RADIO AS A CULTURAL FORCE

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These notes on the economic and social philosophy of America's radio industry, as represented by the policies and practices of the Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc., were embodied in a talk on October 17, 1934, before the Federal Communications Commission, in its inquiry into proposals to allot fixed percentages of the nation's radio facilities to non-commercial broadcasting.

RADIO AS A CULTURAL FORCE

RADIO broadcasting is perhaps the newest of the established industries of this country. It has come to occupy an important place in the nation's economic progress, as well as in its social and cultural spheres. It has become a new force in the distribution of goods, as well as in the dissemination of ideas. Furthermore, no other industry has greater potential influence, in other than business fields. Because radio is a sound business enterprise, it is able to make, and actually does make, such a continuously effective contribution toward our nation's cultural development.

This fact has a significant bearing upon the subject of this inquiry. In no other country of the world has radio broadcasting reached the development it has achieved here. In no other country are the people more interested in radio broadcasting.

Competent data show this interest to be growing.

And it has grown extraordinarily in the last four years —depression years. This growth is clearly shown in terms of sales of radio sets, and also in terms of hours of listening.

Now, the fundamental reason for this development of American radio broadcasting is that it is the most widely interesting broadcasting in the world. And it is the dictates of good business practice which make it so widely interesting to so many different elements of the population. Moreover, I believe that continued regard for the fact that radio, to be most effective in serving the whole people, must be conducted on sound business principles, will enable radio to continue to render its greatest service.

I do not believe any such realignment of existing facilities, as has been proposed, would result in a more effective service than radio is now performing daily, for the whole people as well as for special and worthy groups.

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PERHAPS I can contribute most to this investigation by stating, from our own operations and experience, our conception of radio's services, obliga-

tions and responsibilities in both commercial and non-commercial broadcasting.

The Columbia Broadcasting System is based upon a program service which is broadcast over its network 16 hours a day. The Columbia network consists of 100 stations. Of these, 8 are owned or controlled by the Columbia System. The other stations have associated themselves with the Columbia network in order to obtain the advantages of the Columbia programs. These individual stations do not usually rebroadcast the network program during all the hours it is available for their use; they often substitute a program of local origin which they consider more to the interest of their local audiences.

Last year, in 1933, the time devoted to commercially sponsored programs on the Columbia network service totalled just about 30 per cent of our total broadcasting hours. Thus the cost of 70 per cent of our broadcasting periods of the year was defrayed by revenues from this 30 per cent. In the first nine months of 1934 the ratios were 31 per cent of the time devoted to commercially sponsored programs, 69 per cent to the non-revenue-producing.

This means that, on the average, considerably over two-thirds of the Columbia network service consists

of broadcasts sponsored by Columbia at its own expense.

In the first 9 months of 1934, for instance, our tabulation shows that the Columbia network was on the air 4,368 hours. Of these hours 3,011½ were non-commercial. Of these 3,011½ hours of Columbia sustaining programs, a total of 810½, or 26 per cent, were definitely of educational or cultural content.

As an illustration of what we are trying to accomplish, I should like, first, to explain briefly our concept of broadcasting: then to define, as nearly as I can, the concepts of education and culture that guide us in our broadcasting activities; and, finally, to cite some of these activities as pertinent examples.

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WE have our aesthetic ideals; and often we work with the enthusiasm that can only fill you when you feel you're engaged in a socially vital task that's larger than yourself. Nevertheless, we can never forget that radio broadcasting also involves an economic problem. That is, it must be self supporting. It must render a service so important that someone, at least, must be willing to pay for it.

I have never once heard of any real willingness of the American taxpayer to be assessed to support it, as in certain other countries. The taxpayer, indeed, has always seemed wholly pleased with the thought that broadcasting is built on the same economic structure that supports our newspapers and magazines. Hence we necessarily start with the premise that the advertiser makes our 16 daily hours of radio service possible, just as the advertiser makes possible the daily newspaper and the national magazine. In order, however, to have something to sell this advertiser, we must render a very definite service to the radio audience. We must have listener attention—just as a newspaper must have reader circulation—before we can secure advertising revenue.

