

The Origins of Broadcast Education in the U.S.

Beverly James

Some ten years after the licensing of the first commercial radio station in the U.S.—Pittsburgh's KDKA in 1920—radio courses began to appear in the curricula of what were then called speech departments, the forerunners of today's communication departments. As outgrowths of existing courses in public speaking and drama, radio courses addressed such topics as announcing, diction, microphone techniques, directing, scriptwriting, singing, and acting. According to a survey conducted by the Federal Office of Education, some two dozen colleges or universities offered some version of a basic "radio speaking" course in 1933 (Koon 6-9). By the end of the decade, in many institutions the basic radio course had spun off separate classes in production, speech, writing, and other special topics, and several universities had begun to offer degrees in broadcasting (McReynolds 44-45).

The orientation was strongly vocational, at least partly due to the inherently technical nature of communication via radio. Courses in the social and political aspects of broadcasting were virtually unknown until after World War II, when the power of radio as a tool for persuasion and propaganda could no longer be ignored. Today, most communication programs seek a healthy balance between applied, hands-on courses that introduce students to the nuts and bolts of radio, television, and film production, and critical, theoretical courses that explore the media as important sites for the contested making of meaning in contemporary societies. But they do so under the cloud of a persistent instrumental conception of media as neutral conduits of information.

This essay examines the emergence of broadcasting as a field of study in U.S. universities in order to learn something about the roots of this technical orientation. After a short literature review that situates the history of broadcast education within communication studies, I will use the University of Wisconsin as a case study for examining how early educators saw their mission. The justification for focusing on Wisconsin is two-fold. First, while there is some dispute over where the first radio course appeared, Wisconsin was certainly one of the pioneering institutions, and a model for subsequent programs elsewhere [1]. Secondly, for reasons that will be addressed below, the land-grant universities of the

rural Midwest, such as the University of Wisconsin, dominated early broadcast education [2].

In histories of communication as a field of study, broadcast education seems to be the bastard child nobody wants to claim. Standard histories of communication studies either ignore broadcasting (Wallace) or treat it as peripheral (Oliver and Bauer; Benson). The inattention is partly a matter of the convoluted genealogy of the field. Most disciplines arise through an organic process of intellectual differentiation from a parent field, with cognate disciplines sharing a sense of kinship (Cohen 286). Communication, however, was cloned from the genes of a number of unrelated fields. Lacking a common ancestor, speech and mass communication evolved independently, with little cross-fertilization of ideas between the two. Until recently, scholars in both fields were remarkably ignorant of the other (Bochner and Eisenberg 318).

An unfortunate consequence of this separation is that speech and mass communication shared custody of broadcasting, but in an arrangement that institutionalized the separation of theory from practice. That is, by the time mass communication coalesced as a field of study in the 1950s and 1960s, instruction in the practical art of broadcasting had long been the province of speech departments. Generally, mass communication studies arose as a graduate component to journalism programs (Delia 76). The emphasis on graduate training in mass communication, coupled with institutional inertia, meant that undergraduate broadcasting courses remained for the time being mainly in speech departments (or their variously-named descendants) where they garnered little respect (Grover).

The first generation of mass communication scholars had been suckled on the radio studies of experimental psychologists such as Hadley Cantril and quantitative sociologists such as Paul Lazarsfeld. As a result, while they had no interest in training broadcasters, they enthusiastically adopted the broadcast media as variables ("channels") in their efforts at theory-building. It would be many years before mass communication scholars understood "theory" in a more political sense, and even longer before speech professors grasped the radical potential of practice. But the segregation of theory from practice certainly contributed to the development of an unreflective, conservative orientation to undergraduate studies in broadcasting.

If broadcast education emerged in the absence of a critical theory of mass communication, what, then, was the context in which it developed? The most noteworthy factor in the development of radio education at Wisconsin and throughout the Midwest was the technical imperatives that guided land-grant universities, particularly in the populist climate of that region. Let us look more closely at this factor.

The industrialization of American society in the latter part of the nineteenth century demanded a new class of professional experts to oversee and administer the new technical order (Wirth 9). In response, Congress passed the Morrill Act in 1862, establishing land-grant colleges

and shifting the focus of higher education from an elite to a utilitarian function (Bochner and Eisenberg 302). Modern academic departments, including speech, were one result of this broad transition. The unified, classical curriculum of the old-style college gradually gave way to specialized training in diverse practical fields—agriculture, forestry, engineering, commerce, pharmacy, social work, home economics, education, and speech (Wirth 120).

