Hello, America! Welcome, each of you out there, to hear over the cracklings and poppings of static, trying to make sense of the words you are hearing. So many stations were tuned in to the radio in those early years of the Golden Age of Radio, and enjoy their productions. The following section provides background on the history of radio broadcasting, programs, and audiences.

The 1920s: Prosperity and a New Medium

On the evening of November 2, 1920, station KDKA (Pittsburgh) transmitted what most people consider the first professional radio broadcast—coverage of the Harding-Cox presidential election returns. More than a few hundred people heard the broadcast on the primitive radio receivers then owned receiving equipment. But soon people were crowding into department stores and electrical supply shops from coast to coast to buy receivers before the supply ran out. The radio craze had hit.

Two years later, listeners in a million homes were turning in to their radios to hear hundreds of programs nationwide. Night after night, these new radio fans put on their headphones and fiddled with the dials, straining to hear every word that was being said. The mind was aching to pull in stations from farther and farther away. By 1923, Americans were spending more than twice as much money on radios as they were on goods. Most newspapers were running daily radio schedules. Dozens of radio fan magazines were being published. And people were humming songs like “Tune in on L-O-V-E.”

Why did radio catch on so fast and so powerfully? What was it about this new medium that exercised such an appeal?

Of course, the radio was a new gadget—that was part of its fun. But its strongest excitement surged from a different source: as a listener turned the dials and tuned in to an orchestra playing at Carnegie Hall, or to the game of the week on a college football team. Radio played an important role in lessening the isolation of people in rural areas. (Library of Congress)
left manufacturers with a new problem: how to sell surplus goods. To solve this problem, they turned to advertising to encourage consumers to want more things. Radio became a new medium for this purpose. It offered a large and growing audience who were open to new products (if they weren't, they wouldn't have bought a radio). Listeners could skip a radio commercial the way they could skip a magazine or newspaper advertisement, unless they were willing to risk missing a part of their show. And radio was uniquely pervasive in that it fostered the illusion that the announcer reading a commercial was a friend giving advice.

Radio broadcasters were hungry for the money that advertising could bring in. Performers were no longer willing to give up the air for free, and it had become apparent that broadcasters needed to find a way to cover the sizable costs of running a station. America chose to finance broadcasting by selling air time. The commercialization of radio profoundly influenced its program content. Advertisers did not buy time to run just a minute or two of air time; they sponsored entire shows and exerted tremendous control over them. In fact, by the early 1930s, the majority of sponsored shows were actually produced, not by the station or network, but by the advertising agencies themselves. (The relationship between sponsor and show was so close that it was even because of the character of the program itself. A standard joke on the popular comedy Fibber McGee and Molly was the arrival of John Henry Wilcox. He knocked at their door as just another person in their stream of visitors, but no matter what the conversation had been about before his arrival, Wilcox somehow managed to turn it to floor wax within a few moments, and then struggled to promote his product over the continuing conversation around him. Because the goal of the sponsor was to sell as much of his product as possible, he wanted as many people as possible to hear his commercials. This meant sponsoring shows designed to attract the largest listening audience. Thus, shows were designed to express themes and attitudes attractive to the majority of the country's population, and to avoid controversy that was likely to drive away listeners, and hence to reduce the number of potential buyers. The result of this simple economic logic was to create programming that reminded listeners of the sameness among them, and that played down eliminating differences.

Networks. In November 1926, the first formal network, or chain of stations linked by telephone lines, was formed—the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The next year, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). The networks spread quickly over larger areas, and in December 1928, regis to radio as a distraction from the inappropriateness of the broad casting national. Now listeners all over the country could pick up the same programs, hear the same commercials, watch the same shows. The networks gave the country a simultaneously shared present moment, on an ongoing basis.

The 1930s: The Great Depression and the New Deal

America's prosperity ended abruptly with the stock market crash of 1929. The depression swept over the country, leaving between 12 million and 13 million jobless, and real income fell by more than 25 percent. People wanted to escape the reality, and radio was the preferred medium for this escape. People who couldn't afford the expensive radios focused on making payments on those radios, and it was an important part of their way to let go.

As Americans around the country turned increasingly to radio for entertainment, the collapse of the economic system, radio underwent an upsurge in quality and polish. Broadcasters began to draw on the first-class comedians and entertainers from vaudeville, movie actors, and nightclub performers. Advertisers, seeing the size of the audience, increasingly moved out of other media into radio. The public loved radio, and believed in it.

