
On 21 February 1925 Earl M. Terry, broadcast chief of state-operated WHA radio in Madison, Wisconsin, and an associate professor of physics at the University of Wisconsin, received a disquieting letter from a male farmer and listener. "Dear Sir," the letter from C. H. Almenyer began,

I have for a long time been wishing [sic] to take my pickup and go after semester but did not know who but seen your talk in the Capital Times and as think that you may be one of the guilty ones.  

Terry had recently criticized rural WHA listeners in the local press for their tepid response to uplifting classical music broadcasts. Almenyer wrote to disabuse Terry of any notion that rural listeners were quiescent or disinterested in steering the operations of their state-sponsored radio station. "Give us something with a melody and you will get [sic] the applause," he explained:

"Carry Me Back to Old Virginia," [sic] "Just as the Sun Went Down," "Hit Time," or "My Best Girl"—anything with a tune—a melody—git someone with a fiddle another with an old banjo. I said fiddle don’t mean a VIOLIN. . . . If you will do something like that you will git the plause [sic] cards and we the tax payers will vote you the biggest station in the U.S.A.

Almenyer’s fondness for songs, such as "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia," reflected a preference among working and middle-class whites for a nostalgic strand of
Terry, by contrast, represented the new urban breed—a modern hybrid of farmer and scientist. Growing up, he undoubtedly knew men like Alsmeyer. But he had quit the farm for the city, exchanged overalls for a suit and tie, replaced folk wisdom with hard science, and committed himself to furthering progressive reform and rural transformation via radio. He believed that the mission of WHA was not to indulge rural popular culture, but to reinvent it. WHA must function as a progressive instrument of the state, steering listeners away from "worthless material," such as "coon" or jazz music, and redirecting rural sensibilities toward cosmopolitan ideals with a "high degree of merit." With its versatile lyrics, simple arrangements, and celebration of a mythic past, Alsmeyer's music smacked of antimodern culture, which is exactly what Terry, and progressive extension radio generally, sought to expose from the rural landscape.

Broadcasting at WHA began at a time when the pace of the social and cultural transformation of America from a rural society to a predominantly urban one was at its most rapid. Over several generations, rural inhabitants had abandoned farming and village life in greater and greater numbers for brighter prospects in the city. By 1920 the U.S. census reported that for the first time a greater percentage of Americans resided in urban areas than in rural settings. Stiff challenges faced those who stayed behind in the countryside to farm. After briefly reaching unprecedented heights during World War I, farm prices collapsed and proceeded to drift sideways during much of the 1920s. Many midwestern farmers were left overextended and scrambling to regroup. To policymakers, academics, and cultural critics it appeared that the yeoman farmers— that mythic hero of nineteenth-century republican virtue—might well become an endangered species. They searched for solutions to slow what was perceived as a national exodus draining talent from the countryside to the city (Atherton; Doshon; Fuller; Kirschen).
Galpin, became a chief proponent of rural reforms. He decried the "social handicap" plaguing Wisconsin farmers and argued that the best remedy was a community reconstitution. Government officials and academics established a set of areas for national reform, including communications ("we create a public opinion favorable to progress"); homemaking, education, farming, governance, health and sanitation, recreation, and morals (Rasmussen; Bowcy; Kirkland).

This case study of WHA in the 1920s analyzes the first decade of agricultural extension radio in Wisconsin and the distinctive social and cultural context in which broadcasting reached rural America. I argue that the worth of male and female listeners who "talked back" to the network-minded urban producers in let- ter reflect ambivalence toward urban-directed modernization and cultural uplift. Histories of early radio have underpinned the extent to which tensions between rural and urban ways of life structured dynamics and listener reactions to early radio. It is also true that male and female farmers differed sharply in their receptivity to reform via radio. Their letters articulate different visions of radio's place and purpose as men and women weathered the challenges of rural life in the 1920s.

The study relies on WHA records, rural social surveys, government docu- ments, local newspapers and journals, and studies of rural Wisconsin and the nation prior to the beginning of broadcasting.-during the early years. Above all, it uses information culled from dozens of doers of listener letters. Station managers scrupulously saved listener correspondence as evidence of their suc- cesses and shortfalls in serving the public interest. I use these letters for a slightly different purpose—to map a trajectory of rural listener engagement with radio and to qualitatively assess questions, comments, and suggestions as they reveal shifting desires, expectations, and dreams for state radio as a service in their lives. In quoting from particular letters, I have followed my subjective sense of which of the dozens of letters I examined capture key sentiments, concerns, and issues that seemed representative of the collection as a whole.

In recent years scholars have revealed a far more complicated landscape of audience reception to early radio in the 1920s and early 1930s than previously acknowledged. We know that local and national struggle accompanied the estab- lishment of networks, correcting the assumption that universal appreciation and delight greeted direct advertising and corporate control of the airwaves (Smiljan). Congress established the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to bring order to the airwaves, but the body served less as an impartial arbiter than as a cynical handmaiden for network interests (McChesney; Street). Educational, non-profit, and independent stations suffered as a result of this bias.

Other scholarly work illuminates the varied ways in which radio listening promoted identity formations. It analyses marketing and advertising strategies to promote radio. It also considers the phenomenon of "imagined communities" and the formation of a national "radio imaginary" in which listeners negotiated the symbolic terms of citizenship, gender, class, ethnic, "American," and racial identifications (Barlow; Bunch; Cohen; Douglass; Hilmes; McFadden; Newman). Studies exploring the formation of multiple publics of listeners are especially relevant, as cultural historians continue to deconstruct assumptions about "mass" audiences and social and cultural formations (Dennig; Kammen).