In the populist climate of the Midwest, the utilitarian function of the land-grant university was inflected with an abiding commitment to egalitarian reform in social, political, and economic arenas. The mission of the university was not only to generate the brain power for a technically efficient, rationally administered society, but to help construct a benevolent social order based on communitarian, democratic ideals. Vidich and Lyman (1049) explain:

In the Middle West it was assumed that the university was God's instrument for making a better world. Agricultural and engineering studies brought the sons and daughters of the farmer onto the state-university campus. The Middle Western university regarded the farmer, the small businessman, the merchant, the housewife, the rural minister, the local official, and the small-town newspaper editor as the main beneficiaries of its educational mission. Lacking a sense of *noblesse oblige*, the Midwestern professoriat addressed itself to the democratization of culture, and the economic, moral, and spiritual elevation of rural life.

In addition to supplying the state with a skilled, professional workforce, then, the public university was seen as the centerpiece of an abundant society based on the liberal, secular values of social equality and hard work. The most distinctive feature of higher education in Midwest was its disdain for aristocracy and its commitment to serving the professional and practical needs of all citizens, collectively and individually (Curti and Carstensen 3). Science and technology were the linchpins in this pragmatic vision. Back in the formative period of the University of Wisconsin, the regents had declared that "the application of the Sciences to the useful arts, including every industrial occupation which ministers to the well-being of society, have become too numerous and too important to be neglected in any wisely constructed system of general education" (qtd. in Curti and Carstensen 25). By the early decades of the twentieth century, the application of scientific research and development to the solution of practical problems was firmly established. The results of such activities were disseminated to the largely rural population through extension programs. Spirited with a secular missionary zeal, extension educators at the University of Wisconsin led a crusade

“to rescue the farm family from the physical and cultural hardships of rural life” (Vidich and Lyman 1069).

The inauguration of academic courses in radio was closely connected to the extension activities of land-grant universities, not only in the Midwest but throughout rural America. One of the earliest functions of university radio stations was to transmit crop, weather, and market reports to remote areas. Over the latter part of the 1920s, extension educators developed more ambitious plans for using the airwaves to transmit agricultural, instructional, and cultural programming. These designs, in turn, stirred interest among the academic community in the effective use of radio. Radio courses thus appeared about the same time in such settings as Iowa City, Iowa; Vermilion, South Dakota; and Manhattan, Kansas.

By the time radio actually appeared in the Speech Department's curriculum, the University of Wisconsin already had a long tradition of broadcasting. The campus station, WHA, was among the nation's oldest. In the early, experimental years, most of the activity involved the Physics Department. But in the course of the 1920s, its possibilities attracted interest among the faculty of diverse fields, including agriculture, education, home economics, music, as well as speech. A conception of broadcasting as a public service took shape, though the actual lineup of programs remained slim. At the end of 1929, WHA was on the air for less than an hour a day (Ewbank, *Memorandum*).

A more intensive use of the medium in the public interest began around 1930. The schedule was beefed up to three hours a day, at least in part to demonstrate effective use of the channel and prevent attempted takeovers of the frequency by commercial broadcasters. Whatever the mix of motives—public service or institutional pride—the university president, Glenn Frank, was a strong advocate of radio. Under his stewardship, the foundation was laid for a state-wide public radio system designed to convey technical information to farmers and homemakers, to supplement the materials of rural schools, to offer adult education, and to provide a forum for the public discussion of political and social issues (Frank, *Extract 2-3*).

Over the course of the 1930s, these objectives took on life through a range of educational, cultural, and political programs. But despite public access to the state's broadcast facilities, radio operations were implicitly grounded in a speaker-centered model of communication in which scientific truths and administrative decisions would flow from a managerial elite to a receptive but passive public. The conceptualization of mass communication as transmission from a centralized source is best exemplified by the political uses of radio at Wisconsin. Guided by the belief that democracy depends upon an informed and enlightened citizenry, WHA instituted in 1932 the practice of providing airtime to all political candidates, which, in the democratic pluralism of Wisconsin, included Socialists and Progressives. In addition, the station regularly broadcast the governor's addresses to the state legislature, and pro-

vided airtime for legislators to speak to their constituents. The uncritical acceptance of a one-way flow of information is clear in a description of the political programming at WHA by one of the station directors: "Time was available to all solons without cost or obligation. By using the state stations they talked to their constituents at home. This went far to develop on the part of listeners a better understanding of their attitudes on matters of public concern" (Engel 6).

