

POWER OF THE RADIO COMMENTATOR

BY GIRAUD CHESTER

LIKE the dramatic rise of radio itself, the emergence of the radio commentator in this country has been generally accepted but only meagerly evaluated. As the radio industry expanded from 30 stations in 1922 to 1520 by the first of this year, so the part-time radio editors blossomed forth into full-fledged news analysts with their own professional associations and mammoth followings. And as radio changed from a \$5 million business in 1927 into an industry with annual gross billings approaching the half-billion mark, so the \$40-a-week commentator of the early thirties has seen his income soar to \$400,000 a year.

Habituated as we now are to hearing opinions on the air, we tend to forget that in radio's \$5 million period a Wisconsin congressman-elect, in the midst of a speech charging capitalistic control of the radio, press and schools of America, had his microphone switched off, in apparent corroboration of his claim. We forget that a debate on evolution between William

Jennings Bryan and Professor Henry Fairfield Osborn was once barred from radio on the ground that such a program was too controversial. Atheists still find it necessary to obtain assistance from the Federal Communications Commission to get their opinions aired. Last fall, Don Hollenbeck, a well-known news broadcaster, began an early-morning news program which followed a singing commercial by saying, "The atrocity you have just heard is not a part of this program." By noon he was fired.

Advertiser domination of radio may have stilled comment concerning that domination, but it does not seem to have retarded the flood of opinionated rhetoric on other matters by men and women whom the advertisers and networks choose to put on the air. Llewellyn White, of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, estimates that the country now has more than 600 "commentators" who not only report the news, but claim to analyze its significance and occasionally to predict the future. Atlanta alone has

GIRAUD CHESTER, assistant professor of speech at Cornell University, recently concluded a year's investigation of the radio commentators under a special research scholarship at the University of Wisconsin. His article in this issue is a general introduction to more detailed analyses of individual commentators, which will be published from time to time. An article dealing with the record and influence of H. V. Kaltenborn will appear next month.

19 of them, and there are 58 in the New York-New Jersey listening area. Mutual lists 16 commentators, ranging from Kate Smith to Fiorello La Guardia. NBC carries a staff of 48 broadcasters classified as commentators, correspondents and newscasters. CBS lists 19 New York and Washington news reporters and analysts, while ABC carries 20 network news commentators, including its Sunday-evening features, Drew Pearson and Walter Winchell. No accurate count of regional and local "commentators" seems to have been made as yet.

Nor does anyone know how well these men and women are doing their jobs. The 31 New York commentators who organized the exclusive Association of Radio News Analysts in 1942, under H. V. Kaltenborn's leadership, excluded a number of their colleagues, apparently because of doubts about their competence. No one, however, is prepared to vouch for the competence of ARNA's own members, for while the masses listen the commentators are unheard and unchecked by the few experts who could furnish criticism. As they see their audiences and incomes grow, they tend to develop "commentator's complexes," characterized by an increasing willingness to deal with subjects in which they are not expert, and to render opinions at the flip of a switch. This growing sense of power, as adulations of uncritical listeners descend upon them, is distinctly unhealthy. It is not long before they are ready to cry persecution when

their preferred position is questioned.

Radio has come to supersede the school, the church and the press as America's number one source of news and opinion. As Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld has pointed out, radio has made it possible for the molders of opinion to speak to the most suggestible people—the great masses distributed in family units—and to make their appeals directly, personally and repetitiously. Of all the facts that make radio a powerful social institution, probably the most imposing is the opening of the home to the purveyors of information and misinformation, opinions and prejudices.

II

Not long ago, a network news commentator, a member of the Association of Radio News Analysts whose name is a household word, commented on a nation-wide broadcast:

In the General Motors strike, the company made an offer of 15½ cents while the workers demanded 19½ cents. The company raised its bid to 17½ cents but the strike continued. Government intervention finally gave the workers 18 cents an hour. That strike lasted four months and cost the average worker around 900 dollars. You can figure out for yourself whether union leadership in that strike was wise or unwise.

So persuasive was this piece of analysis that the commentator received enough requests for copies to warrant its mimeographed distribution.

A simple critical check reveals, however, that four of the statements in the comment were inaccurate from

beginning to end. General Motors offered 13½ cents, not 15½. The workers demanded a general wage increase of 30 per cent for everybody at all levels, rather than a simple 19½-cent raise. The strike was settled for 18½ cents, not 18. The "government intervention" consisted of a fact-finding board, which ruled that General Motors could pay a 19½-cent increase without a price increase. (The union offered to settle for this figure; General Motors refused.)

Paragraph one of ARNA's Code of Ethical Practice reads: "The Association expects and requires of the radio news analyst painstaking accuracy in his public statements. . . ."