Studies of early radio listeners and programmers in the 1920s and 1930s emphasize the importance of local community context, institutions, and ethnic folklories structuring a negotiation with radio and the resulting aspects of iden- tity formation. In the industrial Northeast, where broadcasting established strong roots by the mid-1920s, programs catered to the quotidian needs of industrial America's multilingual, multietnic populations. Specialized radio outlets helped to redraw boundaries of social and cultural affiliation, such as Chicago's "Voice of Labor," WFIN, which helped unite multietnic workers in support of the New Deal (Cohen; Godfried). Excellent content studies of radio programs aimed at rural audiences sug- gest the importance of regional differentiation, such as in the Piedmont area, and we are coming to know more about the Midwest and the South (Hall et al.; Grundy). National commercial networks are credited with creating specialized programming to serve rural-to-urban migrants settling in large cities, as well as those remaining in the hinterlands who sought hillbilly and lower country music on the airwaves (Petersen). Early commercial radio programs courted favor with rural listeners through programs such as the WLS Barn Dance and various home- maker programs for women. They spurred a national and regional, rather than local, listener ethos among fans of hillbilly and country music (Gregory). Researchers have also studied the forms and messages of farm and home shows, emphasizing the manner in which such programs and representations domestic- cated the technology of radio for American consumers by mobilizing gender stereotypes, promoting consumerism (particularly among women), and cele- brating the family ideal (Bunch; Marchand; Smiljan).

A social and cultural historical methodology offers an alternative to working back from radio program texts and representations to reveal the listening publics of rural America. The paradigmatic form of farm and home programs can- not be confused with, or substituted for, critical study of the diverse audience of rural Americans engaging these broadcasts and, wherever possible, of their reac- tions to the shows. Without social and contextual specificity, women on farms of the 1920s, to give but one example, risk becoming a banal stereotype alongside their equally caricatured 1950s white, middle-class suburban sisters.

While the strategies and ideological commitments of the Country Life move- ment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are well studied (excluding the later role of radio), comparatively little is known about the nature of rural people's reactions to its uplift doctrines. Struggles and negotiations between farm- ers and progressive reformers over the nature and content of agricultural exten-
tion radio illuminate issues dividing farmers threatened by modernization of agri-
cultural technology and economics from the scientific experts and rational-sys-
tem theorists of progressivism in the United States (Burton, Incongruence).

Agricultural extension outreach in Wisconsin dates to the 1880s, but the influence of Progressive Republicans in the state between 1900 and 1938 pushed state agricultural reform policies forward and supported the innovative work of radio in circulating Progressive and Country Life ideals that continued beyond the period studied here. Governor (and later Senator) Robert M. La Follette and his sons, Philip and Robert James, spearheaded policies to cement a uni-
versity-state complex and determine the progressive tenor of the state for the rest of the century (McGarity, Glad).

The story of the remaining of the farm by radio began officially in January
1920, when KSLM (later WHA) became the first licensed station to broadcast in
Wisconsin. The following year Professor W. H. Lighty of the Extension Division
of the University became the station’s first program director. He derived impa-
ration from the Progressive ideals of university president Charles Van Hise, who declared: “I shall never rest content until the beneficent influences of the
University of Wisconsin are made available in every home of the State.” Lighty
accordingly began to develop radio broadcasts in consultation with a University
Committee Radio Committee of twelve faculty advisors appointed by the University pres-
ident to serve the people of Wisconsin. In cooperation with Lighty, the College
of Agriculture began producing a farm program in 1921 and the Homemaker’s
Hour in 1926. It developed its programs through a radio committee of its own
that sent one member to the University Radio Committee. 1

Beginning with its first program and continuing throughout the 1920s,
WHA concentrated on serving rural farmers. The midday Farm Show supplied
weather forecasts, road reports, and market news daily to southern Wisconsin
farmers. In 1924 WHA established a link with WBEL, a state-owned station
located at Stevens Point in north-central Wisconsin. The farm and home shows
originating in Madison could now be heard across much of the state. 2

A tone of easy informality characterized early written exchanges between lis-
teners and the station. Early Listeners wrote to share their joys and trials with
the fascinating novelty of radio, to swap knowledge, even to solicit technical
advice on格力电. By the early 1920s farmers had helped make radio a nation-
wide hobby industry. Farmers preferred home-built crystal and single-tube radio
sets for their simplicity and affordability. The Wisconsin Agriculturist published
a regular radio column, offering tips to farmers such as how to recharge the set
by dry-cell batteries using gasoline-fed generators that pumped water. 3

Rural Wisconsin Listeners took to radio as a tool and as a welcome source of
entertainment linking them to a world outside. They showed no evidence of
being mesmerized or intimidated by this new medium. Listeners scribbled notes
at the slightest provocation in order to comment on or to share a question about

"Your Voice Came in Last Night . . . but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared"
These programs were designed to educate and entertain the farm family and bring them into a closer relationship with university life. By 1925 evening broadcasts began presenting regular talks promoting scientific farming techniques as well as domestic science topics for women; the Homemaker's Hour debuted the following year and became a smash hit.48