Wisconsin's use of the airwaves as a forum for threshing out issues of public policy was to stand as a national model, a demonstration, in Frank's words, of "the practicability of recreating the New England town meeting" ("The Radio" 75). But unlike the interaction of the town meeting, the public could only tune in. Indeed, mixing his historical metaphors, Frank more accurately likened radio to an Acropolis from which an American Pericles could speak to the entire nation at once. This mode of communication reduced democracy to a plebiscite in which voters simply register their acceptance or rejection of the candidates and policies placed before them.

A similar notion of radio appears in the early research on broadcasting. In the first article on radio in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Sherman Lawton ("The Principles" 259) characterized radio speech as a situation in which "the speaker addresses his audience, tongue to ear." Not only was the speaker reduced to the status of an unattractive if useful organ, the disembodied voice was made subservient to the technical limitations of the microphone. For example, Lawton warned that sibilant sounds were taboo. He advised the radio speaker to substitute the word "crime" for "lawlessness," the word "twine" for "string" (Lawton 265). Paired with the image of speaker-as-tongue, the listener was conceptualized as a gigantic, walking ear, keenly sensitive to technical flaws in speech.

The first radio course at Wisconsin reflected this mechanistic understanding of the subject and how it ought to be taught. Henry Ewbank, a professor of speech who joined the department in 1927, initiated the course and maintained primary responsibility for it, though it was often taught by other members of the department or by WHA personnel. The course began as an outgrowth of Ewbank's "Forms of Public Address," described in the course catalog just prior to its transition as "The construction and delivery of speeches of different types. Special attention to problems of radio speaking." By the following year, the title and description had changed to "Radio Speaking. The composition and delivery of various types of radio continuity. Training in announcing." Nationally recognized as being at the forefront of radio education, Ewbank received numerous inquiries about the class from colleagues interested in developing similar courses at their own institutions. His responses are the best surviving descriptions of the course. In a typical reply, he describes it as follows:

The class writes its own continuity. At each meeting we put on a thirty minute "broadcast" containing news talks, interviews, roundtables, sketches, dramatizations, etc Towards the end of the course we put on a number of more ambitious programs with musical background, proper sound effects, and all that sort of thing. (*Letter to S. Howard Evans*)

The secondary importance of the substance of radio content to its technical preparation and delivery is apparent throughout Ewbank's descriptions of the course. Elsewhere, he writes, "The students write all sorts of scripts from news broadcasts and comedy sketches to radio plays and historical dramatizations" (*Letter to Kenneth M. Gould*). The course involved a great deal of laboratory work, most of which simulated actual broadcasting. After writing and rehearsing the scripts, groups of students presented their programs to the rest of the class over the Speech Department's public address system. Exceptionally polished productions were aired over WHA. Clearly, the substantive content of the broadcasts was of less concern than the skill with which they were executed.

Ewbank's primary text was a thick, mimeographed packet of sample scripts and instructional material on radio speaking and writing. In addition to producing and criticizing programs, students prepared a term paper based on supplementary readings. While a complete list of Ewbank's reserve readings does not appear to be extant, we can piece together a probable set of readings based on partial reserve lists, recommendations to correspondents, and bibliographies included in early articles and texts. The list would include standard texts in radio speech (Sherman Lawton's *Radio Speech*, 1932), writing (Peter Dixon's *Radio Writing*, 1931), education (Ben Darrow's *Radio, The Assistant Teacher*, 1932), audience measurement (F. H. Lumley's *Measurements in Radio*, 1934), advertising (H. S. Hettinger's *A Decade of Radio Advertising*, 1933), and eventually, psychology (Hadley Cantril's and Gordon Allport's *The Psychology of Radio*, 1935; Rudolph Arnheim's *Radio*, 1936). In addition, Ewbank assigned articles on radio in *Broadcasting* and the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

