their achievement illustrates how many early wireless experimenters began working with the new technology.

Rawson Stark, Stanton Hicks and Cyril Brandon were in their late teens when they publically demonstrated wireless transmission on 10 September 1908. They sent messages back and forth across the Otago Harbour including greetings between the mayors of West Harbour and Dunedin along with a message to the Premier which was forwarded to Wellington by telegraph. A number of public figures and officials were present at this demonstration and it was reported at length in local and national newspapers (Day, p.19; Dougherty, pp.15-16).

This demonstration came after two years of study and hard work by the boys. Stark’s father was employed as one of the city’s electrical engineers while Brandon worked for a private electrical engineering company. They spent all their pocket money on the parts needed to build their equipment from scratch. What they could not buy, they salvaged and scrounged from the city’s electrical workshops. Their family connections may have been

useful here. Getting hold of the materials for their experiments was one thing but finding out how to put it all together and make it work was another. They spent many hours in the Dunedin library “in search of the latest literature relating to wireless phenomena” and talked to local Post Office telegraph operators and engineers (“Three Clever Boys”, 1908). It took a lot of experimentation and effort in building and rebuilding their apparatus before they began to achieve results. After their spectacular demonstration, the mayor of Dunedin expressed his pride that the first land based wireless telegraphy system in New Zealand had been established in the city. Other officials offered similar encomiums to the boys. No mention was made of the illegality of the experiments let alone the threat of prosecution.

The “three clever boys” of Dunedin were rewarded by officials in a spirit of avuncular benevolence that was notably lacking just five years later when Eric Battershill was taken to court. His case showed some of the anxieties and fears associated with the thoroughly modern technology of radio while the Dunedin demonstrations were illuminated with the glamour and fascination that this seemingly miraculous scientific development radiated along with its invisible electromagnetic waves. It was not just technically inclined schoolboys, Post Office technicians and engineers who were interested in radio and informed about it. The wider public were kept up to date about this latest technology along with other global developments. The ways in which knowledge about radio was spread throughout New Zealand illustrates how modernity was experienced at what seemed to be one of the remotest parts of the globe.

The 2 January 1907 issue of the New Zealand popular scientific magazine *Progress* carried a long article by one Captain Louis E. Walker. Walker was an agent of the Marconi Company and he was trying to interest the New Zealand government in purchasing equipment for the proposed network of wireless stations. Walker’s article gave a history of wireless development to date or at least the triumphs of the Marconi Company in this field. Along with detailed descriptions of the technology and theories behind radio, the article also included various illustrations. One of these was of the Marconi wireless apparatus on display at the New Zealand International Exhibition that was held in Christchurch 1906-7. Another one was of a circuit diagram of the “Marconi transmitting and receiving apparatus” (Walker, 1907, pp. 92-94). These illustrations can illuminate some aspects of the reception of modernity in New Zealand.

The Marconi Company set up a radio station at the Exhibition as part of its strategy to corner the wireless telegraphy market in Australasia. This was the first public display of wireless in New Zealand and the regular demonstrations sparked off a great interest in the new technology (Day, 1994, pp.16-17). The Exhibition itself was an important moment in New Zealand history in that it marked the country's transition from Colony to Dominion status. Through the Exhibition, New Zealand was displayed to the world, and itself, as a prosperous, advanced and modern country (Phillips, 1998). But the world was also being brought to New Zealand as many countries had displays as part of the Exhibition. The international nature of the Exhibition made it more than a nationalistic statement about New Zealand's role in the world. It was also connecting the rest of the world to New Zealand and so undermining the notion of the new Dominion as an isolated and peripheral island fastness, remote from the distant world centres of North America and Europe. It was showing that New Zealand was part of the modern world and that world included technologies such as wireless telegraphy.

Walker's article also featured a clear and detailed circuit diagram (Walker, 1907, p. 94). It would have been a simple matter to build a duplicate of Marconi's machine from this diagram and the descriptions in the article. For wireless devotees such as Battershill and the "three clever boys", there was a wealth of information available from overseas sources. Similar articles and diagrams were found in magazines such as *Popular Mechanics* and newspapers also published articles that explained the technical aspects of wireless in some detail. Manuals, handbooks and the equivalents of modern "How to" guides were readily available from local bookshops or could easily be bought from overseas. Oliver Lodge's *Signalling Through Space Without Wires* (London, 1900), George Pierce's *Principles of Wireless Telegraphy* (New York, 1910) and C.C.F. Monckton's *Radio-Telegraphy* (London, 1908) were the sorts of works consulted by New Zealand radio enthusiasts for circuit diagrams, equations and general technical advice.