Prior to the introduction of the WHA Farm Show, market news reached the countryside via telegraph to post offices, banks, general stores, and newspaper offices. Farmers congregated in these central places, often found at county cemeteries, to jot down the latest quotations. Keeping abreast of crucial market fluctuations closer to harvest and slaughtering time must have been a nuisance for farmers hesitant to squander time off the farm. WHA radio obviated the need for a special trip to town, a visit to a neighbor, or a series of telephone calls (assuming one owned a phone) to get an update on the market or an impending rainstorm or frost. Farmers such as Herman Leitz of Ripon responded heartily to the convenience, reporting that he listened to the Farm Show every day and that “I think it is a very nice thing for the farmers.”49

Even as the audience for the farm and evening programs grew larger, there were reminders that kinks remained in synchronizing broadcasts with the ingrained patterns of working farmers. Ezra Smith of Lodi wrote WHA in the spring of 1925 to share his appreciation for middle Sunday church services but complained that the timing of the lectures in the evening conflicted with his regular chores. W. J. Heberle of Portage expressed a similar conflict when he wrote: “If these programs are for the farmers I am sorry they couldn’t be about one hour later say at 8 o’clock as 99% of the farmers are in the midst of the milking process.”50 Without resources to conduct systematic audience research, WHA operators necessarily relied on written feedback in order to gauge the successes or failures of their programs and to make the necessary schedule adjustments to maximize its impact on life in the countryside.

From requests for an evening grace period in which to milk the cows to listener queries about circuits and intentions, rural listener letters to WHA reveal a tacit relationship between themselves and state station personnel. Farmers and WHA programmers in the early era looked to each other as new and mutually supporting neighbors. Listeners used WHA’s farm service and readily consulted the technical know-how of station engineers in meeting their particular needs. WHA programmers studied listener difficulties and attempted to provide satisfactory solutions. Programmers mapped farm correspondence to chart their broadcasting range and even sent queries to listeners asking them to tune in and report reception quality when the station ran out of new equipment.51 The bonds of reciprocity that rural historians often attribute to agricultural communities prior to modernization found new virtual overtones of expression during an era of “neighborliness” on the state airwaves, when the interests of listeners and those of the station sat in a delicate balance (Neth; Pederson; Osterud).

Smitten by radio’s allegedly beneficial effect on rural family togetherness, Country Life advocates added their voices to the chorus celebrating radio in the countryside. With little evidence to back the claim, they applauded radio for bringing the modern world to the farmers of rural America without the negative centrifugal pull attributed to other recent technologies. “Automobiles and good roads have tended to take farmers away from home,” wrote Floyd H. Lynn, secretary of the Farmers Education and Cooperative Union of America:

The radio, on the other hand, tends to keep these same folks at home... [it is a] a centripetal influence... to those influences which have come with mechanical and scientific development and which have had the tendency to diminish or stifle the social life and identity of rural communities.52

By this logic, unlike the automobile, radio presented no immediate threat of carrying rural people off the farm to towns and cities in search of new forms of recreation and public leisure. In a sense, it served as a model technology from a Country Life perspective. Radio could engage and entertain without overreaching. It instilled the conviction deemed necessary to keep folks down on the farm. Radio seemingly anchored rural families in place and kept them happy and productive.53

Radio manufacturers promoted agricultural programming to sweeten their pitches to rural customers. By 1925 advertisements appeared regularly in the Wisconsin Agricultural Notes radio for inculcating country values and promoting family togetherness. Ames-Kent, another manufacturer, invoked rural tastes when it proclaimed, “There are no songs like the old songs” and recommended purchasing a radio since “it keeps the boys and girls at home.” Rural parents feared for the morals of their sons and daughters on summer evenings, but the greatest fear of all may have been the specter of young adults deserting the country for the city.

Set manufacturers and rural radio programmers used overlapping appeals which portrayed radio as a beacon leading the modern farmer, farm woman, and farm family away from the ills of backwardness, inefficiency, and cultural isolation associated with farm life, and toward occupational, social, and cultural fulfillment. “You can make Radiola 20 pay for itself in better crops,” declared one advertisement, alluding to the farm programming on WHA and other Midwestern stations. The Radiola 20 became a surrogate of farm extension, since it guaranteed a sound so clear that it was "as though the head of the agri-cultural college had dropped in for a chat with you personally."54

The Radiola ad reflected a shift in radio programs under way at WHA and elsewhere. As early as the mid-1920s, WHA programming began to shift away from its role as a neighborhood service—a virtual country crossroad for farmers—toward a more aggressive instrument of agricultural extension work. County
agents, the foot soldiers of progressive agricultural reform, began increasingly appearing not on farmers' doorssteps but on their radio sets. These agents had traditionally worked alongside farmers in the cross-spread, recruiting them for membership in sanctioned cooperative associations such as the Farm Bureau, encouraging rural communities to engage in youth, women's, and community club work, and conducting public relations for the state's agricultural policies (Baker, Net). As the novelty of radio wore off and its potential impact and uses grew more evident, the university's Agricultural Extension Division began developing new ideas for rural programming. These innovations brought state radio increasingly into the orbit of technical and organizational agricultural extension work and substantively affected interactions between rural listeners and programmers as he decade wore on. Beyond its spatial reach, radio offered intriguing avenues for continuing and expanding the mission of extension work into farm living rooms and distributing knowledge and expertise from the university's agricultural laboratories and lecture halls.

