

Learning to Listen: Developing the Canadian Radio Audience in the 1930s

Anne F. MacLennan
York University, Toronto, Canada

The imagined community of Canadian radio fans emerged quickly. In a country with a small and scattered population, radio had an unparalleled appeal. Both Canadian and American radio stations were received by large concentrations of listeners closest to the border. The commercial programs rapidly available to listeners through American network radio were but one sign of radio's popularity. Programs such as Pepsodent's *Amos 'n' Andy* were reputedly had such a strong hold on their fans that toilets stopped flushing for the fifteen minutes at seven in the evening when it could be heard over the airwaves. The experience in Canada was not as consistent, due to the slow development of Canadian network radio, region by region.

Fans demonstrated their early devotion to the broadcasts of local entertainment as well as distant programs. Early DXers kept maps in their homes documenting all the locations from which they received postcards confirming their own letters noting the call letters and timing of a song or program broadcast by a distant station. A lack of interference due to the limited number of broadcasts and clear atmospheric conditions rewarded the early hobbyists or fans with broadcasts of distant programs reportedly from other continents. The growth of radio and increasing interference ended the explorer phase of the fans' early activity.

As Canadian fans entered the 1930s, more stations, a greater variety of programming and a desire for entertainment expanded the fan base not just for specific programs as noted in the United States, but for the medium in general. While some local newspapers studiously avoided inclusion or even mention of their perceived competitor, others integrated a variety of radio columns, advertisements and listings into their daily pages and often became early owners and operators of radio stations across Canada. Columns provided tips on how to assemble radio receiving sets, what tubes were best and how to guarantee better reception. The merits of local and network programs were also extolled to listeners. Radio columns provided testimony to the participatory involvement of early listeners with their radios.

Canadian listeners made exceptional efforts to guarantee their ability to receive radio programs. A listener outside of Regina, Saskatchewan reported that even though the family was busy with chores on the farm during the growing season winter meant radio. Not only did confinement to the home encourage listening on cold Canadian winter nights but in this case the battery was removed from the tractor and connected to the radio to make listening possible.

Radio wafted out the open windows during the summer on city streets taunting and tempting those without radio according to some listeners. Live and local radio was especially valued by local columnists and the radio listeners who wrote letters to the

newspapers. Radios fan base extended from children listening to their nightly bedtime story to farmers who attentively awaited weather and grain reports.

Listening to early Canadian radio also included transgressions ranging from hiding radio receivers from inspectors to avoid payment of the annual license to the loyal audiences of foreign language programming, whose programming was curtailed during the Second World War. The patterns of the listening day, acceptable programming, regulation, licensing, and audience behavior all developed in the medium's first few decades. This research based on oral history interviews, newspaper sources and archival materials revealing the slow growth of a loyal radio fan base in Canada.

Anne MacLennan is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at York University and the York-Ryerson Joint Graduate Program in Communication & Culture. She is a media historian whose research focuses primarily on Canadian radio programming and audiences during the 1930s.