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# “What These People Need Is Radio”

New Technology, the Press, and Otherness  
in 1920s America

**RANDALL PATNODE**

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“The people of these towns are out of touch with the rest of the world and their chief conversation is gossip. . . . [W]hen winter comes life means being shut in by the cold and snow. After supper is over the next three hours are dreaded ones. There is nothing to do but read the well-thumbed books and magazines or play a little stale phonograph music. Mother has exhausted her wits thinking of some entertainment that would induce the neighbors to face the cold and spend a sociable evening around the fireplace.” In the 1920s it was not uncommon to see in the daily newspaper this sort of portrait of rural America. Often the point was not to disparage rural life—although it certainly did that—but to praise and promote a new technology, one that promised to do away with such dreariness. The journalistic heralds of the new technology diagnosed the farm’s illness and prescribed the remedy: “What these people need is radio.”<sup>1</sup>

The periodical press of the 1920s attempted to promote the value of radio for all Americans in part by focusing on how it was adopted by farmers, the group that could potentially benefit most from the new technology. Isolated from the urban centers and cut off from such urban-based entertainment as theaters and music halls, farmers were depicted by the popular press as ideally positioned to profit from what radio did best: bridge large distances and provide an abundance of information and amusement. In focusing on radio’s potential to redeem rural America, press accounts exaggerated the shortcomings of farm life, casting the farmer as an antimodern “other” and indirectly lending support to an increasingly urban and modern way of life.

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1. “Radio’s Value to Farm Is Shown,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, 2 September 1923, sec. 2.

The concept of “the other” has been used to explore the positioning of women, people of color, and non-Western cultures, but few have used it to describe the rhetorical marginalization of once dominant groups.<sup>2</sup> In the eighteenth century American farmers were held in such high esteem as to be called by Thomas Jefferson the “chosen people of God.” But by the 1920s, for reasons that are numerous and beyond the scope of this article, the American farmer had gone, in the words of rural historian David Danbom, from “paragon to problem.”<sup>3</sup> No other cultural or social group was identified, isolated, and marginalized by the discourse about radio to the degree that farmers were.<sup>4</sup> Four factors account for this. One, as part of the Country Life Movement, reformers in the cities (and in the country, to a lesser degree) labeled farmers as a group sorely in need of help, and radio seemed to offer many solutions to their problems.<sup>5</sup> Two, farmers were an

2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1976); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1994); Russell Ferguson et al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization in Contemporary Cultures* (New York, 1990). Traditionally, historians have explored the conflicts between urban and rural America in terms of prohibition, immigration, population shifts, economics, and politics. See William Edward Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914–1932*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1993); James H. Shideler, “Flappers and Philosophers, and Farmers: Rural-Urban Tensions in the Twenties,” *Agricultural History* 47 (1973): 283–99; Charles W. Eagles, “Urban-Rural Conflict in the 1920s: A Historiographical Assessment,” *Historian* 49 (1986): 26–48; Don S. Kirschner, *City and Country: Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920s* (Westport, Conn., 1970); Paul Johnstone, “Old Ideals Versus New Ideas,” *Yearbook of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., 1940).

3. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787; Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995); David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, 1995), 175.

4. The next most prominent group singled out by radio discourse was probably women. However, women’s magazines carried little news about radio and were not as clearly defined a market as were farmers. See Louis Carlat, “‘A Cleanser for the Mind’: Marketing Radio Receivers for the American Home, 1922–1932,” in *His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Technology*, ed. Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun (Charlottesville, Va., 1998), 115–37. Typically, women were not targeted as buyers in radio receiver advertising, but instead were used to demonstrate the technology’s ease of use. See Richard Butsch, “Crystal Sets and Scarf-Pin Radios: Gender, Technology and the Construction of American Radio Listening in the 1920s,” *Media, Culture and Society* 20, no. 4 (1998): 557–72.

5. Prior to World War I progressive reformers began taking notice of the deficiencies of farm life that were leading farm youth to the cities in alarming numbers. Underlying the reformers’ scrutiny was the concern that continued migration from farm to city would jeopardize the country’s ability to feed itself. At the behest of President Theodore Roosevelt, the Commission on Country Life set out to ascertain the problems of American farmers and offer some solutions. The commission’s report, issued in 1909, pinpointed problems in agricultural methods, country schools, rural churches, and farm organizations. The report fed a continuing desire on the part of so-called uplifters to improve the lot of farmers, and a general sense that farmers needed to be more like city folk; among its results was the establishment of agricultural extension programs. For more on the Country Life Movement, see David B. Danbom and William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900–1920* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1974). For the text of the 1909 report, see *Report of the Commission on Country Life* (New York, 1911; reprint, New York, 1975).

easy group to identify based on their location, economic status, and lifestyle. Three, farmers represented a huge untapped retail market for radio manufacturers. By 1925, about 10 percent of U.S. households owned radios, while farm households lagged behind at about 4.5 percent.<sup>6</sup> Radio manufacturers and their advertising agents could envision farmers as a relatively homogenous market (even though they were not), which made the creation of marketing materials that much easier. Finally, the farm represented the antipode of the increasingly urban and modern experience of the early twentieth century, and the discourse managers—writers, editors, and advertising copywriters—offered the antimodern farm as a rationalization for adopting the often unfamiliar and perhaps unsettling trappings of modernism.

