

The zen of listening

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



Douglas, Susan. (2004). The Zen of Listening, in Listening in : Radio and the American Imagination (22-39). Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Abstract Radio is examined here as a shaper of generational identities, as a uniting force for the creation of "imagined communities" or nations, and as a nostalgic device with associational links in our past. In addition, it is portrayed as a powerful aural gadget that stimulates us cognitively not only through our imagination; our creation of images or ideas based on listening, but also through music, which engages us emotionally.

Further discussed is a comprehensive history of radio in America and its contrasting relationship with newspapers and literacy, and television and its visual component. This contrast, and the existence of the radio and the ways we listen have important temporally bound characteristics that are important in understanding times, the medium itself and our relationship with it as it becomes engrained or interwoven into our everyday lives.

The text examines the social implications and reasons for being of radio and refers to various scholars who have examined the form and its effects of this revolutionary device which unites listeners through simultaneity of listening and the physical responses listening engenders. Through the physiological, social, cultural, and technological spheres of this medium, it is obvious that it is much more complex than commonly believed, and the text brings to light the ramifications of its introduction into a literary, visual culture, creating a hybrid America : a conservative, literate society entwined with a traditional, preliterate. ral culture. Word Count : 230 Keywords : nostalgia, radio, imagined community, modes of listening, music, ritual Response "With radio, the interior "I" began oscillating with the voices of those never met, never

even seen (31). " The permeating qualities of the "voices of radio" in the minds of listeners is an issue, in my opinion, that clearly implicates radio as a persuasion tool, which is an element of the medium that appears to be neglected in the text.

This neglect to fully examine the implications of the medium and the various elements that are quintessential to the formation of a complete and comprehensive understanding of the workings and complexities of radio presents a rudimentary portrait of the form which should definitely be corrected. I argue that Susan Douglas presents an incomplete account of the rise of radio in her idealization of the medium and that, like the listener who is "inclined to remember [radio] at its best", she fails to examine the intention of radio messages and focuses more on the experience of listening to the radio (Douglas, 2004, p. 5). Firstly, with a basis on the above sentence, she idealizes the form and effects of radio by overlooking or barely touching on the idea of the commercial hand that plays a rather large role in the medium, and affects the intentions and motives of the speakers and the content they disclose. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of these voices is cause for concern for listeners as they are prey to subtle influence from these "familiar voices" who infiltrate themselves into the very thoughts of individuals.

Susan Douglas' article addresses many ideas that revolve around radio, but does not seem to pay much attention to the commercialization of the medium despite her mentioning that "by the 1930's, with the highly commercialized network system in place, a great majority of these voices—which sought to sound familiar, intimate, and even folksy—represented a

centralized consumer-culture (Douglas, 2004, p. 31). ' Beyond the idealized concept of the "imagined community" and the positive unity it creates among the listeners, the commercial hand in the medium of radio implies a certain intention in the scale of the medium; one that seeks numbers. Douglas does mention that in an effort to maximize profits, the network and advertisers aimed for the largest possible audience, promoting the medium of radio as a "nation-building technology" (Douglas, 2004, p. 24). ' This emphasis, however, on the maximization of profits casts doubt on the integrity and the intention of radio. The oscillating voices of "those never met, never even seen" which interact with the inner voice of the listener are tainted by an underlying struggle between social consolidation and betterment, and commercialism. This leads to the need to examine content and intention in radio, and to the need for a critical assessment of this revolutionary device.

Secondly, these voices which penetrated our minds, spoken by unknown radio personalities, did more than allow us to free our imagination. In effect, these voices which now interacted with the inner voice of the individual could become subtle influences of our ideas, and beliefs without our even knowing. This danger, which I greatly believe is applicable in this mass medium, especially when taking into consideration the novelty of the device in the 1930's, could leave listeners unguarded against potential manipulation or influence.

The idea that the voices of the radio speakers have a certain familiar or intimate quality illustrates this desire to identify with the listener, which leaves that latter to fend for himself in the identification of the veracity of

messages, and in the intention of the speaker who is trained to please an audience. The various personalities that would speak to the nation through radio—the "politically powerful and the rich, [... ministers, educators, [...] comedians, singers and actors"—could have various intentions in their speeches; they could seek to sway auditors to favor certain ideologies, to act in certain ways, or could misdirect or misinform listeners (Douglas, 2004, p31). Furthermore, the ability for radio to adjust to various circumstances of listening makes it even more alarming as it becomes the background music of our daily lives, making these voices that much more likely to become a part of our interior dialogue (Douglas, 2004).

In conclusion, as mass media of various sorts—newspapers, television and radio—become national, and all-encompassing, the need for critical analysis of every aspect of each medium becomes necessary to understand the limitations of each, and their intentions. Since there are many underlying motives to every medium, especially commercial or political ones, and since mass media have developed into such huge social entities with powerful influence, it is important to think by ourselves, without the implication of unknown others in our reasoning; to question why we believe certain things, and how we came to so as to remain individuals in the mass, and to be able to ward off unwanted influences which may find their way into our subconscious. Word Count : 782