

Chapter 15

Farm and Rural Radio in the United States: Some beginnings and models

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In many countries in the world today, radio is used principally for entertainment. In the United States, for example, there are virtually no more radio documentaries and relatively few of the country's 12,700 radio stations are news and public affairs stations. Even most of the 2,100 educational or public radio stations are, like their commercial counterparts, devoted mainly to popular music.



We find much the same situation in other countries with principally commercial broadcast systems. In too many places in the world today, radio has either seriously underachieved or entirely abandoned efforts to be a meaningful medium for news, information, education, and culture. In part, this is because subsequent media – like television and the Internet – have replaced radio in countries with economies strong enough to accommodate widespread use of the new media. This is also due to factors such as migration from rural to urban areas – rural and geographically isolated populations relied on radio for basic information connection more than urban ones do.

It was not always like this, and rural and farm broadcasting have long been an exception. In fact, in the United States the first significant use of radio communications, aside from early ship-to-shore communications, was in rural and farm areas.

The first radio operators in the country were amateurs, known as *ham radio operators* or simply *hams*, experimenting with the new invention. There were over a thousand of them by 1912, many of them using radio to bridge the distances between their rural or farm homes to others in similar situations or to hams in towns and cities. Universities were the focal points for the development of radio in the United States during and following the end of World War I. Engineering, physics, and other science and technical departments in a number of universities introduced courses covering the new phenomenon of wireless communications. As with any new scientific development, it was important that students learn not only how it worked, but also how to use it. Going from theory to application, universities set up laboratories so students could put the scientific principles they had learned into practice. Realising that it was not enough just to send out signals at random, many of these labs became radio stations.

Universities in the Midwest, the heart of America's farmland, were among those that decided to use their facilities to offer a public service, choosing to focus their efforts on geographically isolated rural and farm areas, where at that time it might literally take days to travel over rough, unpaved roads to a city or town to get the latest news. These university-based stations began providing life-saving information to farms: weather bulletins from the U.S. Weather Bureau; soil and air information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture; market reports on livestock, crops and other farm products; prices of grain, feed, machinery, and other farm needs from dealers in distribution centres; warnings about floods, tornadoes, drought, and storms; news about any events that affected farmers; even appeals for help in a crisis or disaster. In other words, radio provided information that farmers needed but were otherwise unable to obtain without long delays such as waiting for it to arrive via mail or through lengthy personal travel.

Some of the universities, especially the “land grant” colleges that had been chartered for the purpose of serving rural areas and which had extensive agriculture departments, offered distance education courses over the radio to people who were too far away from a school or university to attend in person. These courses were mainly in the fields of agriculture and home economics, covering subjects and skills necessary for the efficient running of a farm, both in the fields and in the house. It is noteworthy that the critical and necessary role of women in running farms was recognised in the courses offered – not only acknowledging the home economics aspect of the work women did, but as well their increasing field and management work. In fact, during hard economic times when many men took on non-farm city jobs in order to keep the farms going, and during World War II, when many men were in the military, women ran the farms either principally or completely. Then, as in many developing countries and in nations with vast land expanses in the world today, these were much-needed and appreciated “Schools of the Air.”

Commercial radio also recognised the importance of the new medium for rural residents. A 1916 memorandum attributed to David Sarnoff, later to become the most powerful broadcasting executive in the United States as head of the RCA and NBC networks, called for the development of a “radio music box”, placed on a table in the parlour or living room” which could provide lectures and events of national importance that “can be simultaneously announced and received.” Sarnoff concluded the memo with the words, “this proposition would be especially interesting to farmers and others living in outlying districts.” And indeed, that is what happened with the new medium.