By 1939, when networks were just beginning to build up their news staffs, a *Fortune* opinion survey established that radio was already the public's leading source of news interpretation. Indeed, according to *Fortune*, the radio commentators were more popular than the newspapers' editorial writers and columnists combined. Another public-opinion study, made during the war by the Bureau of Intelligence of the Office of Facts and Figures, revealed that Americans would be receptive to increased analysis of the news. The better-educated people showed a greater preference for interpretation.

Those who thought that listening to news and commentary would taper off at the close of the war have been surprised. A survey made by the Co-operative Analysis of Broadcasting showed that 65 per cent of night-

time newscasters and commentators had higher ratings in December 1945 than a year previously. In January 1947 *Variety* published a breakdown of national network program logs for typical weekdays in 1944 and 1947. It showed that more radio commentaries were broadcast after the war: on January 13, 1944, the networks carried 225 minutes of news comments; on January 13, 1947, they carried 250 minutes.

That the public has confidence in the radio commentator is to be deduced from another opinion survey, made in March 1946 by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Denver. Only 18 per cent of those interviewed said that they thought the commentators gave unfair or biased opinions. However, when asked, "Who do you think mainly decides what opinions a news commentator expresses over the air — the commentator himself, the radio station, or the company that sponsors the program?" only 43 per cent said that the commentator himself did the deciding. (But 63 per cent thought that he should.) Seven per cent thought that the radio station decided what opinions were to be expressed over the air, while 27 per cent thought it was the sponsor of the program.

III

It is easy enough to attribute the popularity of the commentators to the public's need for someone to unravel the mass of data on world events. But the fact of almost complete public

confidence in these men, whether justified or not, has an inherent danger.

Careful experiments have demonstrated that a fifteen-minute radio commentary can and does influence attitudes significantly. Professor John Dietrich of the University of Wisconsin set up controlled experiments to determine what effect, if any, a radio commentary has on the attitudes of listeners. He devised attitude scales to find out how certain college students felt about Soviet Russia. Then, after taking the attitude tests, the students listened to a transcribed commentary by an unidentified but accomplished speaker. After the commentary was heard the students' attitudes were measured again. Two weeks later, the attitude tests were administered once more.

Dietrich discovered that "a fifteen-minute radio speech, designed to influence attitudes, does influence attitudes significantly," and that two weeks after the commentary was delivered the shifts were still significant. He also discovered that those listeners who expressed a greater interest in the program were influenced more deeply. It is well to remember that radio audiences, by virtue of the fact that they are listening, have already expressed an interest in the commentary.

The popular American habit of respecting men who are introduced with words of high praise gives commentators considerable prestige with the public. H. V. Kaltenborn has been

billed in the press as the "world's best informed and most unbiassed commentator on European affairs"; and Fulton Lewis, Jr. has been described in paid advertisements as "America's foremost commentator on national affairs" and "the greatest reporter alive today."

What can happen when a skillful speaker makes use of the persuasive powers of radio is suggested by a famous Sunday-afternoon broadcast in 1938 when Father Coughlin, in opposing a piece of legislation, appealed to his listeners with the statement that "The immediacy of the danger insists that before tomorrow noon your telegram is in the hands of your senator." By the next day no fewer than 100,000 telegrams had piled up on senators' desks in Washington, and thousands were still pouring in when the time came for a vote. Even as early as 1932 John Brinckley, a patent medicine man with no political experience, no press or party support — nothing, in fact, but a radio station — induced almost a majority of Kansas voters to write in his name for governor. He had campaigned on the air for only three weeks.

Government officials are acting wisely when they take to the air to explain or defend their positions. But the commentators have the advantage over them in that, over a period of time and through a stereotyped approach, they can hammer home an idea with some permanent effect. Moreover, the radio commentators have the largest regular listening

audiences of any group of professional speakers in the country; they hold a preferred position in the channels of communication; they speak from the news centers of the world, or, as in the case of the mellifluous Gabriel Heatter, from Long Island in the summer and Palm Beach in the winter. They have resonant voices; they are masters of innuendo.

But do they merit the confidence they hold? Do they increase understanding? How well does their record of analysis stand up?

IV

These questions can be answered in two ways. First, by examining the technical qualifications of the commentators on the air, and second by analyzing their commentaries.

The hiring and firing of a network commentator is in many ways a matter of national concern. It is sometimes difficult to say how and by whom commentators are hired at present, but in general it appears that they are chosen by advertising agencies, sponsors or network managements, or by all three. Local and regional commentators are more often selected by the sponsors. The suggestion that the over-all political slant of the commentators is unfairly weighted on the conservative side is therefore not surprising. The president of the CIO union which sponsors Leland Stowe's weekly news analysis stated that it was the union's desire "to counteract the growing imbalance in the ratio of liberal and conservative com-

mentators on the air." Some radio executives claim that the public itself selects the commentators, because if the public did not listen they would lose their jobs. This answer overlooks the not unimportant problem of who decides which commentators will be available for selection by the public.

