

**IS AMERICAN RADIO DEMOCRATIC? A  
STUDY OF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM OF  
RADIO REGULATION, CONTROL, AND  
OPERATION AS RELATED TO THE  
DEMOCRATIC WAY OF LIFE WITH EMPHASIS  
UPON ITS EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS**

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# IS AMERICAN RADIO DEMOCRATIC?

*A study of the American system of radio regulation, control, and  
operation as related to the democratic way of life with  
emphasis upon its educational aspects*

BY  
S. E. FROST, JR.

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
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## PREFACE

THE radio transmitter, as a piece of material mechanism, is neutral where human values are concerned. As an instrument, a mechanical device, a product of modern scientific knowledge and inventive ingenuity, the radio is comparable to such other manifestations of human genius as the automobile, the electric light, the airplane, or the rotary press. It may be employed to serve the "higher" purposes of mankind and to enhance individual and collective welfare, as an instrument serving the democratic way of life, or to spread misinformation that excites passion, hatred, and fear. It may be enlisted for the enrichment of life and the conservation of that which man has found of most worth, or it may be directed toward the destruction of his finest and noblest.

The President of the United States, in his capacity of public servant, employs the radio as a means for discussing with his vast constituency problems of vital significance to every American citizen. Also, through its facilities the finest in entertainment, music, drama, and literature may be brought into the homes of the humblest and the farthest-away, enriching and refining the lives of millions. An instructor may use it to stimulate thinking and the desire for further investigation on the part of listeners everywhere.

On the other hand, the rabble-rouser may make use of the radio to excite blind passion and unconsidered action on the part of vast populations. The dictator may pour through the microphone his *ipse dixit* pronouncements for the ears of millions while denying them the right to listen to arguments that challenge his authority. The partisan instructor may use it to indoctrinate a vast listening "class," while economic groups may so control its functioning that propaganda suited to maintain their position of privilege and power is spread throughout the country in the guise of education or enlightenment.

As technical improvements are made in the instrument it will be possible to do all these things more efficiently. Television, facsimile broadcasting, and the use of the ultra-high frequencies,



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developments which are "just around the corner," will manifoldly increase the power of the radio.

Recognizing these facts, a great many individuals and groups desire to employ this instrument in ways that will assist in bringing about the realization of their particular purposes. Among such are those interested in making the radio serve as one of the means for insuring the democratic way of life. Within this group are to be found many professional educators functioning through organized educational institutions.

That radio is peculiarly an instrument for the educator should be obvious. The educator's purpose has been, among other things, to influence thinking and acting. In the radio he finds available a most efficient and powerful means for doing just this. His "class" is no longer limited to those few who can get into a lecture-room or auditorium, but may include millions seated in their homes or in public places throughout the world.

His obligation to consider the functioning of this instrument within present-day society should be equally obvious. Maurice T. Price, writing for *Progressive Education*, has called attention to the fact that

as the social philosophy of the schoolman tries to square educational policy and programs to the cultural epoch, to the social trends, to the threats of conflict, and to lags of the time, so the philosophy behind the cultural and educational progress of any given population and behind the contribution of radio to that progress must try to square broadcasting policy and programs to the special situation of each generation. New needs and new demands in society, unrest because of maladjustment, the obsolescence of ideals outdistanced by our actual development—these in numerous combinations must be sensed, estimated, and dealt with by those who are responsible for giving people a perspective of their problems and of the contributions of our best thinking toward the solution of these problems.<sup>1</sup>

The educator, as a teacher, should recognize the value of radio as an instrument for widening the scope of his teaching influence and should seek to develop techniques for doing such more effectively. As a philosopher of the process in which he is engaged, the educator should be concerned with the far more difficult problem of squaring radio policy and program practice

<sup>1</sup> "Weighing Radio by Educational and Social Standards," *Progressive Education*, January, 1936, pp. 44-45.

with the needs and demands of the society of his day and place in terms of what that society may become.

Necessity for the latter concern, not only on the part of the educator but on the part of everyone motivated by a desire for a more democratic social structure, becomes more obvious when it is recognized that

developments and inventions that are now going on and being made in the radio field will affect the mental life and education, and possibly the material interests, of every person in the country. Behind this development, fraught with so much importance to our people, a fierce struggle is going on for the control of the great resources of the air.

Private interests favoring private monopoly are naturally anxious that there be just as little government "interference" (regulation) as possible in what they call their business. Those who believe that we must not repeat the mistakes of the past and allow the wasteful exploitation of our resources are just as keenly aroused in behalf of the government taking a strong hand in protecting the public interest.

The indifference of the public to the importance of this struggle is lamentable. Fascinated by the wonders of radio and the astonishing developments in the entire field of communication, little attention has been given to the economic control of these new developments. Unless the public is aroused, its interests are apt to be neglected and lax administration is apt to creep in. In this way private monopoly, without warrant of law, establishes itself and, too late, the public bestirs itself to recover ground that never should have been lost.<sup>2</sup>

Cognizant, more or less, of this situation and of the potency of radio in relation to cultural levels, a growing number of individuals and groups are asking for some evaluation of this instrument in terms of the fundamental principles of democracy. They are desirous of knowing to what extent the present practices of radio regulation, control, and operation in the United States contribute to the democratic way of life. They are further interested in discovering what changes or revisions this system must undergo if the instrument is to serve more completely this ideal.

Basic to such an evaluation is a clear conception of the meaning of democracy.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from an address by George Henry Payne delivered before the Rotary Club of Bayshore, Long Island, August, 1936; see *NAB Reports*, IV, No. 42 (August 27, 1936), 1490.

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Societies, as Professor John Dewey has shown,<sup>3</sup> may be characterized by the number and variety of interests which are consciously shared by all members and the fulness and freedom of interplay which are possible between any one group and other groups. One society is more democratic than another to the degree that it evidences a greater number and variety of consciously shared interests and a more full and free interplay with other groups. As consciously shared interests are increased, greater reliance is placed upon mutual interests as factors in social control. Authority comes to rest not in the hands of particular individuals or groups so that it is imposed from without upon the members of a society, but becomes the authority of the interests of the whole group. Further, as interaction between social groups is freer, changes in social habits take place and the group is continually experiencing adjustments "through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse."

And, Professor Dewey maintains, "these two traits"—"greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control" and "change in social habit—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse"—"are precisely what characterize the democratically constituted society."<sup>4</sup>

A democratic society is one in which there is mutual intercourse of man with man and in which adequate provision is made for the reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests. Further, an institution may be said to contribute to such an ideal to the degree that it makes possible this "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."

The radio, an institution of modern society, functions as a contributing factor for the democratic way of life to the degree that it is regulated, controlled, and operated so that all listeners are guaranteed broad, wide, varied, and rich shared contacts with others and with their physical environment, open-mindedness, and increased flexibility of thought and action.

<sup>3</sup> *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1923), pp. 95 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.