While students were exposed to the emerging body of trade and scholarly literature on radio, the thrust of the course was decidedly practical. Sherman Lawton's Ph.D. dissertation, *The Basic Course in Radio*, suggests that Ewbank's emphasis on the mechanics of broadcasting was the norm. Lawton (*The Basic Course* 84) studied the goals and content of basic radio courses across the country, and found that the typical course emphasized "skills-activities" (preparing, writing, producing, and acting in radio programs), with some attention given to "activity-knowledge" (learning how to perform the activities rather than actually doing them). From an exhaustive list of possible topics, instructors indicated that their courses most frequently included instruction in microphone techniques and enunciation (Lawton, *The Basic Course*, appendix A, 1).

It would be wrong to characterize the basic radio course as simply vocational, a technical training ground for would-be broadcasters. Still, it is evident that in the optimistic climate of the American heartland, larger social issues were seldom addressed. It was assumed that radio would be effectively used in the application of science, education, and democracy to the solution of social and economic problems. In an interview years after his pioneering work in radio, Ewbank explained that initially, he knew nothing about radio. But a year-long stint as a teacher in an isolated, one-room country school had convinced him of its educational potential:

We had so pathetically little in the way of an up-to-date library to tell us what was going on in the world. I was very conscious of what might be done to supplement what any rural teacher would know. It seemed very likely that this gadget radio could give the under-educated teacher some help right along with his pupils. (Matheson 6)

In part, educators' scant concern over philosophical, theoretical, or ethical issues is explained by the institutional setting of the early courses. That is, the educational and cultural missions of the university stations with which they were affiliated were indeed admirable. But oddly enough, the commercial broadcast industry seems to have escaped critical attention in the classroom. In the years leading up to passage of the 1934 Communications Act, the political, social, and economic consequences of commercial radio came under heated, vigorous criticism in the public arena (see McChesney). But rather than an antagonistic or even a wary relationship between educators and commercial broadcasters, a comfortable symbiosis developed and was played out in a number of ways. Commercial broadcasters were active in the national speech associations. In urban universities, professional broadcasters often taught the radio courses. Commercial training manuals were used by speech professors. Networks and radio manufacturers provided educators with equipment and research grants.

Even in the midst of conflicts over frequency assignments, educational broadcasters were quick to deny any hostility to commercial stations. In describing Wisconsin's plan for a state radio station, for example, Ewbank emphasized that it would supplement rather than replace the national networks by providing regional information. His homespun explanation is a perfect illustration of Midwestern common sense (Ewbank, "The Wisconsin" 284-85):

A great many peas are grown in Wisconsin and are canned there. We need to supply the people who grow peas with specialized information which does not need to go shooting through the ether to the citizens of other states whose only interest with that vegetable is to open a can and eat the contents.

In the lean years of the Depression, educators were eager to prepare students to fit into any available jobs. Professors of radio may have been sensitive to the charge that their courses were vocational, but at the same time, they were apparently comfortable with tailoring coursework to fit industry needs. Lawton, for example, starts with the assumption that the basic radio course, "being more definitely professional in possibilities than are most speech courses, should conform to the opinions of professional workers as to what materials would be most helpful in a professional career" (Lawton, *The Basic Course* 11).

It was only in the 1940s that universities, including Wisconsin, began to offer much in the way of courses that critically analyzed the role of radio in American life [3]. The early years were marked by an unreflective faith in the potential contributions of radio to social progress. The legacy of that early period is an enduring tendency to conceive of broadcasting as technique, without adequate concern for the ends to which it is applied.

Notes

- 1 Cable (495) claims Washington State University instituted the first regular course in radio speaking in 1930. Niven (245) lists the University of Southern California as having the only independent radio course in 1929. In a work published in 1927, *Principles of Effective Radio Speaking*, the author, Raymond Borden, is identified as an instructor in radio speaking at New York University.
- 2 It would be incorrect to imply that early radio courses were an exclusively rural phenomenon. Universities in Los Angeles, New York, Cleveland, and Denver all offered radio courses in the very early years. Nevertheless, the bulk of the courses were offered by the Midwestern public universities (Coulton 613).
- 3 A course called Radio and Society first appears in Wisconsin's 1945 catalog. The course is described as "The history of radio program development; comparative study of broadcasting practices in other countries; radio as a social force and a cultural influence." The impact of World War II on the changing trajectory of broadcast education is obvious.