Listening in the Golden Age of Radio

The period from the early 1930s until around 1950 is often called the Golden Age of Radio. At that time, radio programming was at least as diverse as television programming is today, and as central to the nation's consciousness.

Who listened? What did they listen to?

Breakfast shows. The early morning audience was not clearly defined; the time slot was not a favorite with sponsors. The shows reflected this: they were loosely structured and chatty, with a little something for everyone. Listeners might tune in on The Breakfast Club, with its folksy humor and its four "calls to breakfast" (complete with whoops, drum rolls, a trumpet fanfare, and a "march around the breakfast table"), or join one of several husband-and-wife teams as they chatted about the doings of the day.

Women's shows. The daytime airwaves belonged to housewives and were filled with teas. The soap operas—so called because they were sponsored by soaps and other household products—were despised by critics, but hal</p>
nobody knows”); giveaways show like Pot o' Gold and Queen for a Day, and talk shows like Life Begins at 80, or its counterpart, Juvenile Jury. The one long-running weekly radio program was radio fiction shows like Dragnet, the Mentalist, who claimed to read minds over the radio, and You Are There, on which a team of narrators described historic events, including the destruction of Pompeii and the assassination of Julius Caesar.

News. Besides providing all these kinds of entertainment, radio covered the news. Many of radio’s most memorable moments originated as news coverage: Charles A. Lindbergh’s arrival in Washington after his solo transatlantic flight; the explosion of the airship Hindenburg before the horrified eyes of the radio reporter routinely sent to cover its abduction; the abduction of heiress Abigail Hill Rockefeller; and Franklin Roosevelt’s Day of Infamy speech after Pearl Harbor.

And broadcast journalism did not just report events. In the late 1920s, the invention of the radio made news interviews, panel discussions, and documentaries.

News commentators like H.V. Kaltenborn and Willard Van Dyke were able to go beyond recitation and editorializing in a way unique to radio, become authorities.

In the late 1930s, when the world seemed to be running out of control, when economic disasters at home was added the growing threat of war abroad—worried listeners around the country turned increasingly to commentators to explain and interpret events.

Radio brought the voices of politicians, too, directly into millions of American homes.

No politician was better at selling radio than Franklin Roosevelt. His “a real pr,” radio veteran called him. On March 12, 1933, two months after he was inaugurated, he gave the first of his Fireside Chats, broadcast speeches designed to explain and gain support for his New Deal programs.

Roosevelt spoke to his nationwide audience of citizens as if they were friends.

His relaxed, intimate tone made maximum use of radio’s ability to make each listener feel that the voice coming in over the airwaves was speaking to him alone.

World War II
Radio’s power to unite was most evident—and most deliberately put to use—during World War II. Here was a very different kind of national crisis from the domestic problems that had reflected radio’s role played by its listeners.

The causes of the Depression were not obvious to most citizens. Even the experts couldn’t agree on how to bring the situation back to normal. There seemed to be no ready answers.

In contrast, the situation that was to develop was one in which the enemy was everywhere—his waiting.

A new kind of crisis—one in which the enemy was not only directed resources toward the war effort, but not only directed resources toward the war effort, but radio’s daily on-the-spot coverage made faraway battles real.

The next day, with a record 60 million Americans listening on the radio, announced that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Once you are familiar with the historical background of radio, you are ready to develop a teaching approach in line with your curriculum objectives. The approach that follows was designed for the practice of listening and writing skills.

You may want to point out that television, which is a further development of radio technology, was employed to cover its arrival; the abdication of the former Duke of Windsor; President Roosevelt’s news interviews, panel discussions, and documentaries.

For as many kinds of listeners as possible—in other words—would have to be found to market.

It was possible for radio to become even more oriented to communication until after World War II.

As the children listen, encourage them to discuss their reactions to what they hear. Do the jokes still seem funny? Can they imagine the same type of show being on television now? What differences do they notice between what they are hearing and what they are seeing?

The lesson plan outlined here proceeds in three steps:

In this step, the children familiarize themselves with radio broadcasting in the years before television; in the second, they write their own radio scripts; in the third, they produce their scripts.

Step 1 Tuning in on Radio

Introduction.

How many of them listen to the radio? Why do they listen? For fun? To learn things? Do they have favorite shows? What is it about these programs that makes them listen to them?

Now explain that radio, as the children usually listen to it, is a form of mass communication—or a way of getting information out to people (radio can also be used for point-to-point communication, with information going out to an individual or a limited group of individuals, but we will not be concerned with this here.)