This means the first problem of our business is to win an audience, hold an audience, interest an audience.

We must do this, moreover, in the face of competition. Almost every radio station must face competition from several other excellent stations serving its listening area.

Furthermore, in winning and holding our audience, we cannot select some small group of people, closely knit by kindred interests, and appeal merely

to these interests. A magazine or a newspaper may pick out of the entire community some one group to which it directs its appeal; it concentrates on this group; and builds up its circulation entirely within these boundaries.

Radio broadcasting cannot do this. The wavelengths used for broadcasting permit an almost universal reception. Hence the very name of the service: broadcasting. And hence the concept, held by governmental regulatory authorities in the past, as well as by broadcasters generally, that material broadcast over this band of wavelengths should be designed to serve an almost universal audience. It should never be *systematically* restricted to subject matter of interest only to certain groups within the larger commonwealth.

I do not mean here that all programs, at all times, must be directed to the whole community. I do mean that a broadcasting service must be so balanced that, in its schedule, it offers programs directed to the majority interests, and to those of the worthy minorities alike, in intelligent proportion.

So it is that radio as an industry has from its earliest days conceived its proper task to be to draw the whole community into its focus. Within any given locality, each individual station has sought to do this. The re-

sult has been intense competition in devising programs to win the interest not merely of one or of a few groups, but of all groups within the community.

That is the basis of our broadcasting industry today: it is what we in Columbia understand the business of broadcasting to be; and it is our own constant effort to create programs of this wide community interest which has resulted in our large national audience.

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NOW it happens that educational, informative and generally cultural programs have played a very large part in these broadcasts which have attracted and held our millions of listeners. Somewhat later I want to give you very definite figures, the result of actual surveys, showing how this number of listeners has grown and is still growing—not guesses or estimates, but the result of actual census-taking in the field. Meanwhile, I want to tell you why we include so many serious broadcasts in our program schedule.

They are *not* there because they elevate and improve people's minds according to special standards prescribed by radio executives. They are there, rather,

because they reflect the interests of a very important number of groups in the community. They are there because our constant policy is to give such groups a voice, and these groups cooperate with us constantly in creating these programs. Finally, they are there because they form a very natural part of a whole balanced program of interesting content, which is our goal every day in the year.

Interesting program content is of first importance always. Every radio program presentation—including the educational program—must have in it a vital creative spark. Every program must appeal either to the *emotions* or the *self-interest* of the hearer, and not merely to his *intellect,* if it is to hold him. And no program which does not measure up to these specifications, for at least a representative number of the listener group, should be passed by a respectable radio director.

The reason for all this is simple. Experience has taught that only programs built upon these specifications will attract listeners or hold them.

And as I have said before, the radio industry considers this listener interest its life's blood. We cannot, assuredly, calmly broadcast programs we think people ought to listen to, if they know what is good for them;

and then go on happily unconcerned as to whether they listen or not.

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SO arises the first axiom in program building; to give the public what it wants to hear—just as every newspaper and magazine editor tries to give a smaller and more selected public what it wants to read. Then comes the second axiom: to reserve some program space to offer what the program director believes people *would* like, if only they had an opportunity to know about it. In these periods, for instance, go cultural programs primarily supported in the beginning by minorities—with a view to educating majorities to wider appreciation of their excellence. (That procedure is also familiar to editors everywhere.)

You are perhaps familiar with radio's introduction of fine symphony music to the national audience—something broadcasters were certain people would like very much, and which has indeed grown tremendously in popular demand.

As a less general illustration could be cited Columbia's broadcasts of a lecturer, whose talks were

largely devoted to books and writers and literary trends. Only a limited audience existed for these talks when we started the broadcasts, but we were sure they would have wide popularity if the general public only had a chance to become acquainted with them. After last year's programs, we sent investigators into garages, into department stores and groceries, and to the doors of housewives; and sure enough, the reports came back that all sorts of people were actually enthusiastic over this speaker, who previously had always been thought of as a lecturer and writer for the limited few. The result is that he appears this year on the air under commercial sponsorship; and Columbia program directors are pioneering in still newer directions.