In the early 1920s, as radio in the United States began to expand, many stations went on the air for the purpose of serving isolated people in farm and rural areas. In 1921 there was one radio receiver for every 500 households in the United States. Only five years later, in 1926, there was one for every six households. One major problem for the expansion of radio in rural areas will be familiar to people working with radio in many developing nations of the world today – in the 1920s only about half of the farm and rural population in the United States had electricity, and batteries were expensive. Nevertheless, within a few years a radio receiver was a necessity for farm and rural populations in the United States. When economic depression and drought hit simultaneously in the 1930s – resulting in the loss of thousands of farms and millions of acres of farmland, radio was the principal link to the world for poor people in rural areas and on farms. Most people were willing to sell their beds, iceboxes and other household necessities before they would give up their radio sets.

Farm radio programs were popular, important and influential. One in particular, the weekly *Farm and Home Hour* on the NBC network, was a favourite for decades, even in cities. It combined entertainment with information and was carried on commercial radio stations across the country, not only serving rural listeners but also making money for its sponsors and for the NBC network. There were many similar regional and local programmes on radio throughout the country. Even today, there are more than 100 agricultural radio stations still on the air in the United States, providing programming to farm and rural listeners. Several hundred more devote at least some time every day to farm topics, often in the form of franchised programmes supplied by independent production companies.

Over the years the use of radio to serve rural and farm areas grew. Through the development of an extensive radio service in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, even the government got involved in producing programmes for broadcast on commercial and public stations.¹ Highly-qualified writers and reporters were recruited to prepare and air materials

¹ Under U.S. law, the government is not permitted to own or operate domestic radio stations, a law intended to prevent the medium from being used as a propaganda vehicle by the government or party in power. As a result, in the United States the government relies on private commercial radio stations or “public” stations belonging to foundations, universities or community groups, to provide air time for the programs it produces.

The One to Watch – Radio, New ICTs and Interactivity

with the help of agricultural experts and, as time went on, many of the writers and reporters themselves became well-versed in farm and rural needs and solutions.

One of the pioneers in the field, working for radio stations that emphasised agricultural programming, was Lane Beaty, who later became chief of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's media office. In a book on the history of American radio and television, Beaty described some of the services provided farmers through radio:

It may be coincidence that the first use of "broadcast" was agricultural, referring to the sowing of seeds. It is nonetheless fitting because in the early days of radio when rural people lived in varying degrees of isolation, radio became a link to the outside world and a live-in companion for farmers and their families. Those first two radio stations, KDKA, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and WHA, Madison, Wisconsin, emphasised such services. Stations justified the use of their assigned frequencies and power by their broadcasts of market prices, updated weather forecasts, information on better farming practices, government regulations, and commercials adapted for far flung rural listeners. In my long career, those years spent broadcasting agricultural programs were undoubtedly the most rewarding in terms of public acceptance. My listeners included not only country folk but urban professionals as well, and one network program (the old NBC "Farm and Home Hour") drew mail regularly from the Wall Street area. On the air, I tried to be warm and friendly with some natural humour, not contrived, too corny or suggestive—no inside jokes. I made as many personal appearances as possible, and this helped build goodwill for the station. Entertainment (music, etc.) and long features, early staples on farm programs before good roads and television, have disappeared, making way for shorter, more concise reports aimed at helping farmers and ranchers (and sponsors) turn a profit.²

Indicative of the kinds of services provided for farmers by radio was a trip Beaty took to Mexico in 1947 when he was farm editor of a radio station in Fort Worth, Texas. Foot and mouth disease had broken out in Mexico and was being combated by killing and burying thousands of heads of cattle in a quarantined area in the central part of that country. Because of the danger to U.S. livestock and the concomitant economic effects on farms and ranches, American farmers were concerned and the United States government was cooperating with Mexico in trying to halt the outbreak. Lane Beaty went to Mexico with the then-new wire recorder³ to interview key government, veterinary, and farmers. His reports were gratefully listened to by Texas cattle ranchers.

