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## Tuning In or Tuning Out?

Lynn David Long

Cedarville University, [lynndavidlong@cedarville.edu](mailto:lynndavidlong@cedarville.edu)

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## **“Tuning In or Tuning Out?”**

**by Lynn David Long**

### **Instructor’s Notes**

This assignment required students to fully explore all sides of an issue while maintaining a neutral point of view. Why might such an exploration be important both inside and outside of the classroom? What other writing genres might require such a stance? What factors would be important when selecting sources for this specific genre?

### **Writers’ Biography**

Stephen Combs is a second-year Finance major from Miamisburg, Ohio. Stephen takes academics very seriously. As far as writing goes, he enjoys blogging and writing an occasional poem or two but is not a big fan of academic writing. However, Stephen enjoys a good challenge, and academic writing provides that for him. In his spare time, he enjoys playing most every sport in existence, working, playing the ukulele, and hanging out with friends and family.

### **Tuning In or Tuning Out?**

The place that I now call my office, relaxation space, and second home is the student radio station at Cedarville University, otherwise known as Resound Radio. It is a place that represents more than a job; it is an outlet for my voice, and fulfills a desire for belonging. Through my current studies and career goals, I am preparing for a life in the business of radio. The difficulty attached to this career path is the seemingly wide belief that radio is no longer a viable media option: that people are not interested in radio anymore. This would affect the future of the industry, would it not? If people are not interested they stop listening and then revenue for stations would deteriorate, rendering radio personnel jobless and aspiring DJs pursuing new career paths. So why do I even continue this pursuit of radio, a growing passion of mine? With the historical,

technological, and personal implications associated with radio seemingly going by the wayside, it begs the question: Is radio dead?

This essay examines the relevancy of radio in the modern media setting by exploring some aspects of the birth and history of radio, certain characteristics that makes radio unique, and its current and future standing in the media market. Radio is a means of media, by way of local and national stations, a listener can tune in to any variety of music, talk shows, sports broadcasts, and news programs. The radio industry has had an effect on media. In order to understand how radio has affected media, historical aspects of the industry must first be examined. Next, the reasons why radio appeals to listeners as a media outlet must be assessed. Once the history and the appeal of radio is grasped, the future of radio can be considered. It is in this order that the topic will be explained.

Radio is connected to communication and technology, which in turn is connected to science. The development of science leads to innovation and creation in new forms of technology and communication. In order to appreciate the birth of radio, an appreciation for the development of the science behind the communication outlet should be obtained first. This understanding that technology and communication are not separated from each other is an important factor to consider in radio development as a media outlet. The driving force behind technology and communication is science, for as science improves understanding and developments in technology so does technology improve communication (Barboutis 156).

The development of broadcast radio was a gradual process, as the audience had to learn to listen to this form of communication. "The transformation of a radio listener to a fan or a community occurred slowly. Listeners reported that sometimes their older family members steadfastly refused to listen to the radio, favoring other forms of entertainment" (MacLennan 313-314). As MacLennan shares in her article on the development of the Canadian radio audience, once listeners learned the technology and prepared their schedules around the broadcasted programs, casual listeners became fans (325). As families began listening together, table top and floor model radios became popular in households, fueling the continued growth. Canadians loved their sports, especially hockey, and the ability to hear games broadcast across the country in the 1920s and

1930s helped to spur more popularity for the medium (MacLennan 319). Through the development of radio in Canada, the ideas presented by Barboutis seem quite fitting. “As reception range grew, radio receivers in most homes improved as radio became a vehicle for information and entertainment, no longer a piece of technology for experimentation” (MacLennan 316). Technology was an early fascination with the radio audience and once they grew accustomed to the technology, the audience expanded. Barboutis explains that technology and communication are inseparable and are bounded by science (156). Early development in Canadian radio showcase this concept by the process of growth in the Canadian listening audience. The history of radio grew from the development of technology, which improved communication and was founded by science. As seen in the growth of early Canadian listeners, once the technology was understood, the radio became part of the household. With its birth in science, radio made an impact in communication and drew attention from listeners. What did audiences hear in radio that kept making them listen? The appeal, or reasons for listening provide intriguing clues to radio’s current relevancy.

Canadian radio listeners became part of their immediate communities when they congregated in groups to listen to their favorite programs, such as hockey, even before every home was equipped with a radio receiver. As their listening became a daily ritual that was taken for granted, the audience or individual listeners learned to become parts of larger groups of fans and enthusiasts across Canada and North America. (MacLennan 325)

Radio created connections for individuals, families, and communities. Listeners received something special from radio programs, a sense of home as described in Anne Karpf’s article. “Indeed, even when the radio voice is at its most instrumental- spelling out wind direction, precipitation, sea conditions in the shipping forecast- it has the capacity to engender a deep attachment” (Karpf 61). The deep attachment is described as homeliness, a feeling of comfort and familiarity. When a listener connects with a familiar station, music, or a favorite radio voice, they want to return to that feeling of homeliness. These feelings stem from various situations, whether it is a connection through sports, music genre, or talk shows, which ultimately came from a desire to be contained. Containment is

described as the consoling power a radio voice has over the fears and frustrations of a listener. The voice can't be seen, only heard. It is this fact that Karpf believes connects us so powerfully to radio, because it is similar to hearing our mother's voice while in the womb (Karpf 63). As our bad feelings could be controlled by our mother at an early age, so can the radio voice contain our bad feelings as a listener. Though this power of radio can and has been misused, the listener does enjoy this connection and returns to it to hear more.

