

July 2010 Argumentative Reading

Contacting the Past: Early Radio and the Digital Revolution

by Henry Jenkins III. 1997 (Slightly abridged)

The science fiction film, *Contact*, opens with a dramatization of how sound waves travel through space. As the camera pulls back through our solar system, the soundtrack goes back into time, past landmark moments in the history of broadcasting -- the release of the Iran Hostages, *All in the Family*, The Beatles, Milton Berle, the end of World War II, FDR's fireside chats -- and then, the silent void of space.

The sounds of silence, in this case, mask the erasure of history. The casual viewer of the film might assume radio began sometime in the late 1920s and early 1930s, already operating within a national system of commercial broadcasting. What we didn't hear were thousands of overlapping voices as amateur radio operators shouted their call letters and their messages into home-made crystal sets. What we didn't hear were the dots and dashes made by Marconi and countless other experimenters, amateur and professional, who perfected the technology. *Contact*, a corporate product, makes it impossible to imagine radio outside corporate control.

Perhaps, the filmmakers concluded that such sounds would be too arcane for a mass audience, confusing rather than illuminating. Yet, this erasure of broadcast history is perplexing when you consider how often *Contact* returns to the image of ham radio, although its operators are more interested in communicating with the dead or with space aliens than with each other. In choosing not to reference the era of amateur radio, *Contact* lost the chance to increase public awareness of an age when participatory radio was the norm, rather than a marginal recreation.

Widespread ignorance of this history has tremendous consequences at the present moment. Once again, we are discussing the prospects of utopian or apocalyptic change wrought by an emerging communications technology -- in this case, digital media. Once again, we are seeing the potential for a broad-based participatory medium, and once again, we run the risk of losing it all to corporate interests.

The digital revolution, we are told, will enable us to participate in virtual communities which overcome the alienation and isolation of contemporary urban life. The digital revolution will facilitate participatory democracy. The digital revolution will sweep aside the gatekeepers, allowing free expression and broad access to information. The digital revolution will free us from national governments; we are now citizens of the "global village" or free minds afloat in cyberspace. We live in an age where our ideas are evaluated on their own merits, not on the basis of visual markers like age, gender, race, or personal appearance, a world where nobody knows you're a dog. We can all find a home on the net, some place where everyone knows your name. This is the world according to *Wired*.

Or alternatively, the digital revolution will destroy the American home, as our innocent children are exposed to video game violence, pornography and cybersex. The digital revolution will isolate us from real world communities and real world politics; cyberspace is a nether world of illusionism, fraud, and escapism. The digital revolution will destroy the rational culture of the book and replace it with the chatter of second-rate minds. This is the world according to *Time*, *Newsweek* and *CNN*.

Everywhere we turn, the digital revolution has been met with sensationalism and overstatement; rarely has it been confronted with much historical consciousness. If we are going to chart a middle path between utopianism and media-bashing, if we are going to make meaningful predictions about digital media's actual impact, if we are going to make intelligent decisions about its regulation and its financing, if we are going to take full advantage of its potential for community-building, political activism, knowledge transfer, and self expression, then we need to study the past. We can't just talk about interactive technologies; we need to know more about human interactions with technologies.

If we look to the past, we will discover that the same social, political, cultural and economic impulses that are fueling the digital revolution sparked most previous communications revolutions. As the North American continent was settled, we required technologies that met the challenge of reaching out and communicating with other Americans across massive distances. Americans demanded participation in the political and cultural debates shaping their democratic republic. And, they wanted contact with the mother countries they left behind.

Radio was one of many communication technologies promoted as bringing the world into our parlor. From the start, radio was sold as a participatory medium; many assumed there would be as many transmitters as receivers. Radio would enable everyday citizens to communicate their ideas, feelings, and experiences; it would give rise to a new and more democratic culture. Early advocates like Hugo Gernsback spun elaborate fantasies about a world radically transformed through better communications and transportation. Many built their own crystal sets and joined an expanding amateur radio culture. Much as we now talk of "surfing the web," they spoke of "fishing the ether," bringing in remote signals, listening to faraway conversations, and participating in geographically-dispersed communities. From 1906 to 1912, amateur use dominated the technology, with the airwaves literally clogged with signals. Problems arose, with pranksters tapping into government or military communications channels, transmitting false information, or assuming fake identities, and there was growing concern about radio's moral content. The more one reads about the amateur radio culture of the early 1900s, the more strongly one sees parallels with the cyberculture of the late 20th century.

Learning more about this history can help us to identify the forces which caused a dramatic shift in radio's use from a grassroots medium to a more centralized system of commercial broadcasting. By the early 1920s, radio was dominated by two national networks -- NBC and CBS. Many factors contributed to this change, including increased government regulation of the airwaves intended to secure governmental and military communications during World War I and, then, to protect the growing interests of the broadcast companies. The attractiveness of radio as a means of spreading advertising messages also played a central role in displacing its grassroots use. Most consumers found it easier to buy sparkling clean radio receivers, made to look like

nice furniture, rather than to build their own transmitters, and they were content to listen to entertainment and news, rather than engage in conversation. Our contemporary talk radio may be the last vestige of this earlier participatory ideal.

There are early warning signs that something similar might happen to digital culture -- AOL, the Communication's Decency Act, increased government interest in regulating cyberspace, the growth of push-advertising, and the development of low cost technologies which enable us to point-and-click but not to type (great for home shopping, poor for cyber democracy). While we've been busy celebrating the net's participatory dimensions, corporate mergers concentrated most of our national media resources -- newspapers, radio stations, television networks, cable outlets, film production companies, etc. -- in the hands of four or five major multinational conglomerates such as Viacom and Warner Communications Inc. This media concentration expands the rule of cultural gatekeepers over what messages get into broad circulation, even if we can now speak back in cyberspace.

I don't mean to sound like a prophet of doom. Many factors indicate that the digital revolution will have a more enduring social, cultural, and political impact than the amateur radio movement did. Yet, ignorance, apathy, and self-confidence blind us to real threats to maintaining a broad-based participatory media.

The Digital Revolution has also led to several inventions becoming obsolete. Some of these now antiquated devices include analog radio, the fax machine, VHS tapes, typewriters, mail correspondence (with the exception of packages), telegrams, and even landline phones to a certain degree. Societal Impacts. Without question, the Digital Revolution has resulted in broad social impacts and widespread lifestyle changes. It has increased and improved the ability to communicate and find important information. Additionally, it has made globalization possible which has, in turn, resulted in more effective