

# POINTS ON THE DIAL

Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks



ALEXANDER RUSSO

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*Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks*

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If radio is an art, as I believe it is, you have to remember, first of all, that an art must give pleasure. There are many books on esthetics. But there are only two problems in esthetics. One is to get the audience to *come* in. The other is to get it to *stay* in. Radio is the easiest of all arts to walk out on. What most people overlook, if they have not tried it, is the extreme difficulty of using radio so that it will be interesting to the listener. Every art has its limitations. You cannot practice any art until you recognize its limitations and *master its technique*.

JOHN ERSKINE, quoted in *Broadcasting to All Homes*

Advertising that *doesn't distract—doesn't sell*. It doesn't get a *chance* to sell, *unless and until it distracts*.

JUSTIN MILLER, writing for the Grey Advertising Agency



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# Narratives of Radio's Geographies

On October 19, 1937, President Frank Mason of the National Broadcasting Company received an irate memo about station affiliations from his vice president of network sales, Roy Witmer. In the memo Witmer recounted that the prior evening he had been listening to the Bridgeport, Connecticut, station WICC, which he knew was a member of NBC-Blue. However, during the broadcast Witmer had heard a series of announcements that implied that WICC had other network affiliations. The first statement announced that WICC was affiliated with the Colonial Network. A notice of affiliation with the Mutual Network immediately followed. Finally, a third announcement informed the audience that they were now joining the Blue Network of the National Broadcasting Company. This was not the first time that Witmer had noticed that WICC used a variety of program sources. Several months earlier he had written to the station's owner, John Shepard III, and Shepard's flagrant violation of NBC policy surely added to Witmer's ire.<sup>1</sup> Perplexed by the knowledge that an NBC station was affiliating with two other networks, and worried that multiple affiliations "confused" listeners, Witmer expressed a "deep suspicion" that "there are a great many other stations doing the same thing."<sup>2</sup> I begin with this example because it encapsulates a range of dynamics that render more complex a monolithic conception of the so-called network era of radio broadcasting. I believe

Witmer's hunch was correct. During radio's golden age its stations drew upon a range of program sources and not just national networks. If this scenario was not exceptional, if it represented common broadcasting industry practices and a normal listener experience, then it suggests that radio of this period was more complicated, fragmented, and multivocal than has yet been accounted for.

It is my argument in this book that between 1926 and 1951 (the "network era") radio as a cultural form in the United States was not the homogeneously constructed "imagined community" that is inscribed in popular memory. Radio stations drew upon not only national network feeds but also a wide range of programming sources including regional networks, sound-on-disc transcription recordings, and nationally produced scripts performed locally. Likewise, an equally diverse group of individuals and organizations made possible the production, distribution, and sponsorship of these programs. The programs and their producers created hybrid and varied programming and advertising forms, which were integrated into the daily lives of audiences that listened both attentively and distractedly in locations both inside and outside the home. These were the dynamics in play when a distressed NBC executive expressed concern that one of his network's stations was receiving programming from multiple sources—a case that violates golden age radio's mythology of national unity.

The cultural memory of golden age broadcasting recalls radio's ability to unite the country around a shared experience of hugely popular, nationally produced, commercially sponsored programs. This is not a coincidence. Almost from their inception, NBC and CBS sought to represent themselves as national unifiers. Practices of interconnection, network formation, and commercial advertising built upon one another in service of the national ideal during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup> AT&T landlines facilitated the simultaneous connection of affiliated stations by building a network from the metropolitan centers of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Broadcast networks considered commercial advertising necessary not only to pay the connection fees but also to provide a "better class of talent" than local stations could supposedly come by. Only national advertisers could afford the steep admission price for network sponsorship. Finally, according to this narrative, audiences responded because they preferred the higher production values and star personas that only the networks and national sponsors could afford. In this account the near universal popularity of these pro-