However, most New Zealanders would have received radio through the pages of newspapers and popular magazines rather than technical manuals and specialised journals. Editorials, articles, pictures and cartoons described radio and made it familiar to New Zealanders long before they had a chance to hear it. Most people would have got radio long before they received it. And to get radio, as in to understand or get other technologies such as phonographs, films and telephones, was to be modern. It was to be

familiar with the progress of science, the annihilation of time and space, the shrinking of the world, the increasing, exciting and nerve tingling acceleration of the speed of modern life: to know about and maybe use these things was to be part of modernity and New Zealand was a country that was “born modern” in that it entered and participated in the modern world of technology, mass media, and consumption of industrially produced global culture from the genesis of its awareness of itself as a country called “New Zealand”. This could, be dated to the 1850s with the establishment of the country as a nation-state (Daley, 2010).

While there may have been few radio waves in the air in pre-1914 New Zealand, the idea of radio was certainly in the air for most people. New Zealand’s media had been connected to the global network of telegraph lines since 1876 and the world’s news, fashions, fads and technological developments were all part of the daily life of the country’s people. Accounts of the experiments and inventions by people such as Thomas Edison and Marconi had appeared in New Zealand newspapers fresh from the European and American presses and telegraph wires. The idea of wireless transmission was familiar to many New Zealanders well before the technology itself. This may have given rise to tensions and anxieties about national security but other meanings were more benevolent. Part of being modern was a form of nonchalance in the face of seemingly miraculous technologies such as wireless communication. Telegraphs, telephones, recorded sound and films were all accepted parts of New Zealand’s daily life by the time wireless was demonstrated at the 1906-7 Exhibition. Cartoons and jokes, along with sober technical accounts and demonstrations, played important roles in the normalisation of technology. To get the joke meant that you got the technology even if you did not actually have it as such.

A cartoon from the *New Zealand Free Lance* in 1907 showed how knowledge of wireless communication could be used. The cartoon showed a drunken man woozily clinging for support to a telegraph pole on Lambton Quay, a main street in New Zealand’s capital city, Wellington. The caption read: “Don’t talk – hic – to me – of new inventions. What’ll I do – hic - when they go in - hic - for this new-fangled - hic - wireless telegraphy?” (“Too Much Easter”, 1907, p. 15). What this cartoon played on was its audience’s knowledge that wireless telegraphy was ... wireless! Unlike the old system of telegraphy, wireless telegraphy used no wires so it needed no poles for these non-existent wires which further meant that the drunks of Lambton Quay would have nothing to cling to when this

new technology was fully deployed. The knowing readers of this cartoon, all citizens of a modern country that was deeply embedded in the world of modernity, knew that wireless did indeed mean no wires. This was one of the important things about this new technology that people knew even before they saw it. This familiarity helped demystify the technology itself.

The speed of wireless telegraphy was also made fun of. Another cartoon featured in the *New Zealand Free Lance* in 1908 showed two tramps staring in amazement after a blurred shape that had just zoomed past them at immense speed, causing one to stagger and lose his hat. One tramp wondered if it was a streak of lightening or a “wireless telegram”. The other put him right by saying that it was Joseph Ward on the election trail (“Sir Joe in a Hurry”, 1908, p. 12). Ward’s 1908 campaign saw him tour a lot of the country at high speed. This was not the funniest political cartoon of modern times but it said something about how radio was understood. Radio was fast, like lightening, or a campaigning politician. People knew that radio waves were invisible so part of the knowing humour lay in the absurd idea that one might see a wireless telegraph message. The clued up second tramp got this. So did the readers. But the speed of radio was the idea being played with in this cartoon. Everyone understood that radio was really, really fast.

There was a further political layer to this cartoon in that Ward was very interested in the development of radio and strove for New Zealand to be part of the invisible empire of wireless networks that spread around the world before 1914. Ward was Postmaster-General in 1905-6 when he toured Europe and the USA and attended many demonstrations by various wireless companies. He became familiar with the technology and understood its strategic and commercial possibilities. After becoming Premier in the 1908 election, Ward pushed along the development of official wireless communications in New Zealand (Day, 1994, pp.15-19; Wilson, 1994, pp.91-96). The message of congratulations he sent to the Dunedin boys after their 1912 demonstration was more than a mere token. Ward had a real interest in developing wireless communications in New Zealand. Hence the comparison of him to a wireless telegraph message had multiple and interrelated meanings.

