

# THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



## — RADIO —

Radio—is it “a blessing or a curse?” It is “virtually useless,” “just another disintegrating toy.” It is “a Tremendous Contribution,” “the only means of instantaneous communication yet devised by man.” Radio “will elect the next president”; its listeners comprise “an organization that in days to come will be the most powerful in the world.” However one judged radio as it grew from a “helpless youngster” into a “husky adolescence” in the 1920s, one thing was clear—“There it is, up in the air, absolutely free, waiting for you to pull it down with the aid of electricity.” The vast array of opinion on radio’s value and future is apparent in this excerpted commentary from the decade.

Radio broadcasting is spectacular and amusing but virtually useless. It is difficult to make out a convincing case for the value of listening to the material now served out by the American broadcasters. Even if the quality of this

material be improved, as it undoubtedly will be, one must still question whether the home amusement thus so easily provided will sufficiently raise the level of public culture to be worth what it costs in time and money and the diversion of human effort. It is quite possible to argue, indeed, that the very ease with which information or what-not reaches one by radio makes it just so much the less valuable. In educational matters, as in commerce, men usually value things by what they cost. Culture painlessly acquired is likely to be lost as painlessly—and as promptly.

Is the whole radio excitement to result, then, in nothing but a further debauching [morally corrupting] of the American mind in the direction of still lazier cravings for sensationalism? I believe not. There are at least two directions, quite different ones, in which radio has already proved its utility and its right to survive. One of these is its practical service as a means of communication. The other is its effect, continually growing more evident, in stimulating the revival of that exceedingly useful and desirable creature, the amateur scientist.

E. E. Free [science editor]  
“Radio’s Real Uses”  
*The Forum*, March 1926

“There can be no appeal to passion over the radio,” says Governor [Al] Smith of New York. “You’ve got to talk facts.” Which permanently eliminates the radio from all national political campaigns.

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If it is really true that there can be no appeal to passion over the radio, then the movies won’t have to fear this competition after all.

“Life Lines,” humor column, *Life*, 23 April 1925

Harry Hansen  
"Some Meditations on the Radio"  
*The Nation*, March 25, 1925

Literary editor of the *Chicago Daily News*, Hansen wrote his piece soon after delivering his first radio broadcast.

. . . I had not, up to that time, thought of it [radio] as a sort of mental hypodermic [injection]. I had, as a matter of fact, connected it principally with the national defense, and I remember that originally I had some vague notion about the service the radio would render in times of war, in the matter of expediting [sending] messages, detecting spies, etc. Of course I knew that it was a Tremendous Contribution—to what or to whom I was not exactly sure, but I had heard it styled so by ministers in the pulpit, and I was sure that in time it would be included in school histories under the chapter entitled Benefits of Inventions and Discoveries, which explained how much the cotton gin, the locomotive, the telephone, and the motion picture had done for civilization.

By actual contact, however, both as a listener and as a broadcaster, I learned that the radio was associated with that other form of service which is a sort of national rallying cry in America, "Service," with a capital S, that intangible something, which the merchant professes to confer upon you in addition to the goods for which you pay; . . .

. . . Its programs were free. You could tune in anywhere without even giving a tithe to the government. As one station sang nightly:

Just set your dial  
And stay a while  
With W-X-Y-Z.

There it is, up in the air, absolutely free, waiting for you to pull it down with the aid of electricity. Opera and symphonic music, jazz, twenty minutes of good reading, how to cook by Aunt Jane, tales for the kiddies and prayers set to music, even "Now I lay me down to sleep"; sermons and exhortations not to drink, gamble, and blaspheme, with music by the white-robed choir; advice on how to spread your income by investment brokers; advice on how to make your shoes last longer by shoe salesmen; talks by the mayor on civic duty, on "Your Boy" by the master of the Boy Scouts; on the right sort of boys by the head of the Y.M.C.A., and the right sort of girls by the head of the Y.W.C.A.; barn dances, recitals of music schools, whole acts of plays, speeches, speeches, speeches.