grams produced a feeling of commonality as the family unit symbolically participated in national events by gathering around a single radio located in the home. Network radio then reigned supreme as a nationally unifying medium until it was displaced by television's arrival in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the present work I revise this account by revealing the complexity of the story of radio as a cultural unifier. In addition I challenge the image of radio during the network era as monolithic and static, and I gesture toward how a reconceived history of the network era influences our understanding of postnetwork radio and of phenomenologies of listening. As a cultural form, network programming supposedly offered a vision of unity and cohesion by creating a sense of a simultaneous "imagined community." This concept, derived from Benedict Anderson's model of nationalism in the modern age, animates many contemporary studies of radio in the network era.<sup>4</sup> Anderson argues that the simultaneous daily activity of reading a newspaper containing information circulated from other co-temporal places created an experience of connection and shared existence vital to national identity. When this notion is applied to network-era radio, the emphasis is placed on the medium's practice of the centralized distribution of live programs. As cultural gatekeepers, national networks were able to disseminate programming that appealed to a homogeneously defined American identity. This mass mode of address defined radio as a national rather than local entity. Audiences were invited to see themselves as members of a single national community rather than as part of multiple, varied identities. National networks used "sanctioned national culture" to attempt to smooth out and control regional and local cultural expressions. Thus these appeals to a single identity could only be sustained at the expense of those at the margins. At the same time there were limits to these efforts, which in turn created a national radio culture that was both unified and divided, characterized by ongoing structural tension rather than by pure dominance.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, while arguments concerning American radio networks' centralization and standardization describe one aspect of radio's cultural form, they are incomplete because of the wide variation in radio's production and dissemination practices and the attendant complications to the cultural dynamics of reception.

Despite an overarching impulse toward homogeneity, there were many fissures within network radio's hegemonic cultural form. Susan Douglas



reminds us that while radio is widely considered to have built national unity in the 1930s, it also allowed “listeners to experience at the same time multiple identities—national, regional, local—some of them completely allied with the country’s prevailing cultural and political ideologies, others of them suspicious of or at odds with official culture.”<sup>6</sup> While Douglas is speaking about the polysemy of network programs, her insight about the ways radio appealed to multiple categories and modalities of identity can be extended to address radio outside of the network system and the multiple forms of imagined community that it engendered. If circuits of distribution are incomplete or coexist in conjunction with alternative methods of cultural dissemination, then a more flexible conception of simultaneity is needed to account for the ways that imagined communities of various scales are established and maintained. Radio most certainly fostered a national imagined community, but it also constructed smaller regional and local ones that were linked to the larger community in some ways and independent of it in others. There has recently been a wave of excellent scholarship that has begun to revise the national orientation of much radio history, but there is much more work that needs to be done to explain the complex ways that local broadcasters operate as local entities, how their practices extend into the national and the global, and how they produce experiences that register as meaningful to listeners on multiple levels.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to complicating the dynamics of radio’s role as cultural unifier, my work in this book revises the assumption that network radio was a monolith unchallenged in its industrial and cultural domination. This narrative holds that the success of commercial broadcasting created a hegemonic system. After a period of intense debate, the medium’s technological, cultural, and economic form was supposedly codified in the 1934 Communication Act, which ratified sets of commercial and technical standards that only commercially sponsored broadcasters could meet. This enshrined national commercial broadcasting’s unchallenged dominance.<sup>8</sup> This perspective also assumes that the remarkable continuity of performers during the network era indicated stasis within the entire medium. In many ways this view is summed up by Fred Allen’s rueful eulogy for network radio that described its final years as ones where “the audience and the medium were both getting tired. The same programs, the same comedians, the same commercials—even the sameness was starting to look the same.”<sup>9</sup> The assumption of “sameness,” then, encompasses both the commercial orientation of

network radio and the deleterious effects of those commercial pressures on programming aesthetics.