In the 1970s, Cesar Chavez, one of the great labour leaders of US history, turned his attention to rural and farm broadcasting as tool for organising farm labour. Migrant farm workers were virtual slaves, working under horrible, unhealthy and dangerous conditions. They had no medical assistance, filthy housing without facilities, no schooling for their children who also were forced to work in the fields, long, back-breaking hours in excessive heat or rain or cold, and they were charged exorbitant prices for food and other necessities they were forced to buy from the farm owners. They had no guarantees of work from one day to the next and entire families could work for months and, after paying the farm owner what they owed for food and necessities, find themselves penniless, with no food, no shelter and no job. In addition, whenever workers tried to organise, the farm owners would hire thugs to beat them and even kill them. Police and other authorities generally sided with the owners.

² Robert Hilliard and Michael Keith, *The Broadcast Century and Beyond: A Biography of American Broadcasting*, 2001.

³ An electro-magnetic recording device that recorded on spools of wire. The format was later replaced by the modern tape recorder.

It was under these conditions that Cesar Chavez, himself a migrant worker, established the United Farm Workers of America (UFW). This union not only successfully organised migrant farm workers, it also mastered modern public relations techniques to organise highly effective public campaigns that convinced many American consumers to boycott the products of some of the worst companies.

Radio was a natural area of interest for Chavez and the UFW and they used it effectively to fight for better lives for farm workers and their families. The union's activities in this area offer an example that may be useful in other countries where farm workers and other rural people want to use radio to better their conditions.

In the early 1980s⁴ the UFW applied for licences for non-commercial – or public, as differentiated from commercial – radio stations in California, where the union had its headquarters and where most of its members worked. Still fighting exploitation by the owners, Chavez thought that if he could get the owners to allow the field workers to carry a small portable radio with them, presumably to raise their morale and motivate them to work even more efficiently for the owners, he could use the stations for more specific union purposes. If he could establish instant communication with all of his members in the field through radio, he could call a strike at a moment's notice when there was a reason, such as an owner refusing to negotiate for decent wages and working conditions; or he could call a work stoppage or a protest when the workers took ill or were poisoned by the pesticides and the owners refused to give them medical help; or he could deploy the workers when the thugs the owners hired brutally beat or shot protesting workers, which was a frequent occurrence.

As the use of the stations was discussed, most of his advisers argued for programming designed to strengthen the workers' resolve and ability to push for union contracts with the reluctant owners – information and education programmes, discussions, speeches and so on. Chavez, to everyone's surprise, said he wanted entertainment, not education and information on the radio channel. He explained that people working hard in the fields wanted something to help them relax. They wanted entertainment programs. They did not want to listen to speeches. Entertainment, mainly music, would guarantee that they would keep the radios tuned in and then the union could be sure that when there was an important announcement, farm workers would be listening. The UFW-associated National Farm Workers Service Center now has seven radio stations in California, Arizona and Washington State and their practical approach to the use of radio is one that can inform situations all over the world.

In recent years many groups in Africa, especially NGOs, have taken to radio to help them organise, inform and educate their constituents, despite the geographic distances and obstacles. It is not surprising that many of these NGOs are women's groups, suffering similar kinds of discrimination and prejudices that farm and rural women did in the United States before their significant roles and rights were recognised. At a recent series of workshops in one country, we heard many comments from women and women's groups. They spoke of women's need for information about legal and economic rights; of their need to know where to obtain information and assistance on health and childcare; of their desperation in trying to learn what to do about AIDS when their husbands refused to use condoms and did not care about infecting their wives or future children; of their desire to find out about technologies that might make their lives a bit easier. They also spoke of their desire for better education and opportunities for their children and to learn about more efficient, easier and more profitable ways of raising and selling their crops and cattle. In essence, these are similar to the needs and desires of farm and rural people, including women, in the United States when radio first came into use. And, as happened in the United States, radio in Africa and elsewhere, is proving to be a key factor in beginning to solve some of these serious problems.

⁴ The author was Chief of the Public Broadcasting Branch of the Federal Communications Commission at the time.

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