Aside from traversing spatial divides, radio programs, if skillfully produced, offered an authoritative mode of communication considerably more engaging than written circulars or bulletins. At the same time, it was ephemeral and hence less direct than the physical imposition of a county agent drumming up enthusiasm for a program before an audience of exhausted or even hostile farmers. Radio could bring the reach of organizational extension work without entirely sacrificing the "human" side of county agent work. Radio no longer served exclusively as a neighborhood link, but instead became an electronic supplement to the old "town hall" face (the county agent) charged with ferrying favor with the rural farm family who also intersected with it.

In the spring of 1925 C. L. Fluke, a professor of agriculture, contacted county agents across the state to discuss using WHO radio to transmit his agricultural lectures as a supplement to their work. A few exhibited skepticism toward the technology itself: "Yes, I am interested in radio," replied county agent Milton Button from West Bend, "but not to the extent (sic) of separating myself from any cold fish for a dollar." Other agents such as J. F. Thomas, based in Waushara, agreed that the idea of agricultural lectures specifically for farmers sounded extremely promising: "I believe the older people will be interested in such talks. . . . I will be glad to ask a number of farmers who have radio, how they like the sort of program mentioned." S. Mathieson of Sheboygan Falls reported that a standable radio audience already existed for this kind of programming: "I have spoken to a few in this county who watch and take advantage of things that are broadcasted in which they are especially interested."

County agents agreed to use their publicity skills to promote WHO program offerings and to provide farmers and county newspapers with advance listings of talks and special features. In late April Professor Fluke inaugurated what would become a regular feature of agricultural science broadcasts for farmers: appearing behind the microphone to discuss projects in their districts. Correspondence indicates that male and female WHO listeners appreciated technical programs from the university. Market news and weather service consistently garnered a warm reception. But the cultural offerings of WHA, in which liberal arts professors addressed farmers, and which were deemed crucial to the cultural dimension of rural radio reform, prompted mixed reactions. A number of male farmers expressed impatience with evening programming that smacked of "education" for its own sake or offered cultural uplift in the form of liberal arts lectures. After his exhausting day of physical labor, many farmers could not muster the enthusiasm or the mental energy for a university lecture.

Some farmers found the educational talk such an affront that they banded together to lodge a collective protest. In a formally worded and carefully typed letter, five residents of Darlington in Lafayette County notified the station of their collective disaffection:

"Your Voice Came in Last Night . . . but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared"

However much we appreciate the efforts of the extension division of the University . . . these lectures have become an absolute nuisance. A lecture weekly would be all right, but we, after our day spent about our business, desire, in the evening, to listen to musical programs, news items, weather, market reports, etc., but your station comes in so strong that no set in Darlington seems to be able to tune you out.

These farmers found WHA's emphasis on "education" and university cultural outreach wasteful and not necessarily reflective of their backgrounds or interests as farmers. It was easy enough to bolt the door when a county agent came to call, but lectures over the radio were harder to avoid by rural listeners. The powerful signal from the WHO transmitter combined with the forceful uplift agenda of the program appeared to exert an almost overpowering effect on the listener. If some listeners balked at the content of cultural talks, others disliked the way they were delivered. The speaking styles of professors unaccustomed to addressing a lone microphone in a studio took some listeners aback. "Your voice came in last night in good shape," wrote A. N. Kelly of Mineral Point, "but I thought it sounded a little scared." Throat clearing, soft pauses, paper rustling, or even an occasional cough would not have been uncommon from speakers lacking experience and confidence with radio. Lecturers sometimes had difficulty compressing their ideas into the ten- to fifteen minutes allowed to each broadcast segment. Speakers rushed to finish on time or over into the next segment, much to the consternation of the director in the control room. After one lecture, a puzzled listener from Orangeville, Illinois, wrote to inquire: "Who was the announcer and why was he so 'rattled'?" Some professors simply refused to speak on the air at all and transcribed their remarks for an announcer to deliver.
"Your Voice Came in Last Night... but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared"

Programmers then injected a practical segment: "How to Select Wood for Strength," by Mr. L. J. Markwardt, Forest Products Laboratory, at 7:40, before continuing with poetry in "Selections from Masefield" and then "Music by the Harewood Orchestra." The evening closed with a short story in Spanish. The blend of dialect readings and Masefield, a popular writer known for his colorful colloquialisms, suggests—if not the roots of free-form radio—the balancing act that promoters of liberal arts uplift by radio practiced to keep the average listener engaged.

Fan letters indicate that both male and female rural listeners listened to the Agricultural and Home Economics Program and to the Wednesday cultural and liberal arts broadcasts. Although specific cases of listeners objecting to university "expert" lecturing on farming matters do not surface in station correspondence, it is significant that WHA chose to include talks by male farmers as well as agricultural professors as the decade wore on. In December 1927, for example, William Ruth of Grafton spoke to his fellow farmers in "How I Obtained the Highest Herb Average in Wisconsin Dairy Improvement Associations." On another night, Otto Onstad of Cambridge presented "Practical Ideas in Tobacco Farming." Perhaps the talks commanded more respect coming from working farmers than from a professor or technician with clean fingernails at the agricultural college. Just as commercial advertising discovers the power of the testimonial to sell products, the extension programmers of WHA relied on the power of local farmers as authoritative subjects. Perhaps farmers appreciated hearing from their own aloft with the "expert" testimony provided by agricultural college professors in departments such as animal husbandry, agronomy, and horticulture. Other talks promoted the beneficial effects of curtailing affinities with the agricultural college, such as one by John Perkins, a student, entitled "Why I Am Taking the Course in Agriculture."

