

# **From A Voice in the Night to A Face in the Crowd: The Rise and Fall of the Radio Film**

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It is no mere coincidence that Hollywood's conversion to sound coincided with the development of radio as a major force for both information and entertainment. The technology to combine sound with image had been available almost from the beginning of the development of the motion picture, with some sources even suggesting that Edison intended the motion picture to serve as an adjunct to his phonograph, and experiments with synchronized sound films dating back to the early 1900s. But it was the rise of radio that undoubtedly was a significant factor in instigating the full-scale conversion of the motion picture industry to sound.

At least one major Hollywood studio even owed its existence in part to radio, RKO, which was created by Radio Corporation of America head David Sarnoff to promote the Photophone sound process. Thomas W. Bohn, in *Light and Shadows: A History of Motion Pictures*, cites a 1927 Variety headline that proclaimed "Radio Aces Hurt Theatres" over an article dealing with the impact of radio on movie going in Minneapolis. As Bohn observes, "for the first time in its young history motion pictures felt the direct force of competition from another mass medium."

That radio provided not only a source of competition but also a potential form of promotion for the motion picture industry led to an often uneasy alliance between the two media, and, as with the newspaper profession, Hollywood demonstrated a love-hate relationship in its depiction of radio and its practitioners.

Although the screen journalist had been developed during the silent era, the addition of sound firmly established the character of the fast-talking, wise-cracking reporter, and the new technology made the inclusion of radio broadcasters to the genre inevitable. Most of the early depictions of radio broadcasters drew almost exclusively on the Walter Winchell mode, with such films as *Blessed Event*, *Is My Face Red?*, *Okay America*, and *Take the Stand* offering thinly disguised versions of the rapid-fire raconteur. Although the broadcasters in these films ostensibly were the protagonists, they also were attacked by others in the films for their ruthless tactics, and by the end of the film either reformed or were eliminated (or in some cases eliminated even after their reformation). Even the likable comedian, Jack Benny, adopted the Winchell model for *Broadway Melody of 1936*, opening his broadcasts with "Good evening, you little scandal lovers" and being told by his boss that he won't be making good until everyone in town hates him, although Benny also tries to justify his tactics by claiming that people aren't likely to do anything wrong out of fear that he'll print it, so that makes him a reformer of sorts.

Indicative of Hollywood's love-hate attitude toward the radio broadcaster is the depiction of the title character in the 1936 film *Here Comes Carter*, a public relations man for a film studio who takes over as a radio commentator and soon develops the policy that the stars he attacks are puppets rather than people and "When I antagonize 'em they stay antagonized." Although Carter is chastised by his girlfriend for his ruthless methods, his soft spot is shown when he secretly arranges a singing audition for her. Despite the attacks on his tactics, Carter ultimately is able to expose a gang of crooks and apologizes on the air to all of the honest people in Hollywood, presumably a concession from the industry not to bite too heavily the hand that fed it.

Variety summed up the ambiguous image of the screen broadcaster in its review of *Okay, America*, noting "under Hollywood influence...the Winchell type of columnist is a hybrid, at times a cross between a Rover Boy and Deadshot Dick who always gets his man or, when the situation warrants, a rascal who stops at nothing to tear reputations to shreds," a description that might have applied equally to the depictions of newspaper reporters at the time.

While these early broadcasters usually did double duty as newspaper columnists, many films of the 1930s placed radio reporters in opposition to their print media brethren. Even the columnist/broadcaster of *Okay America* is taken to task by his boss at the newspaper for spreading scandal and not upholding the integrity of the paper. Typical of the animosity between print and broadcast reporters is the 1937 film *Behind the Headlines*, in which the rivalry between radio man Eddie Haines (Lee Tracy) and newspaperwoman Mary Bradley (Diana Gibson) is both professional and personal. Although Haines insists that "Radio and newspapers have always worked side by side to get the news to the public. We don't really compete with 'em," the contempt the print reporters feel for him is evident in the opening scene as Bradley and her colleagues join forces to strip Haines of his microphone while covering a meeting at the D.A.'s office, unaware that Haines has anticipated the move and already has a second microphone concealed in the office. The newspapers eventually find a more direct way to force Haines off the air by threatening to stop running ads for radio programs unless he is fired, but the two media have to join forces to rescue Bradley when she is kidnapped by thieves plotting to steal a gold shipment and broadcasts their position using a portable transmitter she stole from Haines earlier.

Within a few years the increasing ownership of radio stations by newspaper conglomerates was making the conflict between print and broadcast media irrelevant. In the 1939 film *Sued for Libel*, for example, the radio station for which the hero works is owned by a local newspaper and runs dramatizations of its news stories, apparently having no ethical concerns over this blurring of the distinction between straight news reporting and recreations. Although an element of professional rivalry surfaces early in the film when a female reporter for another paper gives the hero the wrong verdict in a trial, which he proceeds to broadcast, the two journalists eventually join forces to trap a killer.

This new spirit of cooperation across media is to some degree a reflection of Hollywood's own growing alliance with radio, as it began to recognize the medium's potential as a source of both promotion and personnel. In addition to personalities making the transition from the golden mike to the silver screen and popular radio programs being adapted for feature films, radio provided studios with an opportunity to present short dramatizations of current films that would build up audience interest. Even the much caricatured Winchell was cashing in on his established image by the mid 1930s and appearing as himself in films.