A recent study sought to learn something about the leading analysts by examining *Who's Who in America* and other published material, to unearth what they said about themselves. The study revealed that of 28 commentators on whom information was available, 26 had attended college, but only 15 had been graduated. Seven had gone on to graduate study. Twenty listed themselves as journalists with a variety of experience prior to their present employment: eight claimed to have been explorers and travelers, nine military servicemen and twelve foreign correspondents. Fourteen had been reporters, thirteen newspaper staff members, one a railroad worker, one a salesman and one a topographer.

We do not know very much more about most of the commentators. Most of the little we do know is what advertising agents think it would be good for us to know. But it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the great networks be at least as careful in hiring commentators who will address millions of suggestible listeners on all sorts of topics as most universities are in hiring professors who address students on one subject.

We will not know whether the analysts merit the confidence the public gives them until a thorough study has been made of their commentaries. This is the only reliable method of determining whether their broadcast opinions through the years constituted intelligent appraisals of events in the light of the evidence available at the time. To ask that commentators be willing to match the record of their analyses and predictions against the record of history would not appear to be unfair.

Thorough study of scripts will reveal the premises from which the analyst argues, whether, for example, he rides a hobby-horse in his selection of news items, or whether he distorts data to suit his point of view. Inaccuracies in the handling of facts, lapses in logic and outright duplicity will come to light under such meticulous examination. Study of the scripts, alone, however, will not provide the complete answer. Successful commentators have learned to prepare scripts which upon cold examination seem faultless, temperate and fair, but which, through deft manipulation of inflection, innuendo and modulation, cast emphasis where no emphasis is called for, convert praise to blame, highlight one point and shadow another. Going over a script containing the words, "Bravo, Mrs. Roosevelt, bravo!" would scarcely lead the reader to expect that these words would strike some educated

listeners as extreme sarcasm when the commentator delivered them. To estimate the actual effect of a commentator's delivery, it is necessary to find a gauge to listener reaction. This can be done in part by studying the commentator's mail.

In a controversy with the Columbia Broadcasting System in 1943, the commentators won a hard-fought battle to protect their freedom to editorialize on the air. They now have the responsibility for showing that they have made good use of the freedom they preserved. They, the networks and the station managements should cooperate in making files of scripts and fan-mail available for inspection by responsible scholars in the social sciences. Fulton Lewis, Jr. has suggested in testimony before a Senate subcommittee that all newscasters should be required to file sworn statements, open to inspection, listing the organizations to which they belong and the amount and sources of their own and their families' income.

When we have this information, when we have probed the records and have matched commentators against one another and against history, we will be prepared to say whether the public has acted shrewdly in placing such complete confidence in these men, and whether radio commentators should continue to be given the power to express opinions on all subjects, before millions of listeners, for as much as a full hour every week.

DOWN TO EARTH,

by ALAN DEVOE



IS MAN AN ANIMAL?

IN THE mail addressed to this department of THE AMERICAN MERCURY, two kinds of letters come with particular frequency.

The first kind are letters from scientists who belong, not unconsciously, to the tradition of the late great Thomas Huxley. They express alarm or anger, depending on the temper of the writer, over the apparent treating of our human species as a special and peculiar species, somehow set apart from the other creatures treated here: mice, herons, leeches, rabbits, opossums, or whatever. Man, it is pointed out, is only a more ingenious chimpanzee, only a more intricate gorilla. There is no warrant, meeting the stern requirements of science, for supposing that he is other than an animal.

The letters of the second kind come chiefly from clergymen, though not always. These deplore, angrily or sadly, the recurrent insistence in these pages that there is a close link, in fact a brotherhood, between a man and a fox, or a man and an earthworm, or a

man and the bacterium stirring obscurely in the dark mold of the leaves. Man, these writers object, is no mere member of the animal community. He is no mere complicated and larger marmoset. He lives a kind of life uniquely his own. He possesses, as no other does, a thing called spirit and a thing called his immortal soul. He is the master of the beasts. He is the steward of the earth. He is the child of God.

There could hardly be better exemplified than by these two kinds of disturbed reaction, to the same text, the quality of the argument that again and again has set science and religion against one another, as in enemy camps, and that apparently still continues so to divide them.

Religion, since its beginning, has had a central concern: the protection of the truth of man's specialness and primacy of spirit, and the truth thereby implied of a more than material essence-of-being as the ground of the universe. Science has had, since its beginning, a primary concern: the cold-minded study of phenomena, and