However, instead of seeing the networks as monolithic and the era as static, it is imperative to recognize that while the performers may have remained the same, the structure of programming schedules, the organization of individual shows, and the experience of listening changed continuously. By the time a network-dominated commercial system had supposedly consolidated itself in the 1934 Communication Act, parallel institutions had already emerged, constructed audiences, produced programs, sold those audiences and programs to both sponsors and stations, and distributed those programs for broadcast on local stations. The resulting national radio landscape was a multitiered system with intermingling, yet distinct, national, regional, and local programming forms, sponsorship patterns, and methods of program distribution. The changing landscape of revenue and programming sources contributed to a highly segmented, discretely organized listening experience. Rather than a single homogeneous address, the average broadcast day, even for a single station, was full of multiple, contrasting modes of address and program forms. In conjunction, the experience of listening also became more hybrid in nature by encompassing varied degrees of attention and spaces of reception. The histories of these radio models revise and counter the cultural memory of live network broadcasts constructing a national imagined community modeled on the family and constituted by attentive audiences.

The traditional focus on American radio's tendencies toward cultural unity and stasis distorts not just the network era but also the much longer period that came after it. According to the dominant narrative of broadcasting's development, television first crushed and then replaced network radio's nationally unified structure and address. Upon television's birth contemporary commentators pronounced radio dead—the first of many such pronouncements and one unchallenged by subsequent historians. According to this narrative network radio failed to anticipate the demand for television and could not compete with America's enthusiasm for the new visual medium. Yet not all was lost. Supposed visionary entrepreneurs, operating outside the confines of the networks, discovered in the early and middle 1950s that radio could be profitable if it supplied a relatively small range of music and local news, or what came to be called "formats." According to this account the idea of the format, pioneered by figures such as Todd

Storz and Gordon McLendon, saved radio from the onrushing onslaught of television. In an oft-repeated tale, Storz claimed to be inspired to limit his playlist by seeing a waitress at a diner repeatedly play the same songs on the jukebox while cleaning up one night, thus giving birth to Top 40.<sup>10</sup> This story, like many other origin tales, obscures more than it reveals. As the centerpiece of a narrative of phoenixlike rebirth it assumes a simple relationship of cause and effect between the postwar introduction of television and the demise of radio networks, and it valorizes entrepreneurs like Storz and McLendon for having an innate sense of market demands. Dividing the history of broadcasting into neat categories of national and local, network and independent, dramatic and comedic-musical, home and mobile, family listening and individual listening obscures the ongoing interactions among these elements that preceded the widespread transformations of the 1950s.

The transformations in postwar radio were a paradigm shift following the vacuum left by the demise of network radio as a mass medium, but they were as much based upon long-standing tensions and developments in the medium's technological, industrial, and cultural form as they were purely a response to the threat posed by the emergence of television. This volume charts those tensions and developments. I entertain the contradictions of network radio's impulse toward mass audiences as well as the experiences of multiplicity, all structured by commercial imperatives. I trace the institutional, technological, and aesthetic precursors to the mythical moments of death and rebirth, and I suggest that music formats (and their attendant modes of listening) emerged from the complex interaction of multiple influences as part of long-standing tensions within the radio industry. These dynamics shaped the way radio would develop and provided models that many broadcasters, including Storz and McLendon, took up in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Because traditional narratives linked national network broadcasting's demise with the rise of the supposedly local disc jockey era, complicating this story requires attention to the overlapping and preceding dynamics of broadcasting practices and their economies of attention, space, and place.

To examine the complexity of interwar and postwar radio my argument takes an interdisciplinary perspective. I draw on the interpretive methodologies of social, cultural, and broadcasting history as well as media theory to account for interactions within the production and reception of technologically based aural representations. I follow a revisionist historical con-

tention that emphasizes how what is often considered a single medium is actually the result of the “dynamic interplay” of a system of technologies, industrial and regulatory dynamics, programming, and practices of reception and use.<sup>11</sup> James Lastra’s “four-term dialectic” of “device, discourse, practice, and institution” provides a useful schema for this analysis.<sup>12</sup> I consider devices—in this case multiple systems of technologies—that constituted the infrastructure of “radio”; the cultural discourses that described and prescribed how the technologies were to be used; the practices involved in using those devices when producing as well as listening to broadcasting programs in a commercial system; and finally, the institutions, as social and economic structures, that defined the possibilities and activities of radio practice.