The desire of progressive broadcasters to develop an on-air community linking rural listeners to the university faced some of its greatest challenges and controversies when WHA failed to broadcast an important Wisconsin athletic contest or attempted to schedule lectures or classical music on a game night. Beginning in 1921 WHA began broadcasting basketball games from the university armory. In order to hear Big Ten sports live, listeners willingly suffered the poor sound quality of the remote broadcasts, nighttime reception difficulties, and the distorted shrieks of student announcers, who sometimes screamed into the microphone. As S. B. Robinson of Montello observed after an early broadcast, "You could not tell whether you had a dogfight or a basketball game."

Historians have noted the critical role of sports broadcasts in consolidating enthusiasm for chain and network radio during the 1920s and 1930s (Baross, MacDonald, Smulyan, Douglas). Chain and network broadcasts built national audiences for prizefight, horse races, football games, and the World Series. Sports fandom became one example of radio's "imagined community" spawning geo-
graphical divides and ethnocultural differences. In broadcasting Wisconsin sports
to the hinterlands, WHA catalyzed new forms of a local, gendered "radio imagi-
nary" among male farmers. Sports broadcasts from Madison provided men with a
diversity of farm worsts, offered a distinct service to state fans, and
strengthened patterns of rural heterosocial behavior in which men gathered to
hear the news at the county crossroads. Farmers headed for their local hardware
or village country store on game nights, transforming these public spaces into fe-
tive gathering places on evenings when WHA carried Big Ten basketball games. L. Leuenberger, a dealer in general hardware, stores, and oils in De Forest, wrote on
March 29, 1927, "This was the first game I've seen and greatly appreciated by the
whole crowd that gathers here every game." A similar letter from Donaldson
Brothers General Hardware outside of Madison reported that games produced a
packed house from young men and twenty-five enthusiastic listeners. Tuning the
culture of expertise represented by extension work on its head, sports fans often
went to WHA, offering trivia on opposing teams and suggesting skyline; tips for
the collegiate play-by-play announcers. Frequently these letters featured multiple
signatures—ten or more was not uncommon—if to bear witness to the group-
ing effect that occurred as radio audiences congregated throughout the state.
Hearing the university band strike up "On Wisconsin" and the roar of the
crowd while gathered around a loudspeaker in a home or country store miles
from the nearest paved road or streetlight cannot have failed to delight male
farmers. Nighttime sportscasts created a new kind of social event, fostering inter-
action that complemented, but remained distinct from, local club meetings,
cooperative organization events, and church outings where men and women
were present. Congregating around a set provided by a local merchant, who
might sell drinks or food during time-outs and between halves, men could cheer
on their team in a manner that might not be welcome in the family living room or
parlor. In this way WHA furnished a welcome brand of extension service,
bringing rural male sports fans together and promoting ties not over farming
practices or high culture, but over a shared passion for university athletic com-
petitions and main conversations and companionship.

On occasions where programmers chose not to broadcast an important
game, listeners "talked back" with loads of protest and a buzzard of correspon-
dence. A male farmer from Baraboo wrote: "We were very much disappointed
not to receive the game Monday night... we hope you will try and arrange those
programs so we can hear some basketball as well as farm problems." At
an editorial in the Oconomowoc Journal protested: "We are all supposed to be
boosters for the sports of the University, then why not give us some of the entertainment
when there is an opportunity." Letters from rural sport fans betray the ambitions and underlying ill will
some male farmers harbored toward the university progressive reform
community and those in power at WHA. One angry listener accused the state station of

"Your Voice Came in Last Night... but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scarred"
hubris in substituting a university lecturer on a game night. "The world's worst
was pulled last night," he fumed.

I think the Professors out there surely have a lot of confidence in
themselves when they think they can entertain a radio audience. ... After
listening to the Prof. talk I know why athletic coaches get so
much money."

The failure of professors to entertain rural listeners challenged their compe-
tence as station leaders. It may also have fueled perceptions of second-class
friendship among rural residents. As one listener suggested, more basketball on
the radio might ease tensions between farmers and urban dwellers, who were
more likely to be able to afford to attend games in Madison: "By doing this you
are winning more friends [sic] and the feeling between the towns people
and University will be more mutual as there was sort of a disassociated feeling between
them on account of the ticket situation."

Walter J. Dubois of Fall River hatched an elaborate theory about minor basket-
ball broadcasts on WHA. He believed that a vindictive station management
was waging cultural war on sports-loving farmers by deliberately canceling games
at the last minute.

The director's voice as he announced the game would not be broad-
cast was filled with antagonistic satisfaction that he would disappoint
the basketball fans. ... WHA belongs to the people of Wisconsin and
not a few.

In the style of citizens demanding democratic political rights, ten male listeners
from Edgerton filed a letter in the form of a petition, demanding complete bas-
ketball team coverage on WHA. Music was plentiful on other stations, they
argued, but carrying state team sports constituted WHA's raison d'être on the
airwaves. Farmers implied that loyalty to their state station would be won through the
uniquely patriotic discussions of basketball rather than through a
classical concert or a lecture on scientific farming.