This line of inquiry differs from recent scholarship that focuses on how farmers actually used their radios, including the kinds of programs they listened to and the ways in which they resisted conventional or prescribed uses.<sup>7</sup> A great many Americans, especially those in the cities, were familiar

6. Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* (Belmont, Calif., 1990), 656; Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1925* (Washington, D.C., 1926). The percentage of farm households owning radios may have been higher; the *New York Times* in 1925 reported that about five hundred thousand farm homes had radios. With a total number of farms in 1925 of 6.3 million, that would translate into an adoption rate of about 8 percent. See "Survey Reveals Radio Sets on Farms Now Total 553,000," *New York Times*, 13 December 1925, sec. 10.

7. For a broader perspective on rural adoption of consumer technology, see Ronald Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore, 2000), 113–27. For women's uses of radio and programming aimed at women, see Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993), 55–62. On how farmers used radio to support the family unit, see Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900–1940* (Baltimore, 1995), 55–62. On the importance of barn-dance music to farmers and its influence on national music programming, see Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Radio, 1920–1934* (Washington, D.C., 1994), 23–26. On the significance of the live music era in the Midwest, see Steven J. Smethers and Lee B. Jolliffe, "Singing and Selling Seeds: The Live Music Era on Rural Midwestern Stations," *Journalism History* 26 (2000): 61–70. On the importance of Midwestern homemaking programs, see Steven J. Smethers and Lee B. Jolliffe, "Homemaking Programs: The Recipe for Reaching Women Listeners on the Midwest's Local Radio," *Journalism History* 24 (1998): 138–47. For the role of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in promoting farm radio adoption, see Steve Craig, "'The Farmer's Friend': Radio Comes to Rural America, 1920–1927," *Journal of Radio Studies* 8 (2001): 330–46. Also on the structural development of rural broadcasting, see John Chester Baker, *Farm Broadcasting: The First Sixty Years* (Ames, Iowa, 1981).

For broader studies on the social construction of radio, see two works by Susan Douglas: *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922* (Baltimore, 1987); and *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York, 1999). See also Elaine J. Prostack, "'Up in the Air': The Debate over Radio Use during the 1920s" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas,

with the rural response to radio in the early years only as it was portrayed in the popular press. These more recent accounts often differ sharply from that widely circulated media construction of the farmer and radio and point to the hegemonic influence of the press in the promotion and adoption of consumer technologies and the spread of modernist thinking. Broadly speaking, the identification of “the other” by the press is central to the diffusion, acceptance, and social construction of new consumer technologies. In “othering” the farmer (or potentially any consumer group), the press made the embrace of technology by everyone else appear more natural and inevitable. Even though discourse focused on the farmer, it implied a great deal for the city dweller: “But for radio, I would be as lonely and out of touch as the farmer.”

Recent scholarship has also pointed out that the farm press of this period frequently offered oppositional discourse to that of reformers interested in modernizing the farm.<sup>8</sup> However, when it came to radio, the farm journals provided relatively little resistance to the “othering” discourse and, in fact, reinforced notions of farmers as lonely, desperate, and victims of geography. This paradox is explained by the hegemonic effect of the news. The undeclared standards implied by marginalizing a particular group both perpetuate the interests of the dominant group and are internalized by those who are “othered.”<sup>9</sup> With few exceptions, the farm press adopted the dominant norms and cast farmers as a group in need of redemption by radio. Traditionally, the press has identified news as events that deviate from the norm (“man bites dog”), and by labeling some acts and groups as deviant, the popular press reinforced and validated the actions of normative groups and relegated the activities of nonnormative groups to states of otherness.<sup>10</sup>

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1983). Early research on radio accepted the utopian rhetoric at face value. For examples, see Clayton R. Koppes, “The Social Destiny of the Radio: Hope and Disillusionment in the 1920s,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 68 (1969): 363–76, and Reynold Wik, “The Radio in Rural America during the 1920s,” *Agricultural History* 55 (1981): 339–50. Deeper analyses of early radio rhetoric include Mary S. Mander, “Utopian Dimensions in the Public Debate on Broadcasting in the Twenties,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 12 (1988): 71–88; William Boddy, “The Rhetoric and the Economic Roots of the American Broadcasting Industry,” *Cine-Tracts* 2 (1979): 37–54; Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982); Catherine L. Covert, “‘We May Hear Too Much’: American Sensibility and the Response to Radio, 1919–1924,” in *Mass Media Between the Wars*, ed. Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens (Syracuse, N.Y., 1984).