## RADIO FEATURES

### Programme for Today at Newark, Pittsburgh and Phila Stations

*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 12, 1922

#### STATION WJZ, NEWARK [NJ]

- 7 to 7:30 P.M.—"Jack Rabbit Stories," by David Cory.
- 8:30 P.M.—Closing prices on stocks, bonds, grain, coffee, and sugar.
- 8:36 P.M.—"Economizing Space with the Proper Wardrobe and Closets for Men's Clothes," by Vanity Fair.
- 8:40 P.M.—Concert by the Schubert Quartette.
- 9:30 P.M.—"The Merchant of Venice," a dramatic reading by Mona Morgan.
- 9:55 P.M.—Arlington Time Signals: Official Weather Forecast.

#### STATION KDKA, PITTSBURGH

- 7 P.M.—Scientific American weekly programme. United States Public Health semi-weekly bulletin.
- 8 P.M.—Bedtime Story for the Kiddies.
- 8:30 P.M.—Hints on Modern and Practical Home Furnishing, prepared by Miss Harriet Webster. An address of interest to the farmer.
- 9 P.M.—Italian Night. Mlle. Franke, soprano; Nazario La Marca, tenor; Foch de Leo, pianist; Frank Rubbe, violin, Americo Roncale, violin; Alfredo Armocida, cello; Joseph di Giovanni, flute; August di Giovanni, mandolin; Paul Durbano, mandolin.  
This will be a programme of operatic arias and Neapolitan serenades, including popular Italian songs.

#### STATION WIP, PHILADELPHIA

- 1 P.M.—Noon prices New York and Philadelphia Stock Exchanges.
- 1:30 P.M.—Musical programme.
- 2:30 P.M.—Recital by Charles A. Rittenhouse, baritone; Paul Meyer, violinist; Emil Folgmen, violoncellist. [Program follows.]
- 7 P.M.—Weather report.
- 7:10 P.M.—Uncle Wip's bedtime stories and Roll Call.

#### STATION WDAR, PHILADELPHIA

- 10:30 A.M. to 12 M.—Latest music and popular songs.

#### STATION WFI, PHILADELPHIA

- 1:16 P.M.—Late news items.
- 3:30 to 4:30 P.M.—Concert by the Strawbridge & Clothier Male Quartette: John Owens, Ednyfed Lewis, Harold Simonds, John Vandersloot, assisted by Loretta Kerk.  
Official produce market and livestock market reports at 10 A.M. and 2 P.M. on 495 metres [wave length].

*The United American: A Magazine of Good Citizenship*, Dec. 1925

originally published in the *Cleveland News*, n.d.

You hear the rumbling of an organization that in days to come will be the most powerful in the world, and that is the organization of "radio listeners."

There are 5,000,000 radio sets in the United States, costing \$500,000,000, and those 5,000,000 sets undoubtedly have more than 25,000,000 of listeners.

There you have the possibilities of such an organization as the world has never seen.

For the first time in the world's history, outside of the printed word, it becomes possible for one man to be heard by all of the people at the same time.

An ancient Greek said that a nation could not remain free when it became so big that its citizens could not all meet in the public square, hear the speakers, and protect their interests.

Today 115,000,000 of people can hear the president of the United States speak at the same time, and in a few years it will be possible for one man to be heard by every human being on earth.

The difficulty will be to find anybody worthy of such an audience.

Roy S. Durstine  
"We're on the Air"  
*Scribner's*, May 1928

A former newspaperman, Durstine was cofounder with Bruce Barton of one of the largest advertising agencies in the U.S.

And you can't blame the newspapers for feeling a little jumpy about radio. They took it when it was a helpless youngster and they have set it well on the way toward a husky adolescence. True, they did this because radio in its early days was splendid news. It still is, for that matter.