Radio encompassed a complex system of technologies, each of which has particular ontological properties. More than simply “medium specificity” there were elements of aural broadcasting that were unlike other media. Yet, at the same time, those supposedly ontological criteria and the aesthetic and habitual definitions of good and proper radio practice were socially constructed; these rules and norms were the product of conflicts among a variety of actors, each of whom defined collections of technologies in ways that served particular interests.<sup>13</sup>

The technological system commonly referred to as radio was structured by a socially situated idea of spatial communication. The central problem for American commercial radio was (and continues to be) the separation of sender and receiver.<sup>14</sup> Neither radio networks nor sponsors could know how listeners would react to programs. In the absence of prescribed cultural protocols for listening, radio networks worried that listeners would simply turn off programs for the slightest reason. Speaking to this issue, John Durham Peters compared theories of mass communication to those of hermeneutics.<sup>15</sup> That is, both concern themselves with the sending of a message without the ability to ascertain whether that message has been received and understood. This inability to “know” the audiences has taken on a special consideration as a source of sustained anxiety because of American broadcasting’s commercial context. The radio industry depended on selling audiences to sponsors and, in turn, the sponsors who paid for programming needed to know if audiences were responding to the advertising aimed at them. This anxiety has manifested itself through a concern with audience attention.

Attention, as Jonathan Crary has recently noted, emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a new epistemology of consciousness. Attention combined socially articulated psychological functions of perception with institutional imperatives for disciplined subjects. It was part of the disciplinary process in which bodily behaviors became scientific objects and social problems. As Crary notes, “The problem of attention, then, was not a question of a neutral timeless activity like breathing or sleeping, but of the emergence of a specific model of behavior with a historical structure—behavior that was articulated in terms of socially determined norms and was part of the formation of a modern technological milieu.”<sup>16</sup> In encompassing an idea of perception that included both absorption and deferral Crary’s focus on subjectivity writ large also applies to the construction of media subjects enacted in the relationship between audiences and the mass media they consume.<sup>17</sup>

A dynamic of absorption and deferral provides a model for examining ideals of aural reception, the experience of radio listening, and the forms of intersubjective communion that the medium fosters. Today radio is largely considered a secondary medium—that is, consumed while doing something else.<sup>18</sup> This secondary status was not always the case. During the network era, radio was often regarded as a primary medium capable of holding sustained audience attention, thereby suggesting that models of radio listening were socially produced. The changing status of listening reminds us that the relationships between what Lastra has termed “technologically mediated sensory experience” and “technologically produced forms of representation” are not ontological ones. Rather, they are “pragmatic, historical, and contingent forms of knowledge produced in response to concrete and objective material possibilities, but also in response to emerging discourses, existing practices, and established institutions.”<sup>19</sup> As such one thread in this project is to contextualize the listening experience of this era of radio. Scholarship from the field of sound studies suggests that listening is contingent on an array of socially situated contexts and processes. Parts of this work, such as Susan Douglas’s archaeology of listening modes, Kate Lacey’s call for a “periodization of listening,” and Jonathan Sterne’s emphasis on “audile techniques,” address the cultural specificity of radio listening in context.<sup>20</sup> This book thus continues that work by exploring some of the ways in which broadcasters defined, debated, and redefined not just programming forms but also categories and practices that allowed listeners to

experience radio programming as meaningful and the social and cultural importance of those practices and experiences.