8. Kline, Jellison, and Neth all describe how the farm press offered some resistance to these reforms.

9. Russell Ferguson, “Introduction: The Invisible Center,” in Ferguson et al. (n. 2 above); T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 567–93, and *No Place of Grace: Anti-modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York, 1981).

10. Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* (White Plains, N.Y., 1996).

"Othering" is an ongoing part of defining what makes news (a process that was difficult for even the farm press to dispense with). Without the "other," it is difficult to gauge the viability or attractiveness of the norm. In their study of news organizations, Richard V. Ericson and his colleagues observe that "News of deviance is a discourse of failure and, as such, is essential to imagining what might be better—the discourse of progress."<sup>11</sup> Imagining what might be better was particularly important in the shift to a modern consciousness in the early twentieth century. Many urban Americans had to rationalize their choice to leave the familiar farm for the bewildering possibilities of the city. The press made the process easier by presenting farm life as deviant relative to modern urban life. Yet urban Americans were not content to summarily reject their agricultural roots. As many historians have noted, the move to the cities was tinged with anxiety, regret, and guilt over the passing of the family farm and the traditions that went with it.<sup>12</sup> In focusing on radio's promise to redeem the farm, the popular press acknowledged the degree of American ambivalence about the trajectory of modern advances and the loss of comforting traditions.

The discourse of progress was also essential to the financial well-being of the print media, which was at its zenith in the twenties.<sup>13</sup> The popular press preached the gospel of consumerism through the news it chose to report and through the advertisements that made the news possible in the first place. In touting a growing array of consumer products, the press asked its readers to imagine what might be better than the old-fashioned possessions in their homes. As one of the preeminent agents of modernity, the press prepared the way for the new by pointing out the shortcomings of the old.

This article is based on an examination of the radio sections published in the Sunday editions of six urban daily newspapers and in six rural weekly, biweekly, or monthly magazines between 1922 and 1926; they total more than seven hundred urban radio sections and more than five hundred rural radio sections. The Sunday radio columns of the daily newspapers provide a broad picture of everyday radio discourse—that is, discourse that falls within the boundaries of news but outside the realm of the more urgent breaking news.<sup>14</sup> Hugely popular in the 1920s, radio received considerable

11. Richard V. Ericson, Patricia M. Baranek, and Janet B. L. Chan, *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization* (Toronto, 1987), 8.

12. The nostalgic longings present in the 1920s have been noted by many historians, including George A. Mowry, *The Urban Nation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963); Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past* (New York, 1993); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, 1950); and Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955).

13. Donald L. Shaw, *The Rise and Fall of American Mass Media: Roles of Technology and Leadership* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991).

14. The urban newspapers consulted for this study are the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald-Tribune*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. The combined circulation of the Sunday editions of these papers was more than 1.4 million. Several cir-

coverage in most daily newspapers. While many stories relating to radio had sufficient news value to warrant placement on page one or in the regular news columns, the majority of radio coverage was gathered into the weekly radio sections. These special sections also carried advertisements for radio apparatus, messages created by what Roland Marchand called “apostles of modernity.”<sup>15</sup> Small dailies tended to not publish radio sections, or, if they did, they often used syndicated material produced by large urban dailies. For that reason, the newspapers selected for this study were published in medium-sized to large urban centers and produced their own radio columns. A second criterion in selecting the newspapers was regional diversity. Although by the end of the 1920s radio had grown to be a national phenomenon dominated by national networks, regional broadcast content, business practices, and adoption varied, especially in the earlier years.

Farm journal coverage of radio was narrower than that of the large dailies, focusing more on the interests of rural readers. The periodicals included in this study were also selected for some regional variation, although they circulated primarily in the East and in the Midwestern farm belt, where radio adoption was highest among farmers.<sup>16</sup> In addition to

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siderations determined the time frame. In 1922 a substantial number of newspapers began to feature regular radio departments. A number of developments occurred by 1927 that significantly changed radio broadcasting: the first national network, the National Broadcasting Corporation, began operation in November 1926; the regulatory structure of radio changed with the Radio Act of 1927; radio programming became a significant draw for listeners; and receivers operating on AC power became widely available.

15. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985). On early radio receiver advertising and marketing specifically, see Thomas W. Volek, “Examining Radio Receiver Technology through Magazine Advertising in the 1920s and 1930s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1991); Carlat (n. 4 above); and Leslie J. Page Jr., “The Nature of the Broadcast Receiver and Its Market in the United States from 1922 to 1927,” *Journal of Broadcasting* 4 (1960): 174–82. Alan Douglas, *Radio Manufacturers of the 1920s*, 3 vols. (Vestal, N.Y., 1988–91), offers a wealth of radio receiver advertisements but without any analysis.

16. The six are: *Wallaces' Farmer* (published in Des Moines, Iowa), *Rural New Yorker* (New York City), and *Country Gentleman* (Philadelphia), all of which claimed some national readership; *Iowa Homestead* (Des Moines, Iowa); *Dairy Farmer* (Waterloo, Iowa); and *Farm Journal* (Philadelphia). Typically, farmers subscribed to these in addition to other local newspapers. More than half of all farmers subscribed to farm newspapers; see Stuart W. Shulman, “The Progressive Era Farm Press: A Primer on a Neglected Source of Journalism History,” *Journalism History* 25, no. 1 (1999): 29. Under the ownership of Curtis Publications, *Country Gentleman* offered the most sophisticated editorial copy, mimicking its sister publication, the *Saturday Evening Post*, with lavish illustrations and fiction by noted authors such as Max Brand. The farm publications were notable for their high level of reader interaction and allegiance to subscribers. They frequently offered question-and-answer columns, reader's letters, and articles written by farmers. The *Rural New Yorker* regularly interceded as a consumer ombudsman for its readers. The radio product advertising carried by farm publications came overwhelmingly from national retailers, and the same ads frequently appeared in several publica-

offering news about farm life and an abundance of advice on farming technique, these publications championed the cause of farmers on legislative, economic, and social issues. They often presented the interests of rural America as diametrically opposed to those of the big cities. Ironically, the farm journal editors often lived and worked in the cities, and most of the ads were created by city dwellers as well.<sup>17</sup>

### Utility: Radio as the Hired Hand

In news accounts of the early 1920s, farmers were portrayed as more utilitarian in their radio listening than urban listeners, preferring crop, market, and weather reports to musical concerts. "The plaything of the scientist, the electrical wonder of the age . . . has become the hired hand on American farms," said one government official.<sup>18</sup> A 1925 Atwater Kent ad reinforced the utility-luxury dichotomy by comparing the purchase of a radio to that of an early automobile. The ad showed a well-dressed couple riding in a turn-of-the-century auto. Adopting the farmer's point of view, it noted that automobiles were once considered a luxury. "But eventually it dawned on us that the automobile was a utility." Farmers were the last to buy cars, the ad went on, "But when they found out that they needed automobiles *they* bought them."<sup>19</sup> Farmers were similarly slow in adopting the radio, but only because its utility relative to cost had not been made apparent to them. The discourse suggested that farmers bought radios for different reasons than city dwellers. "When the fans have tired of the new toy, the farmer will continue to use his receiving set just as he uses his tractor or milking machine."<sup>20</sup> Radio was helping to define farmers in terms of labor and production, while urbanites were defined more in terms of consumption and leisure.

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tions. Many of the ads—though not all—contained language that specifically targeted farmers or spoke to rural issues.

17. On farm press editors, see Shulman, 30; on advertising copywriters, see Marchand, 1–24.

18. "1,000,000 Farms Using Radio Sets," *Louisville Courier Journal*, 28 March 1926, sec. 4. What farmers actually listened to and what the discourse says they listened to may not be the same thing. Even program logs and announcements appearing in local newspapers and farm journals may not be a reliable indicator of listening habits, since farmers could listen to a number of different stations. It appears that market, crop, and weather reports were, indeed, important to farmers; however, the emphasis placed on this kind of listening by the popular discourse may obscure other significant kinds of listening, especially by of women and other family members. Smulyan (n. 7 above), 10–31, for instance, discusses the importance of "barn dance" music. See also Kline, 113–27, and Neth, 201 and 252–54 (both n. 7 above).

19. "Can you afford not to have it?" *Farm Journal*, October 1925, 45. Emphasis in original.

20. W. A. Wheeler, "Ten Years to See Wireless on Every Progressive Farm," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, 30 July 1922, sec. 3.