Then to have this ungrateful child, nourished by pages of publicity and columns of timetables [program schedules], turn and snatch the bread from its benefactor's hand—what could be more discouraging?

The resulting jumpiness has manifested itself in many ways. At one time most of the publishers decided to omit all timetables. Of course their readers howled. The publishers muffled their ears and sat tight. Roy Howard, chief of the Scripps-Howard newspapers and the United Press, quietly knocked the blockade into a cocked hat by announcing that his newspapers believed in radio and he intended to print more and better radio news, including timetables, than in the past. The faint shuffling which followed was the falling in line of the other papers.

## Minnesota-Wisconsin Game To be Reported by Wireless

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn., Nov. 5.—Reports of the Minnesota-Wisconsin football game at Northrop Field tomorrow will be flashed throughout the Northwest to scores of private and public wireless stations from the press box by students of the University of Minnesota Engineering College. The engineers have set up wireless apparatus in the grandstand and will report the game play by play. Advance sale of tickets for the contest indicates a record throng for Minnesota.

*The New York Times*, Nov. 6, 1920

## BROKERS USE RADIO WHEN WIRES FAIL

Wireless Telegraph for First  
Time Supplants Wall Street's  
Usual Service.

HAILED AS A STEP FORWARD

Chicago Message Takes 3 Minutes,  
but Time May Be Cut to  
30 Seconds.

*The New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1920

## HARDING TO ENCIRCLE WORLD WITH WIRELESS

President's Message to Open  
Greatest Station at Port Jef-  
ferson Nov. 5.

PORT JEFFERSON, L. I., Oct. 21.—President Harding will address practically the entire civilized globe in one message to be broadcasted by radio on Nov. 5 from the newest and largest wireless station in existence as the result of arrangements concluded yesterday during a personal visit to the President by David Sarnoff, General Manager of the Radio Corporation of America. The occasion of the message

*The New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1921

# RADIO

# A BLESSING OR A CURSE?



## The Forum, March & April 1929

The *Forum*, a magazine of social and political commentary, regularly invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. Woodard was a writer of commentary and popular fiction. Harbord, a retired army officer, was president of the Radio Corporation of America.

### \_\_\_JACK WOODFORD\_\_\_

“RADIO: A BLESSING OR A CURSE?” March 1929

Do you remember, a few years ago, how we all felt a vague sort of elation when the wonder of radio came to our attention? Ah, at last, we said, here is something . . . something . . . we were not quite sure what. Something overwhelming that was going to broaden American life and culture. Something that was going to bring peace on earth and good will to men. Something that was going to do everything but change the actual physical line of North America. Do you think I exaggerate? Get out the papers of a few years back and read the editorials.

And now we know what we have got in radio—just another disintegrating toy. Just another medium—like the newspapers, the magazines, the billboards, and the mail box—for advertisers to use in pestering us. A blatant signboard erected in the living room to bring us news of miraculous oil burners, fuel-saving motor cars, cigar lighters that always light. Formerly, despite the movies, the automobile, the correspondence course, and the appalling necessity most of us feel for working at two or three jobs in order to be considered successful, we still had some leisure time. But radio, God’s great gift to man, eliminated that last dangerous chance for Satan to find mischief for idle hands. There is now very little danger that Americans will resort to the vice of thinking. . . .

The marvel of science which was to bring us new points of view, new conceptions of life, has degenerated in most homes into a mere excuse for failing to entertain. Mr. and Mrs. Babbitt,<sup>1</sup>

### \_\_\_GEN. JAMES G. HARBORD\_\_\_

“RADIO AND DEMOCRACY,” April 1929

One of the ancient Greeks held that a few thousand souls was the outside limit for the electorate of a democracy—that being the greatest number that could be reached and swayed by a single voice. But the Greeks did not foresee radio, with its revolutionary effects upon the mechanism of democratic government. They did not imagine that the day would come when spellbinders like Demosthenes would give way to a Herbert Hoover talking confidentially to a whole continent. . . .