Ask the children if they can think of other forms of mass communication (newspapers, books, magazines, movies, television).

Explain that radio began to be used for mass communication in 1920. At that time, the printed press had been the only means of sending messages to a large, scattered audience. Have the children discuss how radio differs from the newspaper as a medium of mass communication (it is much faster; it reaches its entire audience at virtually the same time; it reaches on sound). You may want to point out that television, which is a further development of radio technology, was not available on a large scale for mass communication until after World War II.

Drawing on the information in How Radio Messages Travel on this page, explain to the class why radio listeners are able to hear a broadcast at virtually the same moment that it is sent. Point out that this means that no matter how widely scattered the listeners are, they will all be listening to the same program at the same time.

The children should come up with answers similar to the following:

• People who were housebound could not entertain themselves with radio or television.

• Records couldn’t become popular so fast.

• Different ways would have had the war swept away from them.

• How politicians looked and sounded would matter less. Political campaigns would have to be run differently.

Now you are ready to draw on the historical background of radio to help the children understand how radio developed, the kinds of programs it carried, and the role it played in its listeners’ lives.

You could play them for kids from other classes. (Suggestions for historical background can be found at the end of this Lesson Plan.)

The children listen to the radio? Why do they listen? To learn things? Do they have favorite shows? What is it about these programs that makes them listen to them?

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How politicians looked and sounded would matter less. Political campaigns would have to be run differently.
Writing for radio is writing for a “blind” audience. This means that scripts require sound effects and music to do many of the things that words and layout do in printed publications.

Sound is a marker. Sound can be used in the same way as see paragraphs and headings in a written text, to help signal changes subjects or shifting scenes.

Sound to create emotional tone. Imagine a radio scene in which two people are walking down a street. How different does scene seem if it is accompanied by ominous music as opposed to a cheerful tune. Like music, sound effects can set the tone. In scary shows, for example, the creaking door, the howling dog, and the muffled scream all create atmosphere.

Sound to give information. Two acquaintances approach each other in the hall in a radio play. As they meet, there is a silence, then a gasp, and one of the people cries out, “Now you know how I feel about you!” What has happened? It would be hard to tell only from the actor’s reading of the line. But if instead of the silence there had been the sound of a slap, or a kiss, or a gunshot, or a mocking laugh—then the audience would have been able to follow what was going on.

You may also want to point out that another difference between radio and television is how much more radio leaves to the imagination. Remind the children that this means that they need to be sure that any "essential qualities of the characters or settings are indicated clearly in the dialogue. Everything except the actual words to be spoken by the actors is in capital letters, like this:

ELLIE: This is the life! A rainy night outside, we’re cozy inside, and Jack Benny starts in ten minutes. I’ll just . . .

(THE DOORBELL RINGS.)

RAY: Who could that be?

ELLIE: Probably just the paperboy.

(DOORBELL RINGS AGAIN.)

RAY: I’ll get it . . . (RECEDING FOOTSTEPS, FAILING)

ELLIE: (CALLING) Is it the paperboy, his money’s sticking out of that tailgate.

RAY: (OFF MIKE, CALLING) It’s not the paperboy. It’s Gracie Allen. She wants to know if we’ve seen her brother.

Ray Hein Brown listens to her radio on a visit to Wash­ington, D.C., summer 1988. It was the invention of the transistor in 1947 that allowed manufacturers to rid of the bulky tubes inside radios, and begin designing sets that are dramatically smaller than ever before. (Laura Scott)

Finally, when the children are satisfied (within the time limits of the production schedule) with their show, they should make a final tape of it. Then give the teams a chance to hear each other’s tapes, and to comment on them. If possible, schedule a revision session when each team has a chance to make changes in its production, based on the feedback they have received from other teams.

Now the children are ready to play their tapes for outside audiences. The most exciting way is to organize a “radio hour” when the shows are aired to the whole school, over the school’s intercom system if possible, or at an assembly. If it is impracticable to set up such a large-scale audience, then arrange with another teacher or teachers to trade classes, or to have your classes meet together for a period, so the teams can play their shows to guest listeners. However you do it, remember that the more real this “radio hour” is, and the more you can play it up in advance to your children, the more exciting the radio show project is likely to seem to them—and the livelier their shows are likely to be!

Did You Know That the Smithsonian Has Its Own Radio Program?

It’s called Radio Smithsonian, and it’s a radio magazine about the Smithsonian’s activities. The show can be a good source of topics to use in your teaching.