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Even from a rural publication, the differences between how city dwellers and farmers used radio broke down along the utility-luxury divide. *Wallaces' Farmer* observed: "For City homes the radio is largely a luxury, altho [sic] it does have its uses along education and instructive lines; but with the farm home, it is rapidly becoming almost a necessity for instruction, for entertainment, and for efficient carrying on of the farm business."<sup>21</sup>

Valuing utility over leisure was presented as a handicap in some cases. Farmers, by virtue of their pragmatism, were viewed as so backward and slow to change that directing their attention to radio's utility was seen as requiring an educational "campaign."<sup>22</sup> This was not the case with urban radio listeners, who seemed to have a natural affinity for broadcasting and broadcast content. The farmer turned to entertainment "only after he has obtained from his set more valuable and important items like market prices of farm products," according to a survey by one radio manufacturer.<sup>23</sup> Farmers required demonstrations of radio's value in order to accept it, whereas a city dweller might be satisfied with a verbal explanation. An agricultural agent acknowledged the view that farmers were more tactile and less abstract than city dwellers, requiring a different approach by radio vendors.<sup>24</sup> Farmers (and city dwellers as well) were also concerned that the radios they might buy would quickly become obsolete, a concern that advertisers turned to their advantage with a modernist claim that their receivers had been "perfected."<sup>25</sup>

Farmers were perhaps the only group in America presumed to benefit financially from using the radio. While city dwellers were being entertained or informed, farmers were said to be using radio to become more prosperous. "Radio on the farm is yielding more dollars and cents return on the investment, developing a more prosperous American agriculture and bringing about a better contented, understanding class of farmers than any other single scientific contribution of the age," said another government official.<sup>26</sup> In one survey, 46 percent of farmers reported cash savings from use of the radio.<sup>27</sup> Beneath the surface of these hopeful proclamations,

21. I. W. Dickerson, "Radio and the Farmer," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 16 November 1925, 1488.

22. "Demonstrations to Farmers," *New York Times*, 2 September 1923, sec. 9.

23. "Farmers Prefer Market Reports to Music, Radio Survey Reveals," *New York Times*, 10 January 1926, sec. 9.

24. "Survey Reveals How Radio is Serving American Farmers," *New York Times*, 16 November 1924, sec. 9.

25. "Farmers have only been waiting for radio to be perfected," Deforest advertisement, *Country Gentleman*, 8 December 1923, 32; *Rural New Yorker*, 27 November 1926, 1507.

26. "Chief Speaks to College Editors," *Louisville Courier Journal*, 18 July 1926, sec. 3.

27. "Radio's Value on the Farm Revealed by 1200 Scouts," *New York Times*, 11 April 1926, sec. 9.

however, was the acknowledgement that farmers were poor relative to city dwellers and were in dire need of financial redemption. The relative absence of this kind of comment about what radio was doing for the cities and their various industries also suggests an ambivalence toward America's urban migration, even from broadcast-boosting urban newspapers. The discourse suggests that Americans—even those in the cities—thought farms could and should be better places.

Radio's main urban function as entertainment source sometimes conflicted with the rural work ethic, again accentuating the difference between town and country. One farmer wrote to the editor of *Wallaces' Farmer* asking if there was a way to hook up a radio to his cultivator. The editor acknowledged: "It certainly would be more pleasant while driving the cultivator on a boiling hot afternoon to listen in on 'The Beautiful Blue Danube' waltz or a lecture on 'Bathing Beauties at Hollywood,' than to be wondering how much the yield will be cut down unless we get rain by the end of the week, or how to cure up the galled place on the gray mare's left shoulder without losing a day's work." However, the editor concluded that radio and farming did not quite mix. "With a two-row cultivator . . . guiding the team, seeing each horse pulled its share, steering the gangs so as to get all the weeds and none of the corn, watching for and uncovering buried stalks, and so on, could keep one fairly busy."<sup>28</sup>

### Status: Reforming the Rube

Radio advertising promised to redeem the farmer by raising his social status to equal that of the city dweller—and an idealized city dweller at that. Carried to extremes, this approach employed illustrations of spacious mansions with Roman columns, vaulted ceilings, and stylishly dressed listeners lounging on plush furniture. The typical claim was, "no other radio has such social prestige."<sup>29</sup> Although the picture of urban opulence clashed with the realities of farm life, the relationship between radio ownership and status was being forged. Advertisers were starting to define the attributes of the "ideal" radio consumer, not only by their material surroundings but by their activities. Stewart-Warner made this clear with an illustration of two decidedly urban radio listeners: a girl pretending to strum a tune on a tennis racket, and a boy with a golf club between his knees, simulating playing a cello. More than likely the typical farm boy or girl did not have much use for country club equipment, but the advertiser could still appeal to the farm

28. "Cultivating to Music," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 9 July 1926, 960.