Placing radio within the larger rubric of consumer culture requires expanding the object of study, from viewing radio in terms of technologies and aesthetic practices to situating the radiophonic, a description that invokes why a medium matters to social relations. In a manner similar to James Hay's description of the televisual, I constitute the radiophonic as a "socio-spatial problematic."<sup>21</sup> Like the medium it preceded, radio in the 1930s and 1940s was an "assemblage" that was both "site" and "network." As a site, radio operated in discrete spaces; it also operated relationally through technologies, economic relationships, social arrangements, and links to everyday life that were located elsewhere. Each configuration of ubiquity and connectedness structured the scale of radio's operations and the ways each contributed to a particular model of social relations.<sup>22</sup> Because radio was constituted as both site and network, the social meanings of its institutions, actors, and technologies could shift depending on the scale of their operation. These variable meanings informed the ways that the broadcasting industry attempted to turn audiences, and their attentive capacity, into a commodity organized to facilitate the sale of other commodities.<sup>23</sup>

In the United States commercial broadcasting developed as a response to the question, "Who will pay for radio?"<sup>24</sup> However, a more difficult question almost immediately followed, "What can radio produce that someone will pay for?" To answer this, broadcasters turned to an ever-increasing apparatus of audience construction and measurement. Categories of audience attention were produced by demographers who devised new ways to measure, define, and in effect call into being new market categories. Audience researchers did not operate in a vacuum; they shaped their product (surveys and data) in response to the demands of its buyers (namely, advertising agencies, sponsors, and broadcasters) as well as to larger cultural dynamics.<sup>25</sup> Markets, both mass and niche, have been repeatedly "discovered" by culture industries promoting different products through different media throughout the twentieth century. Thus, while this book focuses on radio audience markets, similar processes occurred in music, film, clothing, and other consumer goods. At times these larger dynamics intersected with radio, but at other times they operated more or less independently.<sup>26</sup>

The development of marketing on the radio was part of a larger relationship between capitalism and social legitimation. Advertisers in the early

and middle twentieth century feared individuals would become alienated by mass-produced products and the similarly massive corporations that created and distributed them. These companies sought ways to mediate that threat, one of which was by using radio.<sup>27</sup> They sought to make radio part of a language of “better living,” where consumer goods became intimately connected to definitions of the good life and taste preferences provided a means of identifying oneself and relating to others. Consumer culture built upon and “destabilized” existing identities based on geography, ethnicity, political preferences, and class position, and radio played a part in that process.<sup>28</sup> In this volume I render this story more complex and extend it by examining the process by which these forms of identity not only provided radio advertisers one set of resources to articulate to consumer goods but also fed back into the orientations and operations of those national processes.

The properties of the medium of radio lent themselves to several unique challenges to practices of cultural production. Radio has given expression to tensions in American culture because of its embodiment of individuality and collectivity. Its individualized reception, use of oral modes of communication, and invocation of the imagination clash with culture industries’ desire for homogenized, uniform responses to programming.<sup>29</sup> Precisely because of this tension, the radio industry used a wide variety of practices and modes of address to articulate commonly held identities and identifications to advertised products via the program mode of address. Through the process of articulation, phenomena that have no necessary relationship are linked to one another within a larger discourse. Stuart Hall stresses the contingency of this process to point toward its usefulness in securing political agency. Yet, this conception also serves as a useful means of mapping the evolution of all kinds of ideologies, including those of consumerism.<sup>30</sup> Geographical identities provided a fertile ground for broadcasters and advertisers who sought to develop specialized appeals and generate narrowly conceived responses. These forms of identity provided to radio producers a set of resources that allowed them to garner and retain listener attention. Radio thus was one venue where culture industries developed techniques of constructing and addressing both mass and niche audiences, a crucial step in the larger process of creating the segmented consumer culture that characterized the latter part of the twentieth century and our present moment.



This book explores how radio and its meanings developed along four overlapping axes: practices of audience construction, technologies of program distribution, the aesthetics of programming form and content, and definitions and practices of audience reception. In order to examine the intersections among these elements, I first discuss the processes whereby radio was discursively constructed as national and how the resulting radio nation was defined as a mass audience. Next I explain the ways in which individuals known as station representatives established alternative market definitions for discrete areas outside of the radio nation. Then I explore the development of two alternative systems of program distribution—regional networks and sound-on-disc transcriptions. These economic, production, and distribution dynamics allowed for the development of “spot broadcasting.” Spot radio influenced the form and content of radio programming and advertising as well as the listener’s experience of the “flow” of individual elements across the broadcast schedule. Finally, I chart how this fragmented mode of address led the broadcast advertising industry to embrace the experience of radio listening as one of “distraction” rather than attention. An examination of the interconnection among these technologies, discourses, and practices produces a more nuanced and more complete understanding of radio’s network era. At the same time, it will give us a fuller picture of the form, content, production, and reception of aural broadcasting that developed after television began.