"Talking back" to the state and the university over the issue of sports on
WHA signified more than a mere declaration of power for Big Ten basketball.
Rural listeners wrote to challenge the WHA programming team toward the
effiminate domain of high culture. Joe Dietzner of Oconomowoc wrote mockingly:

What does the average fan care about symphonies [sic] and symphonies
[sic] on such a night. What we want is to see what our boys can do to
Ohio, Why not put such interesting events out on the air instead of
hoggling all the fun over there. Incidentally, the broadcasting of such
event will surely encourage many young lads to attend our own uni-
versity instead of going over to Michigan or Notre Dame."

James P. Sullivan
Dierauer conveys an awareness of the Progressive aspirations of WHA program-
ners to foster listener loyalty and connection to the state of Wisconsin. Failure to
respond to Wisconsin citizens’ need for sports entertainment risked spurring a
defection to Michigan or Notre Dame. Dierauer’s letter invoked the worst fear
of Country Life activists—that “sympathies” and “sapparions” would not amelio-
rate but instead exacerbate rural disenchantment to such a level that a genera-
tion of trite Badger fans would decamp to Ann Arbor or South Bend, never to
return. His argument implied that keeping male listeners rooting for their
radios for the home team might help keep their feet planted in the countryside, thus
accomplishing one of WHA’s chief ambitions.

The way that rural sports radio listeners constituted a politicized community
by invoking their state’s rights to obtain programs they wanted challenged the
standard complaint about the deleterious effects of modern technology on rural
patterns of social and cultural organization (Pedenor; Barron; Albertson). The
case of basketball indicates the way that consumer publics appropriate and use
technology, particularly communications technology, for their own needs. WHA
radio listening was very much a shared pastime that fostered rather than weak-
ened community social life and, in the particular case of sports broadcasts, became
a cause around which fans united and their voices in organized process.

Through devices such as multiple signatures and speaking of themselves in
terms ranging from the “we” to “our boys,” rural male sports fans expressed them-
sevhes as a unified political constituency. They banded together as the voice of
many rural localities pitted against the state station’s effort to cultivate an au-
cracy. In stark contrast to the “neighborly” exchanges of the early period of listener
expression, these listeners expressed gender and political rights, speaking of the
obligations of the state to “young lads.” They recognized that WHA represented
state and university power, and that their role recourse in staking a claim to the
airwaves required unity and strong arguments.

Rural women expressed listening patterns, tastes, and communicative strate-
gies of “talking back” that contrast noticeably with those of male farmers. For
every letter sent by a male listener such as Frank Walter of Fox Lake, who decried
the “Shakespeare very flat,” or Leo Cote, membership secretary of the Young
Men’s Christian Association in Beloit, who found classical music a “wel-
come interlude to . . . hours of berry baseball broadcasts,” there were multiple
letters written by female farmers praising WHA’s educational lectures and clas-
sical concerts. Apparently the WHA station policy of favoring the classical
music that so incensed C. H. Ahlmen and left many male sports fans muttering
in disgust delighted women on farms. Mrs. A. K. Bassett of SkiHi Farm in
Batavia wrote that she “wished the program at noon, but she reserved her warmest congratulations for the classical performances of
the university band. Josephine Hadley Pierce of Taycheedah summed up what
appealed to her most about WHA: “It is such a relief when nearly every broad-
casting station is blaring jazz to find one station that consistently gives us good
music.” She went on to request that more university lectures be added to the
schedule: “There were so many good things I had to miss in my four years atten-
dance there,” she wrote. From the standpoint of women on farms, musical and
educational programs cemented their affection for state radio and served the
distinct needs of women living in rural circumstances.

Whereas some male farmers expressed suspicion or hostility toward male
professors speaking to them on matters educational and cultural, women on
farms who wrote to the station responded quite differently to uplift of this kind.
Letters suggest that they found the connection with the university enriching,
rather than threatening, and hoped to sustain or strengthen it. Mrs. W. L.
Classon wrote expressing her gratitude to WHA for bringing its educational and
cultural resources into her farmhouse, particularly for its benefit on male mem-
bers of the household: “We are glad to get the farm talk from the university
when the men can hear them,” she wrote. Another listener added: “[You’ve]
given busy farmers a chance to listen and know of our university activities.”

These women’s voices support the idea that while farming could be a lonely
occupation for both men and women, the combination of geographical isola-
tion and the housework and child care burdens borne by women produced a
sense of longing for, or at least a curiosity about, urban life. While many women,
particularly unmarried girls, left the country for the city, extension radio
brought news and possibilities of alternative worlds that lay beyond the circum-
scribed world of female farmers, most of whom were married (Meierowitz).

In 1925 a short story appeared in The Farmer’s Wife, a widely circulated mid-
western magazine, that embodied some of the vague yearnings WHA’s female lis-
teners expressed for a synthesis of farm life and urban culture. “To the Farm by
Radio” was a whimsical but suggestive story about the effects of radio on the lives
of one rural farm family. “What has radio life done for us” the narrator, a farm
woman, muses. “It has made life over,” she proceeds to describe how radio con-
verts a humdrum day on the farm into ablended experience for the entire
family. In the morning radio supplies the intellectually curious woman on the farm
with news of the world without requiring that she leave the house or burn the
bread. As noon the radio picks up the market news, enabling the rural family
not only to compete in the marketplace but to master it. “We know just as much
as the elevator men and buyers do and just as soon,” declares the narrator. “We
know when to hold and when to sell.”