29. "No other radio has such social prestige," Freed Eiseman advertisement, *Wallaces' Farmer*, 19 November 1926, 1511; "Unlimited resources of entertainment," Magnavox advertisement, *Country Gentleman*, 9 December 1922, 32; "More fun for the farm!" Echophone advertisement, *Iowa Homestead*, 5 March 1925, 21.

teenager's desires for something beyond the confines of the farm plot. Advertising for the radio apparatus promised to provide status, and it provided a clear route to the goal by dismantling the farmer's rigid relationship with geography. The Stewart-Warner ad summarized the point nicely: "It isn't necessary to travel the distant highway in search of happiness and entertainment this summer."<sup>30</sup>

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Other discourse alluded to the relationship between geography and status. Radio provided mobility, and for many farmers this suggested a kind of status. A 1925 article on the technique of broadcasting from locations outside the studio claimed that so-called remote-control broadcasting gave the public "the feeling they are being admitted to events which they would like to attend but which are beyond them for one reason or another."<sup>31</sup>

One could argue that the disparaging image of the rube was fading, thanks to radio. Journalists Alfred Goldsmith and Austin Lescarbourea introduced a chapter in their 1930 book on radio with a description of a farmer who draws stares during his visit to the city. "All the difference in the world exists between him who walks the solid pavement and him who trudges through mucky roads," they wrote. By the end of their chapter on "Radio and the Farmer," however, the rube had been fully assimilated into the urban way of life by virtue of his access to radio; his otherness had been wiped away: "[N]ow, as the farmer walks down the street of the city, smooth-shaven, neatly dressed, self-possessed—nobody turns to stare. . . . [He is] no longer a Rube but a man of the world, sympathetic with his fellow men, be they rural dwellers like himself or cooped up in two-room apartments on Monoxide Lane. No longer is the farmer a man apart . . . [D]ue as much to the widespread influence of radio on all cultural and financial aspects of his daily life, he is truly a citizen of the world."<sup>32</sup> By implication, the farmer without radio remains an unkempt eyesore, a social misfit, close-minded and harsh.

The farmer's perceived backwardness extended beyond technology to social skills. The farm was sometimes seen as a place of poorly mannered individuals, whose cloddish behavior was brought to the surface by radio. A Department of Agriculture spokesman told a group of college newspaper editors that farmers complained of "the entire community dropping in every night and then forgetting to go home."<sup>33</sup> Farmers were also seen as lacking discrimination when it came to broadcast content. A survey of more than eighteen thousand farm homes concluded that "farm folk, on the whole, are not prone to be fussy about the kind of entertainment they

30. "Just tune in on happiness," *Country Gentleman*, August 1926, 75.

31. "Remote Control Broadcasting," *Country Gentleman*, 13 June 1925, 34.

32. Alfred N. Goldsmith and Austin C. Lescarbourea, *This Thing Called Broadcasting* (New York, 1930), 258–59.

33. "Chief Speaks to College Editors" (n. 26 above).

can get over the air; 18 per cent of the men and 16 per cent of their wives refuse to state a preference, because they like it all so well."<sup>34</sup> Urban radio listeners, on the other hand, displayed their discriminating tastes regularly, complaining to station managers of the poor quality of programming and constantly retuning their sets in search of better entertainment. Farmers' interest in utilitarian broadcast content could be a source of amusement for urbanites. "The city man listens with mild amusement to an announcer's recitation of a long list of prices on hogs, corn, wheat, butter, eggs, cream and potatoes, but the farmer listens with deep concern, for it affects his personal welfare."<sup>35</sup> The *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* chided its urban readers, who sometimes showed an "unwillingness . . . to cheerfully acquiesce to the assignment of broadcasting time for agricultural news and data, more directly valuable to the farm dweller." The paper concluded that radio was making farmers more productive and contented, which would lead to bigger crops and better quality. "Giving farmers some space on the air is good for everyone."<sup>36</sup>

The farmer was not always pitted against city dwellers in the pursuit of status; plenty of good-natured competition could arise on the farm. An Illinois farmer in 1923 complained that, despite his superior receiving equipment, he was often "outdistanced" by his neighbors in the search for remote radio signals.<sup>37</sup> Atwater Kent exploited the desire to keep up with the neighbors in a 1926 ad. The ad shows the interior of farm home, with the farmer's wife and daughter seated next to the radio and the farmer looking out the window as a farmhand steers a tractor towards the barn. "You already know that a radio set is a good thing to have," the copy reads, "and if you don't get one pretty soon you'll begin to feel you are lagging behind the neighbors." Here, the illustration says as much as the copy; not only does this farmer get to enjoy the radio, he also appears to enjoy a life free from labor. The implication is that the possession of the radio apparatus can signify a level of success sufficient to free the farmer from manual labor. He can hire a man and then—literally—oversee the worker.<sup>38</sup>

## Geography: Dreariness Dispatched

Newspapers portrayed farmers and other rural residents as victims of geography who could be redeemed by radio's ease of use, pervasiveness, and unifying influence. They described the city as a place of progress, where life

34. "Radio's Value on the Farm Revealed by 1200 Scouts" (n. 27 above).