Such instances of the popularization of programs which originally were deemed rather too limited in appeal for the general radio audience are legion.

It is also noteworthy that this work of popularization has had a very marked effect on the content of commercial programs. Commercial sponsors have time and again taken over a program which had been made widely popular as a sustaining network feature. And in recent years symphony music and opera, as well as fine drama and excellent lectures, have appeared frequently in commercial programs as a result

of this pioneering work of the broadcasting station, in developing a national audience for such things.

So it is that in adequate program planning the director must strive always to keep a little ahead of the procession. Now he must also do something else. He is obviously concerned with program *balance,*—that is, with offering his audience no steady diet of any *one* type of broadcast, but with a judicious mixture of all kinds.

Furthermore, he is concerned with the interests of the whole community, and hence must balance his programs with material appealing to all the diverse elements therein.

Here, then, is the basis for including the large number of educational and cultural and informative programs we broadcast so regularly. It is a very necessary and important part of our business.

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AS I have followed the course of these proceedings, it has occurred to me that many of those who spoke of radio education had a different concept, than did other speakers, of what they mean to include in this term.

In radio broadcasting for the American audience only a very democratic, pragmatic concept of education can be serviceable. In defining what American broadcasting understands by the term, *education,* I recently wrote for the *Annals* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science something that might be useful here. In trying to distinguish between two very divergent concepts of what education is, I said:

"Most ancient is the idea that culture is essentially the thought-product of a small class in society, to be handed on in turn to the inheritors of this group's responsibilities and privileges. This concept still moulds today's educational systems in most of the nations of modern Europe, to no lesser degree than it was operative in ancient Alexandria and Athens and Rome. . . .

"The American development of democratic government has been largely responsible for propagating widely the contrasting concept—which we may well call the democratic concept—of mass culture and education. . . .

"You cannot hand the critical and often restive American audience some brand of bright encyclopaedic facts, and expect it to listen enthralled as might an astonished European peasant, who had grown up without benefit of school and newspaper. Nor can you prescribe for it your own particular

brand of culture, and except it to drink deep appreciative draughts. . . .

"All of this is high tribute to the American intelligence, which it is indeed dangerous to underestimate, or talk down to. . . . If, in the American audience, you have perhaps the highest common denominator of cultural appreciation in the world—thanks to our democratic school system—you also have perhaps the most critical one, and one most independent in establishing its own standards of appreciation and judgment. . . .

"Experience has taught us that one of the quickest ways to bore the American audience is to deal with art for art's sake, or to deify culture and education because they are worthy gods. Learning for the sake of pure learning is indeed the *leit motif* of the old aristocratic educational system; but it seems very lightly esteemed in the boundaries of our 48 states. Interest of the American audience in the arts, the sciences, the humanities in general, goes only hand in hand with a passionate interest in the direct application of all these to living what has been called the full and more abundant life, as our people currently conceive it. . . .

"The scholar tutored to believe that one of the goals of education should be the writing of verse in Latin, would be mildly shocked to learn that we even went so far as to classify a broadcast of the World's Fair opening as an educa-

tional program. Yet such a broadcast was undoubtedly useful, informative, and hence educative in our own American sense, to hundreds of thousands of listeners. It is worth noting, in passing, that all broadcasts which tend to develop in our nation a unity of national sense and feeling may be considered to have an important educational value, whatever their subject."

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I have troubled you with a long quotation only because it seems to me that a mutual understanding of what we really mean when we speak of *education* is so highly important.

To radio's democratic audience, history must be made to seem not a recitation of facts and dates, but rather a spy-glass into the past where characters live again. Science must be discussed not as a series of abstract phenomena, but as an answer to the daily needs of man in his struggle with his environment. Classic literature must become a living expression of today's thought in yesterday's imagery. Geography can be no mere description, but rather an actual experience of the world. Every listener, in short, must be made so aware of the direct application of this material to

his own life, that he listens as avidly as to sheer entertainment. We indeed consider the criterion of success in such educational programs a presentation so dramatic that the listener could distinguish it from pure entertainment only with difficulty.

