

## **“These Four Men”: NBC’s Alternative Propaganda Model**

Michael J. Socolow, University of Maine, Orono, USA.

On the evening of September 7, 1941, the National Broadcasting Company aired the first in a “series of living biographies,” designed to educate American listeners about “four world dominant figures” in “a world in agony.” (National Broadcasting Company, 1941, 3) The four programs, aired weekly, dramatized the lives of Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler, and Franklin Roosevelt. The series – titled “These Four Men” - is notable for its intentions, its production values, and, perhaps most importantly, its modeling of a specific radio propaganda format for United States.

When “These Four Men” aired, the United States was officially neutral and not yet a declared belligerent in the world crisis. Yet the broadcast’s production values and placement in a lucrative time slot (Sunday evenings at 7:00pm on the Red Network) attest to the belief, among network executives, that such a dramatic series possessed much political and regulatory utility. The series was far from neutral; in contrasting the heroic figures of Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt with the psychotically unstable Hitler, NBC’s political position on the global conflict closely echoed the Roosevelt administration’s stance. To further promote the political influence of the program, the network published the program’s scripts and distributed them to libraries throughout America.

Despite such promotion and the enormous audience interest in war programming, the series attracted minimal contemporaneous press attention, and it has generally been ignored in the scholarship of American radio propaganda. (Horten, 2002; Socolow, 2007; Sweeney, 2001). Other dramatic war-themed programs aired in this period – such as “This Is War!” and “The Fall of the City” – have attracted far more attention. (Lenthall, 2007, pp.181-193; Spiller, 2004).

This paper offers a close reading of the four scripts of “These Four Men.” In doing so, it places the dramas within the programmatic context of the contemporary network radio industry and the political and regulatory atmosphere in which that industry operated. “These Four Men,” is generally forgotten today, but its existence provides evidence that network executives considered its structure useful for propagandistic and pedagogical functions. The series is most remarkable as an example of a path not chosen; ultimately, America’s propaganda planners and network executives (often the same people) decided such isolated, dramatized war programming was less effective than other means of educating the American people by broadcasting.

Those methods included live (censored) news broadcasts from war-torn Europe and a more subtle integration of war messages within existing broadcast channels. No dramatic broadcast, a reviewer in the *New York Times* (Hutchens, 1941, p.10) noted, could compete with the intense, theatrical offerings heard daily via shortwave. “With the vibrant reality of the real Churchill ringing in one’s ears, it was difficult to be impressed by the imitation,” on “These Four Men,” he concluded. This central question – of whether the most effective propaganda would rely on broadcasting’s established realities or dramatic, theatrical, stylized representations of reality – was still undecided in the fall of 1941. Ultimately, the U.S. government and the networks elected to go with the former, but an analysis of the scripts for “These Four Men,” demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of the latter, alternative model. Such an analysis speaks not only to the state of radio drama in this transitional period, but to basic issues of broadcasting’s utility for information delivery and emotional motivation.

To some extent, “These Four Men,” represents a synthesis between the realism of rooftop broadcasts from the London blitz and the intense, anxiety-creating radio dramas that flooded the American airwaves in the late 1930s. (Miller, 2003) While this hybridization could be considered a weakness – the programs sounded like such dated news-entertainment hybrids as “The March of Time!” – the program’s genre should not obscure its value as a conveyance of information on the global conflict. For example: the following comes from the conclusion of the Adolf Hitler profile, aired on September 21, 1941:

NARRATOR: The house painter had become a god – and in that book he had dedicated to Rudolf Hess – he had given the world fair warning of what he would do when he had become a god.

(Screams)

TROOPER: (Spits it out) Jüden!

(Lash of whip)

(Wails, etc. – Fade for)

(Music. . . . In heavy Jewish theme – takes up whip and wails, continue for ten seconds, then fade for)

NARRATOR: The fury that lashed the Jews in Germany went on to strike and envelope the whole of Europe. (National Broadcasting Company, 1941, pp.51-2)

The National Broadcasting Company has been criticized for its neutrality in presenting Nazi atrocities both before and during the war, yet this scene – airing on the number one network in the United States, at an hour with a large audience – demonstrates that the plight of European Jewry was not entirely absent from the American airwaves. (Obler, 1942, p.239; Weinstein, 2007)

But to only evaluate “These Four Men,” from a pedagogical standpoint obscures the craftsmanship of the scriptwriting. The scripts are well-written and rely on a variety of dramatic techniques to impress the listeners. However, the thirty-minute length of the programs forced them to exploit stereotypes in order to quickly establish characters and move the narration along. Hitler, for instance, is feminized as a shrill hysteric, shown crying upon hearing of the defeat of Germany in the First World War. Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt, in contrast, are notable for their stoicism in the face of defeat.

This paper will conclude by showing how “These Four Men” has much to tell us about the state of American radio in the fall of 1941. This was a period notable for the regulatory activism of the Federal Communications Commission, and thus, it should be no surprise that the Roosevelt administration’s political agenda began appearing on the network airwaves more prominently. “These Four Men,” thus served an important regulatory and political function, by preparing the American people for the war deemed inevitable by the Roosevelt administration. But to dismiss the program as simply a political vehicle ignores the interesting and innovative model it represented for integrating the genres of broadcast journalism and radio drama for propaganda purposes.

**Michael J. Socolow** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of Maine. His research examines political, regulatory, and social aspects of network operation in the first two decades of chain broadcasting in the United States.