35. "Farmers Prefer Market Reports to Music, Radio Survey Reveals" (n. 23 above).

36. "Radio Adds to Productiveness of Agriculture," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, 5 November 1922, sec. 3.

37. "Questions About Wireless Outfits," *Rural New Yorker*, 10 February 1923, 198.

38. "Radio, yes—but what kind?" *Country Gentleman*, January 1926, 50.

is “more pleasant, more easy, more comfortable, more cultured, more exciting” while “the country has remained virtually the same.”<sup>39</sup> The solution to the “dullness” of farm life was radio.

Among the most commonly voiced complaints about farm life, relative to radio discourse, was loneliness. Just how lonely farmers were is a matter of some debate, but the discourse coming from both farm and city publications suggests an abiding perception that isolation—especially for women—was a continuing problem on the farm, one that radio may have made more acutely felt.<sup>40</sup> One Missouri agriculture official called radio “the thing that is ending the isolation and lonesomeness of the farm.”<sup>41</sup> A woman from a farm north of New York City wrote: “I think this development has a special significance for the country woman and country home. Can we ever say ‘lonely’ country again?”<sup>42</sup> Thoughts on loneliness also extended to the problem of youths fleeing the farm: “The strongest social force which has worked to build up the large cities has been the loneliness and unrest of young people when shut away from communication with their kind.”<sup>43</sup>

The radio discourse not only focused on rural loneliness but helped define what the term meant. If loneliness is thought of as the absence of human company, then it is curious that radio would be thought of as a cure for such a condition. How was it that farmers thought they would be lonely no more by virtue of hearing disembodied voices from a box? Certainly they could not engage the box in a conversation. The discourse suggests that farmers were not so much longing for human companionship as they were bored with the monotony of farm life. Farmers wanted to be surprised. What made this desired unpredictability possible was lack of control at the radio receiver’s end. Although farm folk could tune across the dial to a half dozen different stations, they would not always know exactly who or what would be on a given station at a given time. Ironically, as programming developed in the later 1920s, radio became more predictable—familiar programs, familiar characters, familiar formats. Often it was the voice over the radio that was given to dispelling loneliness on the farm. Farmers reflected on how radio cultivated friendship with the voices over the air. They “knew” the president by virtue of having heard him speak on the radio, and this was comforting.<sup>44</sup> Advertisements for radio receivers

39. Goldsmith and Lescarboura (n. 32 above), 249.

40. Kline (n. 7 above), 24, contends that farmers were no more socially isolated than city people. The *Report of the Commission on Country Life* (n. 5 above) makes passing mention of farmers’ loneliness and isolation, especially for women, but focuses on business, education, and organizational issues. For examples, see 39–45 and 104–5.

41. A. B. Macdonald, “Missouri Goes in for Wireless,” *Country Gentleman*, 27 May 1922, 12.

42. Letter to the editor, *Rural New Yorker*, 25 February 1922, 282.

43. *Rural New Yorker*, 18 March 1922, 418.

44. Elizabeth M. Hoag, “My Radio Friends,” *Country Gentleman*, 22 November 1924, 26; “38,500 Radio Sets on Iowa Farms,” *Iowa Homestead*, 26 November 1925, 38.

frequently elaborated on loneliness issues for farmers. In one ad, a woman testified to radio's conviviality, equating it with a social experience: "It used to be pretty lonely out here. But since we bought our Atwater Kent I feel as if I were visiting every evening."<sup>45</sup>

In its relationship to isolation, radio was not portrayed as a mere palliative; it was an agent of change. Alluding to radio's purported transformational powers, a 1923 Radio Corporation of America (RCA) ad went so far as to declare that "The farm's a different place—with a Radiola V."<sup>46</sup> Another RCA ad claimed, "A radio set changes the character of home life, making the evenings more cheerful, and the business of farming more profitable."<sup>47</sup> Radio promised to banish loneliness and boredom and solve all social challenges with the click of a switch. According to the makers of the Music Master, radio would "make happy farm homes and contented families."<sup>48</sup> Radio also appeared to solve the geographical problem by making identity more fluid. The *Iowa Homestead* reported that a professor at the University of Iowa was able to cash a check "in a strange bank in another city recently, with the sound of his radio voice as his only identification." An officer of the bank recognized the professor's voice from a speech he had delivered on the university's radio station.<sup>49</sup>