Chapter 1 interrogates the centrality of network interconnection to golden age radio. While the rhetoric of the networks stressed their national character, network practices reflected a far more heterogeneous reality. Network structures were often limited in scope and continuously in flux. Their orientation at any given moment depended upon negotiations between broadcasters, AT&T, and sponsors. As such there were areas of the radio nation that were neither reached nor covered by the networks. “Split networking”—where sponsors chose to use only part of the possible network—demonstrates one consequence of the gaps in the national broadcasters’ coverage and suggests that network distribution was based upon a contingent flexible configuration of multiple networks. At the same time, station representatives constructed an alternative to the national network market by acting as boundary workers and “audience intellectuals.” These individuals moved between the national and the local scales by promoting stations and informing potential sponsors of schedule openings. In so



doing they translated the needs of parties that operated in each scale to the other. This allowed them to institutionalize a discursive framework that supported the development of spot broadcasting and rationalized the sale of local station time to national entities. Spot broadcasting represents a broad category. It included full-length programs and brief announcements, but the common element was the discrete selection of market, content, and time of day by sponsors.

In chapter 2, I extend the ideas of market definition and networking by examining the use of network interconnection to distribute programs on a regional basis. The gaps in the national network systems charted in chapter 1 and the work of station representatives allowed for an alternative networking model. Existing alongside national chains, regional networks were also prevalent during the network era. By 1942, for example, there were over forty such networks.<sup>31</sup> Broadcasters negotiated national, regional, and local identities within their modes of program address and means of program distribution. New England's Yankee Network and Colonial Network provide a case study that illustrates how regional radio networks created programming that had regional appeal and constructed a regionally based radio market identity to sell to advertisers. In addition, because most regional network affiliates were also national network affiliates, these activities created conflicts that suggest a more complex and fraught relationship between local and national broadcasters than has been thought. Although limited, regional networks serve as one example of spot broadcasting, sound-on-disc transcriptions—recordings produced especially for radio broadcast—represent an even more important alternative distribution method.

Chapter 3 examines the technological, discursive, and institutional histories of sound-on-disc transcriptions as a means of program distribution. National networks successfully established live broadcasts, distributed through AT&T landlines, as radio's ideal form in the late 1920s. Constrained by this definition, independent program producers used specific recording technologies and discursive strategies to establish a distinction between phonograph records and "transcription" discs. They redefined electrical mediation and modes of aural representation that equated recorded performances with live ones. Networks viewed recorded programs as a profound threat to their economic livelihood and acted to co-opt and control

recorded program production by entering it themselves, with limited success. Despite these efforts, sound-on-disc transcriptions changed the conditions of technological possibility for producing and disseminating spot programs and thus provided important models for post-television radio.

In chapter 4, I examine how the form and content of spot broadcasting embodied a diverse range of selling styles and differently scaled modes of address. The multivalenced definition of “spots” brings together a number of threads from preceding chapters and considers their impact on radio’s textual flow. Spot broadcasting consisted of both programs and announcements. National advertisers used spot programs in conjunction with network-based radio advertising efforts to extend a mass address, as well as independently to localize their advertising message. They could do so because of the alternative market definitions constructed by station representatives and alternative means of producing and distributing programs via transcription disc. Transcriptions also gave rise to a new program form based upon transcription music libraries. Music libraries allowed stations to create “network quality” programs without a network affiliation and provided a means for regional advertisers to enter radio advertising without the cost associated with national network broadcasting. Stations also embraced spot broadcasting because it provided them with more revenue than did network programs. They regularly rejected unsponsored network shows in order to air spot programs, thus creating fragmented and multi-scaled modes of address. Spot broadcasting also included short announcements, the progenitors of the fifteen- and thirty-second commercial. Station break spot announcements inserted themselves into and around network programs. This disrupted the attempts by mass appeal programs to create “goodwill” between the audience and sponsor and fragmented the temporal sequence of the radio schedule, thereby contributing to the creation of the dynamics of “segmentation and flow” that continue to characterize American commercial broadcasting.