The story entails the collapsing power of radio upon the rough-hewn farmer
sensibility. The paren to radio life reaches its peak when the female narrator walks
into the barn to find a miraculous sight: “Dusty milking, with the head piece on
and listening to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.” Beyond its lampoon of the straw-slab-
ingsaline rural man transformed into a sophisticate, the image reveals a deeper wish
on the part of the female heroine for rural life and urban culture to converge.
Radio represents a force to vanquish women's frustrations and anxieties about rural life (isolation, economic impotence, and cultural backwardness) and cure the stereotype that country folk lack sophistication and polish. In the story, radio proved able to bring the best of the city to the farm without disturbing the distinctive charms of country life. When the tide leaves the narrator happily with her husband and children on the farm, it suggests the power of radio to female farmers, and perhaps to male farmers too, who are holding on to a dream of a tide enriched by the excitement and stimulation that only a big city can offer.

While WHA radio may not have been able to magically transform the lives of rural Wisconsin women as envisioned in the story, it did in 1926 at last provide a daily program targeted exclusively to their interests. Under the guidance of Professor Edith Hoyt of the university's Extension Division, the Homemaker's Hour aired on WHA six mornings a week. Denying the fact that many female farmers worked alongside men in physically demanding settings outside the farmhouse, the program devoted itself to supporting the daily routines of the farm woman, boosting her morale, and (ideally) overcoming whatever jealousies she might have of her city sisters. Across the country, broadcasters emphasized the principles of "domestic science" in the farm household as well as the joys and trials of life as envisioned through the prism of Country Life ideology.

Each day the program featured "Music of the Home," educational talks, and readings. Despite its gendered limitations, women enjoyed the neighborly sort of informative tone of the programs and women on the program regularly. "I appreciate your Homemaker's Hour so much," began a typical letter from Mrs. B. Bennett of DeForest.

May I ask for a copy of "Some Ways of Using the Veg. We Now Have," and would it be possible to get a copy of what the man said about the Philippines? Just heard the ending, and from that I judge it must have been very interesting.

The program supplied listeners with a weekly bulletin of program offerings (in mailing list snail mail to seven thousand names by the 1930s). It also invited women to obtain university Extension Service circulars on a wide range of topical issues, ranging from health and nutrition to housekeeping tips, recipes, and ideas for games and activities to amuse farm children. The scheduling of the Homemaker’s Hour at midmorning meshed with daily farm routines. The program served as a companion that ran during a time of day when men were out of the house and women controlled the radio set. Women on farms might have had to share the party telephone line, but for several hours prior to the Farm Show, the radio was theirs (Jellison; Smyrl). Just as male farmers gathered at the county crossroads stores in the evenings for group listening, female farmers sometimes adjusted their chore schedules in order to listen to morning programs with neighbors or in the company of their local women's club. Whether listening alone or in groups, however, women on farms found WHA a welcome antidote to their tireless and repetitive tasks. As Anna S. Bang of Mount Horeb eloquently phrased it, "The prosaic task of mending socks became an exalted occupation while listening to Dr. Mill's concert," and Mrs. Rutha Gillette declared, "These programs make mending overall a pleasure. It is worthwhile to be a farmer's wife in Wisconsin." These were not self-conscious testimonials, but letters written spontaneously to the station indicating the kinds of programs these programs were having on rural women's experience.

It is tempting to speculate on how the Homemaker's Hour won rural Wisconsin women's allegiances so successfully that it became the most popular WHA program on the air. In the autumn of 1928 both NBC and CBS networks began producing big-budget home shows of their own, yet WHA's version managed to hold and retain a large audience. The CBS radio Homemaker's Club, for example, was a big-budget affair, produced in a three-room studio, featuring a modern kitchen, a salon, and a bedroom/boudoir set. It celebrated the well-equipped, modern domestic environment and focused entirely on domestic science, home design, and cooking. Nevertheless, for all of its flash and modern appliances, it did not eclipse WHA's success.

One clue that emerges in reviewing WHA program schedules is the range of topics and issues the Homemaker's Hour covered. For all of the predictable domestic segments devoted to subjects such as "Timeless Hints on Home Meat Canning" or "Individuality in Dress for the Elderly Woman," there were also reports by the Wisconsin Women's Legislative Council and discussions of parent-teacher issues. It appears that the program expanded the gender-banded bounds of traditional notions of rural domesticity, serving as a forum for rural Wisconsin women organizing politically on local, state, and national levels. In 1928 Professor Edith Hoyt, Homemaker's Hour chief, received a letter from Theodora Youmans of the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs seeking information about providing "talks on the air on governmental and political topics" to WHA's female listeners. Professor Hoyt responded positively: "I am sure some arrangement can be made by which radio can be utilized in this desirable and practical way." It appears that even as WHA offered discussions of traditional rural homemaking and follow-ups, its women's programming sustained a variety of voices and outlooks on women's work and women's place in rural society that may have garnered special listener interest and support.