Works Cited

- Benson, Thomas W., ed. *Speech Communication in the Twentieth Century*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois U, 1985.
- Bochner, Arthur P. and Eric M. Eisenberg. "Legitimizing Speech Communication: An Examination of Coherence and Cohesion in the Development of the Discipline." *Speech Communication in the Twentieth Century*. 299-321.
- Borden, Raymond C. "Principles of Effective Radio Speaking," *Modern Eloquence Series*, suppl. vol. 2. New York: Modern Eloquence, 1927. 9-15.
- Cable, W. Arthur. "Speech Education in a Democracy." *A Program of Speech Education in a Democracy*. Ed. Arthur W. Cable. Boston: Expression, 1932. 4-35.
- Cohen, Herman. 1985. "The Development of Research in Speech Communication: A Historical Perspective." *Speech Communication in the Twentieth Century*. 282-98.
- Coulton, Thomas E. "Recent Trends in College Speech Curricula." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 23 (1937): 603-13.
- Curti, Merle and Vernon Carstensen. *The University of Wisconsin, A History, 1848-1925*, vol. 1. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1949.
- Delia, Jesse G. "Communication Research: A History." *Handbook of Communication Science*. Ed. Charles R. Berger and Steven H. Chaffee. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987. 20-98.
- Engel, Harold A. "WHA, Wisconsin's Pioneer: A Story of Public Service Broadcasting." Mimeograph. UW archives, miscellaneous file on WHA, 1936.
- Ewbank, Henry L. *Letter to Kenneth M. Gould*. Dec. 6. UW archives, Ewbank, box 3, 7/35/12-3. 1935.
- . *Letter to S. Howard Evans*. Feb. 12. UW archives, Ewbank, box 1, 7/35/12. 1937.
- . *Memorandum to Members of the Radio Committee*. Oct. 28. UW archives, Ewbank, box 1, 7/35/12-3. 1929.
- . "The Wisconsin Plan for Radio Development." *Education on the Air*. Ed. Josephine H. MacLatchy. Columbus: Ohio State U, 1930. 284-90.
- Frank, Glenn. "Extract from the testimony of President Glenn Frank before the Federal Radio Commission, Nov. 19, 1930." UW archives, Ewbank, 7/35/12-2, box 2. 1930.
- . "The Radio and the American Future." *Education by Radio* 2/19, June 9 (1932): 75.
- Grover, David H. "Broadcasting: A Search for Identity." *Central States Speech Journal* 17.2 (1966): 106-12.
- Koon, Cline M. *University and College Courses in Radio*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, Office of Education, Circular No. 53. 1933.

- Lawton, Sherman P. *The Basic Course in Radio*. Ph.D. dissertation, U of Wisconsin, 1939.
- . "The Principles of Effective Radio Speaking." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 16.3 (1930): 255-77.
- Matheson, Helen. "He Helped Squawky Foundling to Maturity and Popularity." *The Wisconsin State Journal* Aug 17, 1947. 6.
- McChesney, Robert W. "An Almost Incredible Absurdity for a Democracy." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 15.1 (1991): 89-114.
- McReynolds, Billy. *An Analysis of the Radio Curricula in a Selected Group of Colleges and Universities from 1935 to 1945*. M.A. thesis, U of Florida, 1947.
- Niven, Harold. "The Development of Broadcasting Education in Institutions of Higher Education." *Journal of Broadcasting* 5.3 (1961): 241-50.
- Oliver, Robert T. and Marvin G. Bauer, ed. *Re-establishing the Speech Profession: The First Fifty Years*. Speech Association of the Eastern States, 1959.
- Vidich, Arthur J. and Stanford M. Lyman. "Secular Evangelism at the University of Wisconsin." *Social Research* 49.4 (1982): 1047-72.
- Wallace, Karl R., ed. *History of Speech Education in America*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954.
- Wirth, Arthur G. *Education in a Technological Society: The Vocational-Liberal Studies Controversy in the Early Twentieth Century*. Scranton: Intext, 1972.