Now that radio has entered the field of politics, all that is changed. Voters may sit comfortably at home and hear the actual voices of the candidates. Every word, every accent and intonation comes to them directly without the possibility of error or misconstruction. The transmission of intelligence has reached its height in radio, for it goes beyond the power of the printed word in conveying the exact tone and emphasis of each phrase. . . .

One change that has been brought about by radio is the elimination of mob feeling from political audiences. The magnetism of the orator cools when transmitted through the microphone; the impassioned gesture is wasted upon it; the purple period [empassioned oratory] fades before it; the flashing eye meets in it no answering glance. Though he be one of thirty millions, each individual in the audience becomes a solitary listener in the privacy of his own home. He is free from the contagion of the crowd and only the logic of the issue which the orator presents can move him.

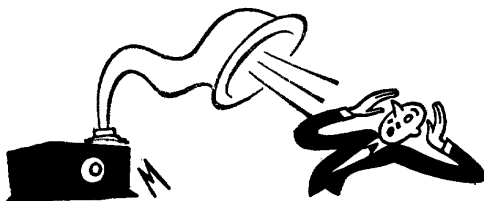
<sup>1</sup> I.e., middle-class low-culture Americans, as satirized by Sinclair Lewis in the 1922 novel *Babbitt*.

who used to make a feint [pretence] at conversation by repeating to each other and their guests the ideas which they had gleaned from the editorials in the morning paper, now no longer go to that trouble. . . All the modern host needs is his sixteen-tube Super-sophistication and a ration of gin. The guests sit around the radio and sip watered gin and listen to so-called music inter-spersed with long lists of the bargains to be had at Whosit's Department Store . . . Thus dies the art of conversation. Thus rises the wonder of the century—Radio! . . .

. . . Instead of hearing the pick of the country's brains, we hear potential Presidents explaining how it is possible for them to be both wet and dry, both conservative and liberal, both for and against every issue before the "sover'n 'merican" voters of this splendid nation. And so it will always be. . .

And yet we believed that radio was about to set up a new culture in America. Dr. S. Parkes Cadman [Christian radio broadcaster], presidential timber [quality], Aimee Semple McPherson, the Sunshine Boys [radio musical duo], all of them crying aloud—that is the culture which the radio to bringing to America. That sort of thing is the radio's fodder, and it will continue to be radio fodder until the loudspeaker follows the iron deer [Victorian lawn ornament] into blessed oblivion. New culture indeed. New nothing! Just the same old brummagem,<sup>2</sup> with the single difference that it is brought to the home and delivered like certified milk. . .

. . . I predict that in two years, at the present rate of advertising exploitation which the radio is suffering, it will be as dead as a Democrat. We can dig a grave for it, alongside the handsome mound now occupied by "Business Ethics," and put up a headstone over both graves inscribed "Killed by Advertising." Probably in another five or ten years we can dig another grave in the same lot for Television.



<sup>2</sup> brummagem: showy but worthless.

The *New York Times* commented upon this effect of radio in the last campaign. "Radio has come into its own," it said, "over the doubts, and some cases despite the vehement protests, of the older school of politicians in both parties." . . .



A persistent weakness in our American scheme of government has been the lack of popular interest in politics and the failure of a great number of citizens to vote. The last presidential election, however, with its huge registration, gave evidence of a greatly increased interest in the affairs of government. It is not unreasonable to attribute a large part of this to the broadcasting of political speeches. Radio brought the candidates and the issues within the family circle and made them topics of discussion at every dinner table. . .

In view of what radio has done for government, it can no longer be waved aside as a "novelty," a box of tricks, or, as Mr. Woodford prefers, an advertising agency. It is the only means of instantaneous, general communication yet devised by man. While it brings only sound today, it promises sound with sight tomorrow. I venture the prophecy that in the campaign of 1932 we shall both see and hear the candidates by radio. Even today it links the nations together and works in the interest of enduring peace. The news of any important occurrence is flashed almost immediately to every part of the globe. International broadcasting will soon become a commonplace. . .