Furthermore, in so far as the educational service of radio is concerned, in my judgment it must be regarded as supplemental to formal educational agencies and methods. It cannot be a substitute for them. It cannot take the place of the classroom and the lecture platform.

Such have been the ideals not only back of the daily programs of Columbia's School of the Air, but behind many of our other programs of adult education.

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SOMETHING else has seemed equally important: the personalities through whom these broadcasts were presented.

It is singularly true of radio that only the truly fit can survive. We strive to place before the microphone only the educator who is first of all a vital, dynamic fellow, living in the real world of mass struggles and hopes and desires.

In our editorial quest for people to conduct our programs, we have wanted first of all speakers for whom the audience would be eager, and second, speakers who were representative of the very best groups of thought in America.

Columbia has carefully refrained from imposing on its audience any small personal concepts of what that audience ought to receive. Rather has it sought, so far as possible, to act as editors and directors of a great news and educational and entertainment service. Columbia's broadcasting facilities and periods have been alike extended to educators and business men, to religious institutions and labor groups, to government representatives and to the political opposition, to women's clubs and organizations devoted to community welfare, to any and all responsible groups with a message of interest for a representative public.

We hold our license by serving the public interest, convenience and necessity. And only by adequate cooperation with all public spirited groups can we be deemed to perform the conditions of our contract. Our constant eagerness to cooperate with every representative group that needs our facilities is sound policy, and important future security, from the standpoint of public good will.

SUCH groups and their representatives speak freely over our facilities. You have heard some talk of censorship. Beyond the insistence that broadcast material must be of representative and timely interest, that it must be the very best of the kind obtainable, and that it must be in good taste and presented with decorum, there is no editorial blue pencil. Last month a distinguished business man, who had decided to run for Congress on an anti-administration program, came to us to ask for broadcast time, and was astonished to have his request promptly granted. As a matter of fact, we were glad to put him on, because he is a good speaker; his name is well known to many; he is nevertheless of distinct news value because he has seldom been before the microphone. But he was astonished. "I thought," he exclaimed, "you fellows broadcast only Administration talks."

That, of course, would be a shortsighted editorial policy. As a matter of fact, intelligent controversy is one of the quickest roads to audience interest, as every newspaper editor who maintains a letter column knows. Our own policy has always been to foster the freest discussion on every topic of wide public concern. Columbia was the first network, for instance, to sponsor debate on the prohibition experiment, long before

the majority of our leaders considered open discussion of the subject appropriate.

This encouragement of free and open discussion on matters of real import, by qualified speakers, is indeed a very important part of radio's activities in national education. It is worth repeating here that we conceive of education by radio *not* in the narrow classical sense, but in the broadest humanitarian meaning. Nor, in our democratic society, is culture merely a matter of learning the difference between Bach and Beethoven—although millions of Americans have indeed learned this through their radio sets; but it is equally a knowledge of how to rear a family in health and happiness—or to spend leisure wisely and well.

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ALTHOUGH Columbia was the first network to establish a program of education directly supplementary to the work in the schools—a program which is used regularly by thousands of teachers throughout the nation—these broadcasts form only a part of our educational work.

Wherever it seemed well and practicable, representative committees have been established to counsel

with Columbia executives on questions of program content and direction.

Thus Columbia's American School of the Air is guided in its program direction by a national committee of 33 distinguished educators, in addition to an advisory faculty of 32 well known teachers.

Columbia's Church of the Air, which was established when Columbia decided to sell no network broadcasting periods to religious organizations or their leaders, has a similar group of counsellors. Representative leaders in the Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon and Christian Science faiths are members of this council, and render invaluable service.