The 1929 stock market crash and the Depression weakened rather than clipped WHA's role as an instrument of Progressivism and social reform. In Wisconsin the economic cataclysm prompted a massive expansion of state radio. Buoyed by Progressive Party dominance under Governor Philip La Follette and by the economic inroads of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs, WHA became an ever more active player in state affairs. In ten years (1928-1938) broadcast time increased sixfold, to fifty-four hours per week. Federal works..."
projects funds supported a massive overhaul of broadcasting facilities, and new studios were built at virtually no cost to the state."

In the early 1930s, at the nadir of the Depression, WHA launched a full-scale program of supplementary education aimed at children. The Wisconsin School of the Air marked the crowning achievement of electronic educational innovation, reaching tens of thousands of elementary-school kids in classrooms supplied with radios across the state. In daily courses covered topics such as classical music, American literature, good citizenship, and club work. To attract youths who had been forced to drop high school or to drop out entirely due to economic hardship, the Wisconsin College of the Air was established. For these and other programs, both state and national educators hailed WHA as a sterling example of radio furthering state service.

By the 1930s WHA had firmly established itself as a beacon of reform and social outreach. In a decade it had evolved through several stages. WHA began as a single studio provider that focused on offering brief bulletins, weather, and road reports to area farmers. In a few years its novelty status gave way to a phase of neighborhood exchange between a growing listener audience and a state radio outlet still testing in equipment and defining its reform mission. Programs aimed to appeal to families as well as farmers were introduced in the evenings. In these years WHA continued to learn about its audience and their interests—who listened and why. Rural listeners, in turn, learned about and often challenged the nature of the state’s commitment to building a service relationship between its university and the countryside through radio.

During the mid-1930s WHA’s success with its midday and evening programs garnered attention within agricultural extension and County Life circles. Radio entered the orbit of agricultural technical and organizational extension work as well as cultural uplift programs. The weekly agricultural and domestic science programs, featuring talks from farmers and experts, lecture nights with liberal arts professors, and the introduction of the ‘Florida’s Own’ highlight the mainstay middle phase. By decade’s end WHA’s broadcast a diverse array of agricultural and domestic science programs and educational and cultural features to educate and modernize rural audience. The WHA electronic ‘neighborhood’ had transmogrified into a nationwide conduit for agricultural extension work and for university-driven cultural interventions designed to encourage rural social uplift.

Listener letters indicate that the transition from a neighborhood station identity to a more formal, state-centered one generated mixed reactions in the countryside, especially among male farmers. Many felt uncomfortable with, or at least alienated by, the educational and high cultural thrust of the station. The programs seemed too esoteric or out of step with male farmers’ needs. The relentless focus on rural organization and agricultural modernization gazed some. As Henry A. Wallace recalled, ‘Farm papers, county agents, Departments of Agriculture, et al., talking to farmers in terms of this necessity’ moderniza-

"Your Voice Came in Last Night... but I Thought It Sounded a Little Sour"
attractors of urban life—highlighted in cultural programs such as classical music or thought-provoking lectures about politics—and consequently had the effect of lowering the bread that idea among men and women to the land.

The significance of the story of WHA’s first decade is threefold. It shows that the specific goals and operations of agricultural extension stations, such as WHA, differentiate them in important ways from other educational, independent, and commercial stations. Rural radio is a combined extension work and Country Life ideology to redefine the techniques of farming as well as represent and enforce rural culture through educational programming and uplift. Second, the responses of rural Americans to WHA's radio producers reveals the importance of factoring in rural versus urban social and cultural differences in evaluating listener uses of radio. Wisconsin farmers requesting that broadcasts be reevaluated because of its public service to urban listeners leads to the idea that co-op and rural areas need to be more involved in radio programming. "In the future, we should explore the roles and needs of urban listeners in a more comprehensive way."

Third, this study makes clear that the combination of forward-looking efforts to modernize agriculture and a backdoor-looking perspective on the idealized rural past doomed the movement to failure. "The story told here suggests that WHA attempted to reintroduce the 'rural' to radio as much as to reconstitute it. The veneer of conservation surrounding programming reflected many biases from the demonstrator stereotype."

Notes

1. Correspondence, 21 Feb. 1933, 27 Feb. 1935, University Extension, Educational Communications, WHA Radio and Television (hereafter WHA Papers), Box 1. 2. Correspondence, 21 Feb. 1925, 27 Feb. 1935, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 1. 3. The census defined "rural" as areas of population with fewer than 2,506 persons.

"Your Voice Came in Last Night . . . but I Thought It Sounded a Little Scared"


8. Correspondence, 16 May 1922, WHA, 02-4, Box 1. The average cost of a good product set in 1935 based on prices advertised in the Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer ranged from $15 to $90.


Correspondence, n.d. (1927), WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 3.
32. Correspondence, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
33. Correspondence, 25 Dec. 1928, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
34. Hall.
35. Correspondence, n.d. and 28 June 1953, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 52.
36. Correspondence, 17 Jan. 1992, WHA Papers, 02-5, Box 52.
37. Correspondence, 14 Mar. 1937, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
39. Ibid., 502.
40. WHA produced both NBC and CBS in creating such a forum in the Midwest.
41. Clipping, 15 Feb. 1930, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
43. Correspondence, 26 Jan. 1928, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.
45. "Indiana's New radio program schedule, 1932-23," WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 52.
46. Correspondence, 18 Jan. 1928, 18 Jan. 1928, WHA Papers, 02-4, Box 2.

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