Meanwhile, in days of great danger to our country, if unhappily they should come again, radio will make it possible for our President to appeal in his own voice to our millions, personally rallying them to the support of our nation. If the future of our democracy depends upon the intelligence and cooperation of its citizens, radio may contribute to its success more than any other single influence.

“A. Atwater Kent Discusses Present Problems and Future Possibilities of Radio”  
*The Talking Machine World*, Jan. 15, 1926

An early radio innovator, A. Atwater Kent was the world’s largest manufacturer of radios by the late 1920s.

To my mind, the outstanding feature of radio in 1925 is the greater and greater part it is taking in our everyday life. Every achievement of the year in radio has contributed to that. So in radio history I believe 1925 will be set down as the year when radio broadcasting began to assume a place in our daily affairs and when it began to take its place as a utility.



Library of Congress

A contribution to this is the linkup of many broadcasting stations. Nineteen twenty-six will see a still greater linkup, and with little difficulty I can imagine a possible lineup through which nearly half the people who are in the United States could hear a speaker. The greatest possibilities lie therein. If necessary the President of the United States could rouse the Nation in the event of war. Messages requiring instantaneous transmission could be communicated instantly direct to the homes. . . .

Radio will never take the place of the teacher in the classroom, but it will supplement her work; it will bring things of value to her and the time will come when every schoolroom will have its radio receiving set and the programs will be so varied and classified that it will be possible to tune in on things of special interest almost at any hour of the day.

“Discusses Use of Radio in Exchange of Culture”  
*The Talking Machine World*  
 January 15, 1926

The development of a system of super-radio broadcasting that would bring about an exchange of the culture of America with that of Europe, South America, and the Orient was

predicted recently by David Sarnoff, vice-president and general manager of the Radio Corp. of America, in an address to the Boston Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Sarnoff said the present development called for a national broadcasting system “ready for any public emergency, with facilities adequate to cover the entire country and to read across the ocean whenever desired.”

He predicted a great step forward in the political education of American people where the masses may listen to debates in Congress, and foresaw the day when the board of education in every metropolitan community would include in its activities a special extension course broadcast from local stations. He also suggested the possible artistic leadership of radio, when the opera and the stage would draw talent from the broadcasting stations.



Cartoonist: Frank Hanely  
 Reproduced by permission of the *New Yorker*.

*The New Yorker*, May 30, 1925

Earl Reeves  
 "Radio Brings Politics into Your Home"  
*Popular Science*, June 1928

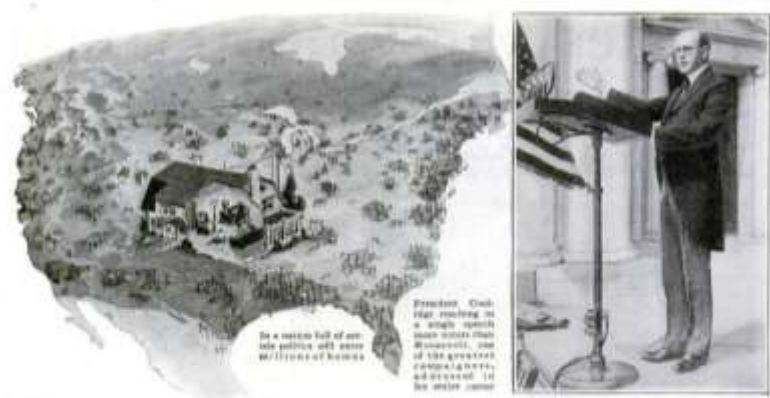
This year radio will elect a President. There is eminent authority for that statement. Calvin Coolidge believes radio is in large measure responsible for his popularity, and the White House view

is that if radio can popularize a President it can elect one. . . .