Again, when radio's developing mechanism made it possible to offer as many as a hundred broadcasts from foreign countries in a single year, Columbia established a Public Affairs Institute Committee on International Broadcasting, under the Chairmanship of Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler; and the distinguished citizens so kindly cooperating on this committee have been most generous in offering their guidance and counsel, whenever this was needed. Similarly, Columbia has created an International Committee for the Institute, with a membership of distinguished men in public life in foreign countries, to assist its execu-

tives in presenting outstanding leaders in cultural, *educational and scientific undertakings abroad.*

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PROGRAMS of non-commercial sponsorship, which may be classified as cultural, educational or informative, have constituted in the first nine months of 1934, a total of 26 per cent of Columbia's 3,011½ hours of *non-commercial* broadcasts, and 19 per cent of the 4,368 hours of *all* broadcasts—commercial and non-commercial—which Columbia put on the air in this nine-month period. The remaining part of Columbia's sustaining air-time is largely devoted to light music, which starts in the early morning, and is also to be heard in the late evening hours.

Careful surveys made by our organization indicate that the daytime audience has been regularly increasing, until it now includes, at some period, every member of the family except the employed head. Radio sets tuned in during the afternoon, for instance, average approximately 65 per cent of the sets in use during the evening.

For many cultural and educational programs—especially those of major appeal to women and children

—the day hours are obviously preferable. It has become the Columbia policy, however, to devote a definite portion of the evening hours to programs of this type, even though this means a certain sacrifice of commercial revenues. Revenues from commercial broadcasts have made this policy practicable and feasible. This year we have set aside definite hours each week, between 6 and 11 o'clock in the evening, for non-commercial programs of a public service nature.

A summary of the time allotment of Columbia's cultural and educational programs in the first nine months of 1934 may interest you. The total programs given in this classification numbered 2207, and of these 718, or 32 per cent, were broadcast in the evening. Of Columbia's 494 outstanding musical programs of non-commercial sponsorship, 106, or 21 per cent, were on the evening schedule. In this same period programs of Adult Education numbered 482; and 25 per cent of these, or 121, were on evening time. Of the 85 programs devoted to Civic Welfare, about one-fourth, or a total of 21, received evening broadcast. Fifteen of the broadcasts devoted to International and Foreign Affairs, or 20 per cent out of the total of 72, occurred in the evening. Fifty per cent of the 487 News broadcasts received evening schedules: 63 per cent

of the 184 broadcasts devoted to National and Public Affairs were during evening periods; 10 of the 18 broadcasts concerning the interests of Labor, and 12 of the 18 broadcasts concerning Agriculture, occurred during the evening hours.

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IT is worth noting, in connection with this statistical summary, that the problem of program balance is important in setting up every schedule of a day's broadcasts. There must not be any unbroken series of talks through several broadcast periods; there must be other interesting interludes; and there must be a balance even in the subject matter of the talks and in the character of the musical offerings. If the problem of program balance, which is an involved one, is not properly solved—in such a fashion that the station at various times appeals to a very wide range of audience interest—then this station will so restrict its audience that the results will be most serious.

Columbia devotes much thought and study to this problem; and in solving it, the programs devoted to the humanities are given a very representative portion of the limited time available during the evening hours.

A little while ago I said that competent data shows listener interest to be increasing. The radio audience has grown steadily, and much of it is of very recent development. First in our surveys come the receiving sets. The number of receiving sets at any given date does not, of course, tell a wholly significant story. But if, from year to year, people go on buying more re*ceiving sets even in depression times, it would seem* to indicate that they feel the investment is warranted by what this expenditure will bring them. When the Columbia System was first organized in 1927 as a group of 16 stations, there were only 7,000,000 receiving sets in our whole country. Today our surveys show over 18,000,000 radio equipped homes—many of them with a two radio installation—and there are in addition a million and a half other sets installed in automobiles. The increase has been approximately 2,000,000 sets in the last two years.

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THE work of the major broadcasters in stimulating audience interest in cultural and educational matters has undoubtedly reacted on the commercial sponsor, setting a standard of cultural excellence

which many sponsors are seeking to emulate. In the last year, as you know, we have heard some of the greatest symphony orchestras, grand opera, and many of the artists of the opera and concert stage—all under commercial sponsorship. One large corporation has actually financed a scientific expedition to the South Pole, where we have set up a special broadcasting station to send Columbia listeners a program of unique scientific and human interest.