But these cartoons, and many others, along with articles and features in the general media, were ways in which those who were not radio “geeks”, such as Eric Battershill or the three clever boys, came to get radio before they actually received it. They were informed citizens of modernity who

enjoyed the thrills of new technologies along with the senses of progress and improvement these new gadgets brought in their wake.

The few citizens who got radio in the sense of actually hearing it were engaging in a modern form of listening. The accounts left by New Zealand's wireless pioneers are sparse and tend to concentrate on technical issues and evading detection. These records tend to leave out what was actually heard.

One account from 1922 gives some idea of what radio listening may have been like in the pre-1914 era. When Ken Collins, Chief Technician at the government owned radio station 2YA until 1949, recalled his first experience of radio, he described hearing through earphones a "faint high-pitched musical note in sharp staccato Morse code – "dit dit dit *dah*, dit dit dit dit". Suddenly the singing note died and immediately, much louder, a dry tearing sound took up the Morse code" (Collins, 1967, p. 13). These sounds of a Sydney radio station communicating with a ship in the Tasman Sea were heard through the inner sonic space generated by earphones.

This personalized, interior sonic space was typical of listening to early acoustic technologies in modernity. Phonographs were often heard through earphones and the telephone had accustomed people to the idea of "sounds in their ears" in new and intimate ways. In fact, many of the early radio listeners had to make their own earphones (along with all other parts of the apparatus) before the mid 1920s, when loudspeakers became more widely available. Telephones could be cannibalized to make earphones. One early radio user recalled that "The phones were of P. and T. [Postal and Telegraph] pattern, obtained from never mind where, suffice to say that they were obtained" (Spackman, 1932, p. 2). Far from being a communal or family experience, radio before the mid-1920s was a fundamentally individual one. The earphones would be passed around if several people were present or multiple sets could be used but each listener heard the sounds in a more intimate manner than if they issued from speakers. The sounds were "in their heads" in a way other sounds were not.

Modern discussions about the use of earphones as listening devices have tended to concentrate on the ways in which they create private aesthetic spaces literally within the listener's head (Bull, 2000, pp. 31-42, 156-161; Weber, 2010). Such accounts stress the novelty of the sort of interior spaces created by earphones but their modern focus overlooks the



fact that early audio technologies also frequently involved the use of earphones. Early phonographs, radios and films were often heard through earphones. Their listeners might well have experienced the same kind of inner musical spaces that scholars now associate with the iPod. The inner acoustic space created by later devices such as the Walkman or iPod is less of an innovation than we might think. Modern listening experiences have surprisingly long, complex and varied genealogies that are not purely dependent on reaching some absolute level of technological progress.

Collins described his sense of wonder and the thrill of even hearing these sounds as he could not understand Morse code itself. That point for many of the early radio operators was simply building the equipment, making it work, and hearing something, anything, that could be a radio signal. The goal then became to build more effective equipment and transmit and receive signals over greater distances through this seemingly magical medium that could transcend space and send messages instantaneously.

Susan Douglas has called attention to the way radio appeared as magical and unearthly to its early listeners. In her account, the communication of live people through early radio “bridged the widening gap between machines and spirituality. Radio burrowed into this unspoken longing for contact with the heavens, for a more perfect community, for a spiritual transcendence not at odds with, but made possible by, machines” (2004, p. 41).

New Zealand’s early radio operators seem to have been more concerned with technical problems and static rather than bridging the alleged gap between technology and the spiritual. However, the response of listeners such as Collins shows how they were moved and excited by the re-embodiment of human presence at a distance through this new and exciting machinery of modernity. Others did experience wireless as a form of spiritual communication.

The links between wireless communication and discourses around the paranormal have been noted by many scholars (Peters, 1999; Sconce, 2000; Enns, 2006). The international interest in spiritualism was felt in New Zealand with many famous mediums and speakers touring the country as well home grown attempts to communicate with the dead (Ellwood, 1993). Audio technologies such as the telephone and the phonograph had detached the voice from the body and conquered space

and time. The ability of the phonograph to capture, preserve and replay voices seemed to even conquer death. Wireless apparatus, radio waves and the ether provided metaphors, and at times mechanisms, for communication with the dead.