In 1924 a really comprehensive radio campaign was impossible. Broadcasting stations were scattered and without central organization for program purposes. Receiving sets were fewer and such speeches as were broadcast frequently hit only the ear of an experimenter in his workshop, entirely missing most of the voters.

But now the radio set has been brought into the living room, accepted by the women, and the radio chain has been perfected. You can link up three big radio networks today and broadcast at once through sixty of the biggest stations. If you are important enough, or clever enough, your voice will be heard through receiving sets in five million homes. . . .

[Theodore] Roosevelt lives in our memories as our most strenuous campaigner. But, standing quietly in the White House, Coolidge probably has spoken directly to more persons than "T. R." ever addressed in all his active and joyous campaigning career. I do not know how many were numbered in the Roosevelt audiences, but the "stumping capacity" of James M. Cox, [Democratic] candidate for President in 1920, was figured at a million and a half listeners. At that rate he would have to campaign through a quarter of a century to meet from the rostrum and train platform the equivalent of a single Coolidge radio audience.



## Radio Brings Politics Into Your Home

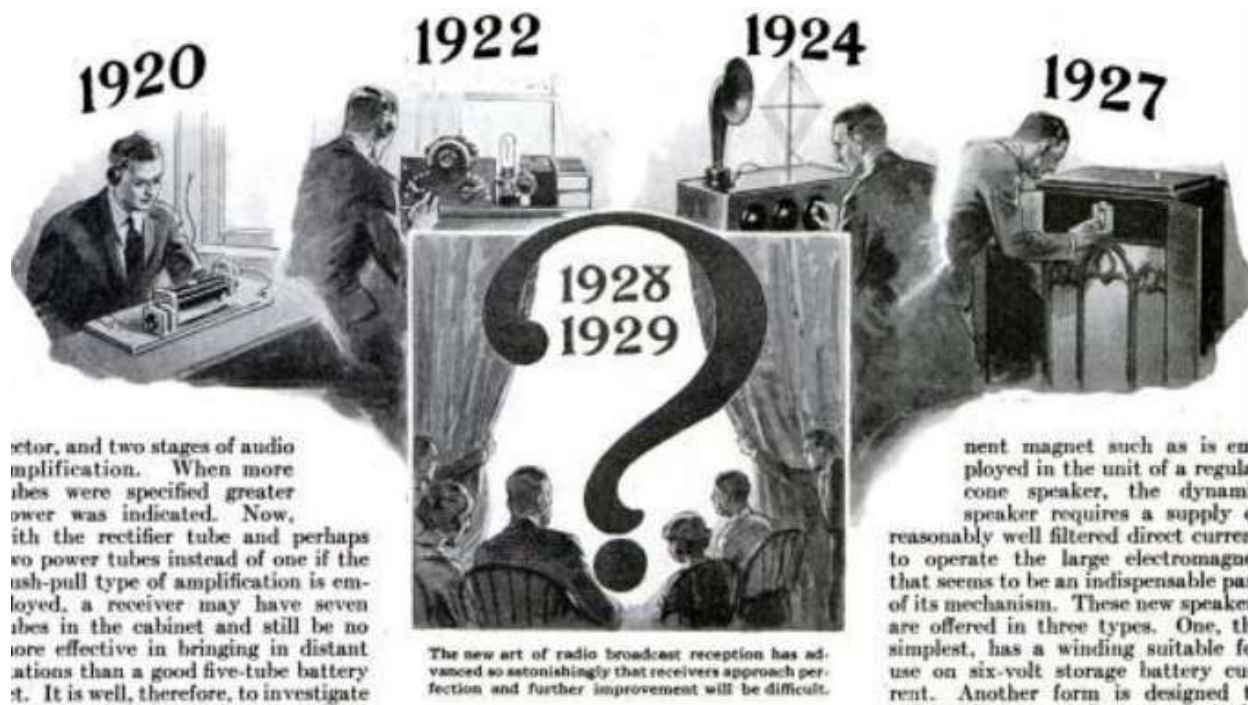
THIS year radio will elect a President. There is eminent authority for that statement. Calvin Coolidge believes radio