It is true that the majority of commercial programs are designed to uplift nothing more than the good spirits of their audience; and if they offer excellent entertainment, as they do, then they fully justify themselves. In recent years the commercial sponsors, competing for audience interest and attention, have come to invest very large sums in their quest for outstanding talent; and the result is that the American audience today has perhaps the finest choice of entertainment in the world.

So much has been said, in this investigation, of the importance of cultural programs, that it might be well to point out that, after all, it is still radio's very vital function to provide the American public with recreation, relaxation and entertainment. That this superb entertainment has served to gather great au-

diences for the humanities is a circumstance not to be belittled.

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TODAY it is no longer sufficient to discuss radio education solely in terms of non-commercial broadcasts. The commercially sponsored programs devoted to cultural and educational presentations form a most important part of our broadcasting schedule.

It may be said, in this connection, that a balanced program content takes commercial and non-commercial programs equally into account. Thus we have refused, on occasion, to take certain commercial programs. It might happen that the sponsor, for instance, wished to broadcast a lecture, on a period that was both preceded and followed by other speaking. We would, therefore, feel it necessary to use this particular interlude for music. If no commercial sponsor wished to supply it, then a sustaining program of music would be inserted. Such program control is vital; and it acts as an important assurance that the extensive periods we are now devoting to educational, cultural and informative programs generally, will not be shortened in the future—even if the time comes when

we sell more than 30 or 31 per cent of our hours to commercial sponsors. Undoubtedly, certain types of programs must always be in the sustaining class.

That the commercially sponsored programs have been improved in general character so rapidly in the last few years is perhaps due to very obvious desires on the part of the audience itself. Public response is continuously changing. Jazz music, for instance, is today not sought nearly so frequently by the audience as formerly. For such trends we believe that our own carefully devised educational work has been responsible to no small degree. Radio, as I have said, is of course a business. But for the most of us who are making it our life's work, it is much more than a great economic enterprise. We regard it likewise as a magnificent opportunity to help make people wiser and happier, whatever may be their station in life.

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NOR is the program service, about which you have already heard so much, an accomplishment with which we are content to rest. This industry is after all still in its infancy. Increasing the radio audi-

ence by offering it an ever-improved program service has been, I think, an important part of the industry's activities, and is bound to be so in the future. We are looking forward to the day when not only will every home be radio equipped, but the program service available through this little instrument will be as marvelous an advance over that of 1934 as this present service is an achievement unforeseen in the early 1920's.

If our broad definition of cultural education is sound; if our concept of radio as a force better suited to supplementary than to formal education is correct,—then the direction of our progress is right. Changes in the tempo of that progress may well be brought about; anything we can develop here to expedite it would be a contribution to the national interest. But any change in its direction might entail serious results.

It is noteworthy, for instance, that the commercial radio, in building up a wide general audience, can do far more for mass education and culture, during a few programs of brief duration which hold this entire audience interest—than could some station broadcasting such programs to a limited audience for many hours of the day.

To change such a situation, to reduce the size of the available national audience by any procedure whatever, would be a blow to that very educational progress we all want to encourage.

This is what I mean by an unwise change in the direction of our present progress, which we want to avoid.

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THE present radio system has developed unusually skillful technique in making the microphone an effective instrument of public service.

We of course have no monopoly of such technique. It could be developed by others. It could be developed as part of the state's educational responsibilities. But would that not constitute a needless duplication of facilities, at a needless cost to the taxpayers? Especially when, in the judgment of so many of the educational and cultural leaders with whom we have cooperated, the present system—free to the listeners—can do the job so effectively.

I am personally loath to believe that any legislative mandate could assist in the attainment of goals that we are already working toward so wholeheart-

edly; nor would it seem that legislative direction would make any easier the creative work in an industry where the creative spark is so vital to the performance of almost every moment's task.

It is an enthusiastic undertaking, to all of us engaged in it. It is in this spirit that the great majority of us in our industry—almost all of us rather young men—are going about this new work. To destroy what has been built, or seriously to limit its usefulness—to weaken radio's economic structure—to attempt to widen the service the public is receiving by subtracting from that service, or to lessen radio facilities so as to make unavailable to any portion of our population the broadcasts they now receive—would seem to us a cause for real regret.