Radio's draw does come from content as well. Programs like sports, music, talk shows and news broadcasts are defining features of radio. Karpf suggests that even beyond the general connections like listening as a family or following a sports team the listener develops a sense of homeliness when accustomed to a particular radio voice. Other attractions for radio is the use of modern technology to promote connections to listeners. Modern radio is including mobile technology to encourage participation in programming, providing unique ways for listeners to connect with radio. A case study performed by Rey G. Rosales, which examined the way two different radio stations used mobile technology to encourage audience participation, showcases some ways that radio stations and listeners are connecting using various technology. Three distinct areas of participation were discovered by Rosales; social interaction, entertainment, and social contact and surveillance of the environment (255). Uses such as text alerts, social media, traditional call-ins, and website use were ways that audience members used mobile technology to participate in one or more of the three areas of participation (Rosales 255). Not only does a listener have an emotional connection with radio, but a continually growing physical connection through technology as well.

This essay has explored some historical aspects of radio and certain emotional and technological connections radio has with its audience. The understanding of how a listenership develops and then stays with radio is necessary for exploring the relevancy of radio today. Since this has been accomplished, it is now appropriate to explore the question at hand: Is radio dead?

"The percentage of people who listen to the AM/FM radio each week remained essentially unchanged in 2012, compared with figures from a decade earlier. In 2012, 92% of Americans age 15 or older listened to the radio at least weekly, essentially the same as it

was a decade earlier (94%)” (Mitchell Journalism.org). These are fascinating facts to consider in a modern radio world. In roughly a decade, listenership numbers have dropped only slightly. The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism’s State of the Media report records more intriguing statistics. One example is the usage of online radio by listeners has grown rapidly in the past couple of years, roughly 39% in 2012 compared to 27% in 2010 (Mitchell Journalism.org). Talk radio continues to be very popular, with conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh boasting the most listened to show in 2012 with 15 million listeners (Mitchell Journalism.org). Satellite radio also continues to remain prominent among listeners as SiriusXM® attracted a record number of subscribers in 2012: 2 million new subscribers bringing the total to 23.9 million (Mitchell Journalism.org). There is large quantity and growth in radio listenership in 2012, which suggests that radio has a place in our current age.

These numbers show a common theme of use of radio as a means of media in this current age. This is a powerful discovery, as the belief that radio is dead appears to be untrue. “...technology and communication do not operate independently of one another, but instead are bound together via the influence of the field of science” (Barboutis 156). As technology is used by radio to enhance listenership, communication grows with that listenership. Additionally, online and mobile radio is projected to see the steadiest increases over the years ahead (Mitchell Journalism.org). “From the standpoint of uses and gratification theory, it is clear that the radio stations examined and analyzed in this study were trying to expand the ways they can interact and engage their listeners and thereby increase their loyal following. One of the ways to do that is through the use of mobile technology and via the embedded social media platforms” (Rosales 255). As seen by the case study and the statistics, technological improvements and advances are areas of growth for radio. As defined earlier, technology and communication are inseparable, and radio is a communication outlet improving in many areas with technology. This would suggest that radio’s relevancy in today’s media is not only vast, but also growing. However, there are certain factors to consider that could speak to the potential for radio to decline in coming years.

The first consideration is the overall earnings for radio

stations increased by very small amounts and only with aid of election advertisements (Mitchell Journalism.org). Consider this: if radio needed help to improve earnings from election advertisements, it could be a problem for continued earnings in the future when elections are not taking place; which means losing buying power for new technology and improvement. The FCC, the Federal Communications Commission, created a task force in 2003 to explore the possibility that bigger network stations and satellite radio companies were encroaching on local radio stations and their ability to compete in a crowded market (Sauls and Greer 37). This is an issue because local radio plays an important role in communities. Aside from just giving the weather and traffic for local areas, the listenership does make connections with particular radio voices, which has shown positive and powerful impacts (Karpf 62). However, with network stations buying many smaller stations and radio frequencies and satellite radio drawing more listeners, local radio stations begin to lose their ability to make connections and lose the audience (Sauls and Greer 37). The hope is the FCC will provide some protection for radio and localism, but as of now is arguably failing to do so adequately. “With the FCC showing no indication of revisiting localism in any substantial form, it could very well be up to the radio industry itself to take the lead” (Sauls and Greer 48). There is some danger for the radio industry, which must be considered when examining whether its relevancy as an industry is valid.

There is always potential for growth in radio because radio was created through technology. Technology is connected to communication and they are bounded by science (Barboutis 156). The largest increases for radio have been in online and satellite radio (Mitchell Journalism.org). Social media has become a factor in increasing radio presence, but radio stations could provide more outlets for social media use. “They need to push the envelope quite a bit more by letting listeners and fans of the station become an active partner in the conversation and in the content creation process whether on-air and especially on the web” (Rosales 256). The fact there is room for improvement should be testament for potential growth.

This essay sought to explore the relevancy of radio in the modern media market by examining historical aspects that brought

radio to life, qualities that make radio appealing to audiences, and data and insights that speak to its current standing and future as a media outlet. By understanding the connection between technology and communication, the appeal of technology and broadcasted information, connections with the radio voice, current trends in the radio market, and possible factors that could lead to a decline of radio use, the issue of the relevancy of radio can be answered. Data indicates that radio is not dying, but perhaps changing. With 92% of Americans still listening to FM/AM radio stations, it is a safe assumption that radio is still a major part of the media market (Mitchell Journalism.org). What lies ahead for radio is uncertain, as the problems of declining localism and possible loss in revenue does hang over the industry's head. However, with increases in listeners among the channels of online and satellite radio, there are still areas of progress to appreciate. As stations learn to use various tools, like social media, effective improvements can still be made in the industry. Radio is very much alive and a large part of our everyday media. Listeners are still tuning in.

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