*Popular Science*, June 1928

Frederick Lewis Allen  
*Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties*, 1931

That winter, however—the winter of 1921-22—it came with a rush. Soon everybody was talking, not about wireless telephony [telephone], but about radio. A San Francisco paper described the discovery that

millions were making: "There is radio music in the air, every night, everywhere. Anybody can hear it at home on a receiving set, which any boy can put up in an hour." In February President Harding had an outfit installed in his study, and the Dixmoor Golf Club announced that it would install a "telephone" to enable golfers to hear church services. In April, passengers on a Lackawanna train heard a radio concert, and Lieutenant Maynard broke all records for modernizing Christianity by broadcasting an Easter sermon from an airplane. Newspapers brought out radio sections and thousands of hitherto utterly unmechanical people puzzled over articles about regenerative circuits, sodion tubes, Grimes reflex circuits, crystal detectors, and neutrodyne. In the Ziegfeld "Follies of 1922" the popularity of "My Rambler Rose" was rivaled by that of a song about a man who hoped his love might hear him as she was "listening on the radio." And every other man you met on the street buttonholed you to tell you how he had sat up until two o'clock the night before, with earphones clamped to his head, and had actually *heard Havana!* How could one bother about the Red Menace if one was facing such momentous questions as how to construct a loop aerial?



ector, and two stages of audio amplification. When more tubes were specified greater power was indicated. Now, with the rectifier tube and perhaps two power tubes instead of one if the push-pull type of amplification is employed, a receiver may have seven tubes in the cabinet and still be no more effective in bringing in distant stations than a good five-tube battery set. It is well, therefore, to investigate

ment magnet such as is employed in the unit of a regular cone speaker, the dynamo speaker requires a supply of reasonably well filtered direct current to operate the large electromagnet that seems to be an indispensable part of its mechanism. These new speakers are offered in three types. One, the simplest, has a winding suitable for use on six-volt storage battery current. Another form is designed for

John Carr, "The New Radio Sets Offer—Higher Values—Better Tone, Selectivity, and Volume—Lighted Dials—Dynamic Speakers," *Popular Science*, Sept. 1928

**"The new art of radio broadcast reception has advanced so astonishingly that receivers approach perfection and further improvement will be difficult."**

Agnes Smith  
 "Television (In Case You're Interested)"  
*Life*, August 23, 1928

At present [television] is in the state that radio was in along about 1908, or motion pictures in 1895, but that doesn't mean that we shall have to wait twenty or thirty years before ship launchings and monument unveilings

can be seen in our own homes. No, things move faster these days and I know optimists who are looking forward to seeing this fall's football games right in their own living rooms, without risking life and limb on the Boston Post Road.

There are three separate phases in the development of television. The first is sending photographs by radio. This is being done every day and is mere child's play. Try and do it. The second is transmitting motion pictures by radio, Heaven help us! The third is televising actual events. And that's the thing that makes sport magnates, movie kings, and theater owners tremble in their little boots.

Until a few weeks ago, it was impossible to send anything but highly illuminated scenes over the radio because the photoelectric cell, which is to light waves what the microphone is to sound waves, demands intense illumination. If you know anything about photography, you will see why when you realize that the photoelectric cell—the eye of the contrivance—is only exposed to the scene for one fifty-thousandth of a second. Thus it was impossible to televise any scene in natural sunlight or any scene with human actors—except for very short flashes—because of the intensity of the illumination.

The Bell Telephone Company has a new system of television whereby it is possible to transmit scenes taken in ordinary sunlight. The necessary light at the receiving end is furnished by a series of amplifying tubes.

Are you still with me, or have you gone home? \_\_\_\_\_

## Motion Pictures by Radio

The Promise of "Movie" Broadcasts, with Receiving Stations in Every Home

*Scientific American*, Sept. 1922