New Zealand's spiritualists, devotees of telepathy, ghost hunters and even astrologers were quick to seize on wireless telegraphy as a model for their modes of other worldly communication. Hence a 1903 *Wanganui Herald* article described telepathy as "the wireless telegraphy of the mind" ("Converts to Telepathy", p. 6). In 1906, Nelson astrologer Joseph Taylor, compared finding an individual's "cosmic key" to radio tuning (Taylor, p. 1). The Theosophist Annie Besant, when interviewed during a 1908 lecture tour of New Zealand, spoke of the power of thought as a natural force like wireless telegraphy and "most potent in its effects when rightly understood and directed" ("Mrs Besant's Visit", p. 14). These ways of using the idea of radio might seem like attempts at bridging Susan Douglas's gap between the spiritual and the mechanical mentioned above. If spiritualism is like radio and yet it lets us communicate with the dead then surely some of the otherworldly aspects of spiritualism rub off on radio? The technology itself seems like magic in just the same way talking with the dead is magical and spiritually transcendent. But the transcendence is not so much made possible by the machines as that the technology becomes a quasi-scientific explanatory factor for transcendence itself. The new acoustic technologies were heard by some as ways of explaining beliefs and practices that did not have too much purchase in terms of post-Enlightenment scientific rationality. The howling, buzzing, screaming and sputtering sounds that often drowned out the Morse code messages of wireless telegraphy were heard by some as the real messages being transmitted via the new and non-human medium.

The outbreak of war in 1914 put paid to any further public amateur radio experimentation in New Zealand. Any attempts at unauthorised wireless transmission were treated very seriously. One man was imprisoned early in the war and several others fined heavily for illegal radio ownership and operation. But even so, some amateurs still operated clandestinely during the war years. A group in Gisborne managed to pick up signals from Apia in Western Samoa with a crystal set and a 90 metre aerial that was concealed in a pine tree during the day and unrolled at night (Day, 1994, pp. 30-32; Dougherty, pp. 21-22). There was also a great demand by the government for radio operators in both the navy and the army and as trainers for other operators. The first military action by New

Zealand in the Great War came when a force was sent to Apia to take control of a German radio station established there. The signals received by the Gisborne operators at night were those of the New Zealand garrison established on Samoa to protect this important strategic asset. After the war, a seasoned cadre of radio operators returned to New Zealand and most began experimenting with broadcasting voices and music (“wireless telephony”) rather than the one-to-one Morse code transmissions of the pre-war period. Some amateurs still kept to the idea of point to point transmission and developed the DX or ham radio culture that still runs alongside New Zealand’s modern broadcast radio market.

Much of the history of New Zealand’s media and media technologies remains obscure and many accounts take nationalist and teleological perspectives that can obscure the ways in which the wider world was experienced. A tendency to see New Zealanders as agricultural producers rather than metropolitan consumers of global culture has often led to stories of development that end in a triumphant “now” with plucky New Zealand taking its turn on the world stage with its unique home brewed cultural products that reflect a distinctive sense of national identity.

Reflecting on the ways in which the global networks of technological and cultural modernity were experienced is a way of capturing a snapshot of cultural colonization in action. This process is ongoing and constantly re-inscribed by the very nationalist based histories, films, music and other cultural products that ignore or downplay the role of global influences and corporate entities that shaped the culture of modernity in New Zealand as much as they made cultures in the Old and New worlds. Stories about early radio in New Zealand decentre the nation as the subject and complicate ideas about cultural colonization.

They also destabilise our notions about media and blur the edges of our idea of radio as heard through its history. It may also be that by listening to the static and interference ridden past of radio, and its reception as a new medium then, we might in turn open up new modes of thinking about the reception of new media now.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# READING RADIO: THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN RADIO AND NEWSPAPERS FOR THE CANADIAN RADIO LISTENER IN THE 1930S

ANNE F. MACLENNAN

### **Introduction**

Just as radio was a new medium in the 1930s, so too was the audience. The Canadian radio listeners of the thirties were enthusiastic consumers of the technology who learned about radio, primarily, from its broadcasts. But a second site for radio listeners to learn about this new medium was the local newspaper. Listening norms, national radio strategies, and programming likes and dislikes were all a part of standard radio columns. Whether or not the columns voiced or influenced opinion about radio, they provided a constant stream of information about the technology, programme content, and practice of listening to the radio. So the experience of listening to radio created an audience in the first instance, but the newspaper played a significant role in reinforcing that listening.

The growth of radio was directed by the transfer of radio knowledge through the medium itself and through newspapers. Newspapers actively, though inadvertently, built and maintained the audience needed to sustain radio, especially in its early years. In *Syntony and Spark: The Origins of Radio*, Aitken explores the balance between science, technology and the economy to conclude that “To understand the creative processes of change... our attention must focus on the ways in which knowledge is transferred” (1985, p. 335). In the case of early Canadian radio, this transmission transpired in a three-way relationship. The audience, at the core of the relationship, acted simultaneously as listener and reader to