To find out whether Radio Smithsonian is aired in your area, write to Radio Smithsonian, National Mu­seum of American History Room 4B40, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. Or call (202) 357-1933.

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The Wyeths: A Family Portrait

This one-hour Smithsonian World special focusing on artist N. C. Wyeth and his five remarkable children will play on PBS stations on Wednesday, November 19 (check newspapers for local listing).

Correction: The photo credit for the picture of the Massachusetts family on page 3 of our April 1986 issue should have read “Lancaster Historical Commission.”

Books for Teachers


Other Resources

Tapes and records of old radio shows are available, at modest prices, from:

• Radiola

Box C

Sandy Hook, CT 06482

• Adventures in Cassettes

P.O. Box 11041

Minneapolis, MN 55411

Other companies will send a free catalogue upon re­quest.

• The Museum of Broadcasting

1 East 53rd Street

New York, NY 10022

(212) 752-7684

This is a museum devoted entirely to radio and televi­sion.

Correction:

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HOW KIDS LISTENED

These boys are probably catching an episode of their favorite radio show. They might be listening to Superman, or Hop Harrigan, or Captain Midnight. Adventure shows like these of the 1940s told exciting stories. Many also offered kids a chance to send away for special prizes. For just a dime and the seal from a jar of Ovaltine, for example, you could join Captain Midnight’s Secret Squadrons—and get a decoder badge that taught you to decipher the secret message at the end of each program. Then you weren’t just a listener, you were part of the show!
**KIDS AMERICA—A RADIO SHOW SHAPED BY KIDS**

Have you ever been a guest at one of Marcy’s parties? Or thought you’d found a word so hard to spell that it might stump the Duke of Words? Or helped Z-KNWW the Alien figure out where on earth he was? If you’ve done any of these things, the chances are you’ve listened to *Kids America*, the only daily live radio show for kids now broadcast nationwide.

What happens on the air on *Kids America* depends on what the kids who call in to the show say. And a lot of kids call in—about 6,000 every day.

Many people work together to produce *Kids America*. The pictures on these pages give you an idea of what a few of them do and what the *Kids America* studio looks like. If you would like to be on the *Kids America* mailing list, write: *Kids America*, % Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Arts and Industries Building 1163, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.

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**MAKING PICTURES FOR YOUR EARS**

As soon as radio character Fibber McGee moved toward his closet, people listening to the show began to laugh. They knew what lay behind that closet door: a towering pile of junk. When Fibber opened the door, old shoes, trays, picture albums, skates, tin cans, pie plates, and countless other things would come crashing down.

This crash, a running joke on the show, was the creation of the program’s sound effects man, Frank Pittman. He made listeners see Fibber McGee’s closet in their mind’s eye—a closet that was famous, but that didn’t really exist.

Fifteen years earlier, when radio was just beginning, there were no sound effects—and shows were duller. But by the 1930s, when Fibber began opening the door to his pretend closet, sound effects had become an important part of radio programs.

As they worked, sound effects people had to be sure that the sounds they made were easy for the audience to recognize and that their timing was just right. They had to be sure that the sounds were soft enough so they wouldn’t startle listeners, or make it hard for them to hear the actors’ words. They also had to be sure that the sounds fit the mood of the show. For example, a drink poured by a murderer on a suspense show should sound different from a drink poured by a clown.
For funny shows, the sound person exaggerated. He might pour a clown’s drink slowly into a paper cup dispenser (which is four or five times as tall as a glass), so the pouring sound would go on and on, making listeners laugh. Broadcasts at that time were not taped ahead and then played later, as most programs are now.

Shows in the 1930s were performed live. The sound effects people stood near the actors and the mike, and made their sounds at the right places in the script. Their sounds—and the actors’ voices—went out over the airwaves, and the audience heard them right away. If any mistakes were made, the audience heard them too.

**WHAT WAS THAT I HEARD?**

Can you guess what real-life sound each of these effects is imitating? (Draw a line connecting each pair.)