Yet, the increasing corporate ownership of broadcast media also became a concern for Hollywood, and their strongest indictments of radio were aimed not at individual broadcasters but at station and network owners. As early as 1931, the film *Scareheads* presented an image of a corrupt radio station owner who is exposed by the use of a concealed microphone broadcasting his conversation with a crooked politician. The ambivalence felt toward the competing medium is demonstrated in the 1936 Warner Brothers production *Two Against the World* (a.k.a. *One Fatal Hour*), which transposed the newspaper setting from *Five Star Final* rather effortlessly to a radio station. The villain of the film is not station manager Sherry Scott (Humphrey Bogart), but owner Bertram Reynolds (Robert Middlemas), who describes his organization as "a great impersonal machine" and shows no remorse over the tragedy caused by his resurrection and exploitation of a twenty-year-old scandal. Some sense of balance is achieved in the film, however, not only by having Scott become the voice of conscience at the end of the film, but also by showing the Association of Broadcasters condemning Reynolds and other so-called "bootleg broadcasters" as "a real menace to honest broadcasting and acknowledging the power of the FCC to control such activities.

Perhaps the most negative portrayal of a media baron is provided by the character of D. B. Norton (Edward Arnold) in Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* (1940). Norton is introduced in a scene showing him commanding his motorcycle troops that is clearly designed to suggest Hitler and his S.S. corps and he uses his media outlets to manipulate the masses to achieve his own political ambitions. Capra's film again sends a mixed message about the medium, presenting radio as a potentially positive force in uniting people for positive social changes, but also as a dangerous tool when ownership of the airwaves is concentrated in the hands of only a few individuals.

Norton's use of radio to distort and manipulate indicates Hollywood's distrust of the media and the potential it has to be abused. Long before Orson Welles' famous Invasion from Mars broadcast demonstrated the enormous persuasive potential of broadcast media to mislead the public, the film industry already was calling into question the truthfulness of what was being presented over the airwaves. In the early radio films this usually was done for comedic purposes, such as Lee Tracy in *Blessed Event* adopting a fake accent while interviewing a member of the Spanish Army, the presentation of a radio star billed as "the Purity Girl" who in real life is anything but in *Professional Sweetheart*, or broadcaster Ronald Reagan (whose boss has told him, either ironically or prophetically, depending on your point of view, not to get involved with politics) in *Love is on the Air* putting a pencil in his mouth to distort his voice so he can serve as his own announcer.

But these concerns became more serious in later films, particularly during World War II, when distorting of news and information over the airwaves became an issue of national security (as evidenced by *Stand By All Networks*, in which foreign agents air a false broadcast using the hero's voice after Pearl Harbor to try to persuade American citizens to distrust their government).

With the advent of World War II, Hollywood presented a more positive image of radio, in keeping with its role as morale booster. Broadcasting was seen as performing a vital role in keeping citizens informed, and the enemies were no longer scandal-seeking commentators and megalomaniacal media barons, but foreign agents who sought to censor American journalists or broadcast false propaganda. Even before the U.S. entered the war this new heroism emerged in the climax of Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent*, in which the protagonist foregoes his newspaper work to take to the airwaves as the bombs are falling on London and makes an impassioned plea for America to join in the conflict. Within a few years, he would be joined by the heroes and/or heroines of such works as *Berlin Correspondent*, *Foreign Agent*, *Stand By All Networks* and *Little Tokyo, U.S.A.*

The figure of the heroic radio broadcaster largely disappeared from the screen following the war, although occasional attempts were made to carry the image over to the Cold War, as in *Assignment Paris* (1952) in which broadcaster Jimmy Race (Dana Andrews) is able to get messages out of Communist Hungary by coding them as seemingly innocuous phrases. In another acknowledgement of the dangers of being able to manipulate the medium, though, he is captured and his words re-edited for a broadcast that makes it sound as though he is confessing to being a government spy. Such roles were rare, however, as radio reporters were replaced by representatives of a more current threat to the film industry, television.

Concerns over the potential for manipulation of radio and the dangers of corporate ownership resurface in two of the last films to provide a serious consideration of the medium. In *The Great Man* (1956), reporter Joe Harris (Jose Ferrer) tries to maintain his integrity while preparing a tribute to a popular radio comedian who has died, despite the desire of upper management to present a whitewashed image of the deceased. Manipulation of the media becomes an issue throughout the film, as Harris discovers that the Great Man of the title faked one of his most famous broadcasts involving an alleged live remote from the front during the war, and Harris himself later re-edits the rather indifferent interviews he got from visitors at the dead man's memorial service to make them sound like heartfelt tributes. The film was followed the next year by *A Face in the Crowd*, which is also the title used by reporter Marcia Jeffries (Patricia Neal) for her radio show. One of the faces she finds is the seemingly folksy and benign, Lonesome Rhodes (Andy Griffith) but as his popularity as a radio personality increases so do his ambitions, particularly once he begins to realize the power the medium allows him to exert over his audience. As if to signal the end of the era of radio films, Rhodes finds his greatest power when he makes the transition to television, and it becomes evident that the dangers Hollywood identified in the earlier medium will become even more pronounced in this new industry.

By the end of the 1950s, the radio reporter had all but disappeared as a popular film character, to be replaced by his television counterparts. As it had with radio, the film industry initially regarded the new medium as a source of competition but soon began to realize its potential as an additional source of revenue for the studios.

More recently, Hollywood responded to the rise of the computer by first stigmatizing the technology as evil, in films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Colossus*, *Demon Seed* and the later *Electric Dreams*, but has come to recognize its potential both for promotion and profit (though they have yet to produce an image of the Internet journalist that has the lasting impact of its portrayals of reporters in earlier print and broadcast media). Such patterns suggest that while the technologies may change, Hollywood's response to them remains the same.