Chapter 5 addresses how spot-based segmented radio appeals played a role in the microgeography of radio reception during the network era as spaces and modes of listening underwent revision. The network ideal of national audiences and national markets manifested itself in ideas of “all-set, all family” listening. This cultural trope imagined the ideal context of listening as one that took place in the evening with the entire family relaxed

but attentive, arrayed around an “ethereal hearth” in the living room.<sup>32</sup> However, this definition made alternative forms of listening—such as distracted, individualized, and daytime—a problem. As more Americans purchased multiple radios for the car and the home, the broadcasting industry sought to graft onto them its earlier definitions of listening. However, at the same time alternative spot-influenced forms of radio programming, such as morning shows and disc jockey-based “block programs,” embraced modes of distracted and individualized listening. These programs, designed to be heard while the audience was performing other activities, contributed to a process whereby distracted listening ceased being pathologized and instead became the norm.

Alternative program production strategies, sources, technologies, and distribution methods revise our understanding of golden age radio as solely live, national, and networked and its cultural form as one of unification and centralization. The proliferation of program formats, sources, distribution methods, and production technologies by the mid-1940s rendered this definition of radio functional as ideology only. A more complete account of radio’s golden age history thus revises traditional accounts of the decline of network radio and the “rebirth” of local radio. It accounts for the complex story of competing forces within the broadcasting industry that created models of radio that remained dominant until the late 1990s.<sup>33</sup>

Network radio, like network television after it, initially conceived of its product as a homogeneous mass. Postnetwork radio, and now postnetwork television, divides its audiences into discrete segments. The prehistory of radio’s postnetwork transformation gives us another origins story, one that focuses on the process through which audiences could be conceived in specific ways and programming could be devised, produced, and distributed in order to address what producers thought those audiences wanted. As such, the story of radio’s specialization and transformation influences not just our understanding of the history of a communications medium but also how we interpret the history of consumer culture, the historically specific ways in which we listen, and the ways we construct identities based on taste cultures. Although peer-to-peer filesharing, commercial download services and devices like the iPod now challenge radio as a means of distributing and listening to music, for much of the last fifty years American audiences learned about new music through radio, and radio in turn created

profiles around those tastes. Far in advance of today's digital data mining technologies and prescriptive algorithms, radio formatters and audience intellectuals sought to generate synergies and affinities between audiences and advertisers. Growing ever more sophisticated, radio represented a field in which these ideas could be tested, and it may well do so again.



## The Value of a Name

### *Defining and Redefining National Network Radio*

The image of a nation connected via radio that appeared in the September 1927 issue of *Radio News* stands in many ways for the iconic understanding of network-era broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> Appearing less than a year after the launch of NBC and the same month that CBS took to the air, this image endorsed the possibilities for cultural integration through technology. Entitled “The New Melting Pot,” it depicts radio as a wired network capable of uniting the nation (see figure 1). The picture identifies the dual A and B batteries used by the radio receivers of that era as “The English Language” and “Americanism and Patriotism,” thereby suggesting that the forms of representation were as important as the content delivered. Significantly, radio is represented as a collective listening experience on both macro and micro spaces. All of the figures are listening to the same programming and all are listening in groups. Even the one possible exception, the African American servant in the South who is the only figure performing labor while listening, is still exposed to the integrative effect of radio.<sup>2</sup> Although neither national radio’s technological capacities nor its meanings were fixed when this image graced the pages of *Radio News*, its division of the country into regional groups invites questions about the identities represented by those geographical places and their relationship to broadcasting as technology and cultural form.<sup>3</sup>