- Crinkle thin, stiff paper
- Blow air through a straw into a container of water
- Repeatedly shake an umbrella open and closed
- Snap fingers
- Slide one block of wood against another
- Swish a lightweight cane through the air
- Hit a pumpkin with a strong piece of wood
- Trickle uncooked rice onto a metal cookie sheet
- Crush small wooden boxes

Hail
An arrow speeding past
Furniture breaking
A person being hit on the head
A light switch
A bird’s wings flapping
Fire
A window opening
A babbling brook
Estos muchachos están probablemente escuchando un episodio de su programa de radio favorito. Tal vez están escuchando Superman o Hop Harrigan, o El Capitán Medianoche (Captain Midnight). Programas de aventuras como estos de los 1940s contaban historias emocionantes. Muchos programas ofrecían la oportunidad de obtener premios también. Por solo diez centavos y una etiqueta de Ovaltine por ejemplo, uno podía pertenecer a los Escuadrones Secretos del Capitán Medianoche—y recibir una tarjeta especial que permitía descifrar el mensaje secreto al final de cada programa. De esa manera uno no solo era un oyente pero también parte del programa.
Algunos efectos de sonido eran imposibles de crear en el estudio. En esos casos, la gente encargada de los sonidos especiales grababa los sonidos fuera del estudio. Después ponían la grabación en el momento apropiado, mientras se transmitía el programa.

¿Qué estás grabando aquí? (Biblioteca del Congreso)

Tan pronto como el personaje de radio Fibber McGee se dirigía a su armario, los oyentes comenzaban a reír. Ellos sabían que había algo atrás de la puerta del armario: un montón de cachivaches. Cuando Fibber abría la puerta, zapatos viejos, azafatas, álbumes de fotografías, patines, latas, moldes para pasteles, y un sin número de otras cosas caían al suelo con estruendo. Este estruendo, una broma común en el programa, fue creado por Frank Pittman, el hombre encargado de los sonidos especiales. El hacía que los oyentes vieran el armario de Fibber McGee en el ojo de su mente—un famoso armario que en realidad no existía.

Veinte años antes, cuando la radio apenas comenzaba, no había sonidos especiales—y los programas eran un poco aburridos. Pero en los 1930s, cuando Fibber comenzó a abrir la puerta de este armario imaginario, los sonidos especiales eran ya una parte importante de los programas de radio.

Mientras trabajaban, las personas encargadas de los sonidos especiales, tenían que asegurarse de que los sonidos que ellos produjeran fueran reconocidos fácilmente por los oyentes. Además, tenían que producirlos en el momento preciso, tener que estar seguros que los sonidos fueran suficientemente suaves para no asustar a los oyentes ni dificultarles que oyeran las palabras de los actores. También tenían que asegurarse de que los sonidos compaginaran con el humor del programa. Por ejemplo, que bebida servida por un asesino en un programa de suspenso sonaba diferente que una bebida servida por un payaso. En los programas divertidos, el encargado de los sonidos especiales exa-
Las actrices Lurene Tuttle y Rosalind Russell actúan un pleito a muerte en un episodio del programa de Radio Suspensión, en 1945. Al final de la pelea, la actriz Russell se caerá por la baranda y morirá. El hombre encargado de los sonidos especiales está atrás de las mujeres, listo a imitar el sonido de la baranda quebrándose. (Biblioteca del Congreso)

eraba. Vertía la bebida de un payaso muy despacio, en un cilindro donde vienen los vasitos de papel para tomar agua (estos cilindros son cuatro o cinco veces más altos que un vaso), así que el sonido de servir una bebida duraba mucho tiempo y esto hasfa reír a los oyentes.

Los programas de ese tiempo no eran grabados de antemano y transmitidos después, como la mayoría de los programas ahora. Los programas de los 1930 eran en vivo. La gente encargada de los sonidos especiales se paraba cerca de los actores y el micrófono, y producían los sonidos en el momento apropiado, según el guión. Sus sonidos —y las voces de los actores— eran transmitidos por las ondas, y los radioescuchas oían inmediatamente. Si se cometían errores, la audiencia los oía también.

¿QUÉ FUÉ LO QUE OÍ?

¿Puedes adivinar que sonido de la vida real imita cada uno de estos efectos?

(Uno cada par con una línea)

Arrugar papel tisú y delgado
Soplar por una pajilla/popote
dentro de un recipiente con agua
Abrir y cerrar una sombrilla varias veces
Castañetear los dedos
Deslizar un bloque de madera sobre otro
Mover rápidamente un liviano bastón en el aire
Golpear una calabaza con un fuerte pedazo de madera
Dejar caer arroz crudo en una cazuela de metal para hornear galletas
Aplastar dos pequeñas cajas de madera
Granizo
Una flecha pasando velozmente
Muebles quebrándose
Una persona siendo golpeada en la cabeza
Un conmutador de luz (un switch)
Fuego
Una ventana abriéndose
Sonido de un riachuelo