The geography of the farm could be redeemed either by importing urban culture to the farm home or by transporting the farmer to distant locales. Travel metaphors run throughout early radio discourse. An ad for Brandes speakers promised to allow the 1924 presidential campaign to be "waged right in your own home."<sup>50</sup> Music Master claimed that its receiver was so accurate that "if you shut your eyes you can believe the broadcaster is standing at your elbow, instead of an hour's or a day's journey away."<sup>51</sup> Atwater Kent anointed itself "your passport to the four corners of the country."<sup>52</sup> Another Atwater Kent ad displayed a map of the United States and offered the testimony of a radio listener, who, unable to take his usual winter sojourn to California, traveled by radio instead: "My wife and I hardly missed the trip. There were so many interesting things coming out of the air that it was no trouble at all to keep ourselves entertained. My wife summed it up when she said: 'California is just one trip, but Radio takes you on hundreds.'"<sup>53</sup>

45. "The farmer makes his choice," *Rural New Yorker*, 14 November 1925, 1473.

46. "The farm's a different place," *Farm Journal*, December 1923, 33.

47. "Radiola 20 has been tried, tested and perfected for farm homes especially," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 5 November 1926, 1445.

48. "Radio makes happy farm homes and contented families," *Farm Journal*, December 1925, 87.

49. "Facts About Radio," *Iowa Homestead*, 3 July 1924, 16.

50. "Better radio right through summer," *Country Gentleman*, 3 May 1924, 28.

51. "Who's Elected?" *Country Gentleman*, 25 October 1924, 22.

52. "Your passport to the four corners of the country," *Farm Journal*, January 1925, 29.

53. "California is just one trip but radio takes you on hundreds," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 19 February 1926, 285.

Ironically, radio gave Jefferson's tiller of the earth a sense of triumph over nature by making geography irrelevant. By the 1920s, the farmer's relationship to his land—once a virtue—had become a handicap, owing to its isolation from the wellspring of modernism, the city. Radio promised to restore the farmer's tarnished morality not by reconnecting him with the land but by allowing him to transcend it.

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### Culture: From Camp Meeting to Symphony

Early radio discourse presents two cultures in conflict: the backward culture of the farm and the progressive culture of the cities. With radio, farmers were able to participate in the superior urban-sanctioned culture and, thus, bridge the gap. “[Farmers] hear all the sports they missed when they were young,” wrote the authors of one popular book on radio. “They used to play a wheezy organ or drive 18 miles to a camp meeting to participate in the singing. Now they listen to the finest symphonies.”<sup>54</sup> Again, the ideological binaries are all but transparent: music from a city music hall is inevitably superior to the camp meeting.

The urban construction of radio extended to almost any rural area or small town, regardless of the presence of agriculture. In a story reprinted from *Wireless Age* magazine, a Shakespearean actress predicted that radio would “emancipate” the small town by bringing it culture. “The small village of the past, with its warped outlook on life, its ignorance of current events, its mean and petty superstitions, is in a line to be completely ‘revamped,’ as it were.” The cure in this case: Shakespeare over the radio.<sup>55</sup> In skewering rural life, articles such as these pressed the modernist urban agenda, using the innovation of radio broadcasting as an example.

In acknowledging the growth of radio on the farms, the *New York Times* noted in 1922 that “Farm life must have grown monotonous at times, especially during the long Winter months. . . . [Radio] not only can connect every farm with the nearest city but with the entire world.” Showing its urban and class bias, the *Times* then remarked that a farmer listening to a radio concert would never encounter the “Standing Room Only” sign.<sup>56</sup> Of course, SRO signs were a fixture of the New York's Great White Way, not rural America's Main Street. And even the assumption that farmers would be interested in theatrical entertainment contained an urban ideology.

Fulfilling the prophecy of the urban newspapers, some farmers (at least those quoted in news stories) began to reflect the urban bias, noting, for instance, how radio could make an “unbearable” life on the farm “most

54. Goldsmith and Lescarboua (n. 32 above), 255.

55. Mona Morgan, “Small Town's Radio Receivers Will Emancipate It, Actress Predicts,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, 11 March 1923, sec. 2.

56. “Farm Service Growing,” *New York Times*, 30 July 1922, sec. 6.

pleasant" and how radio tended to "broaden and enlighten us fellows living far out from the city." To the writer of the story, these farmers had been "drawn out of a rut through the medium of radio and placed squarely on the road to progress."<sup>57</sup> Even *Wallaces' Farmer* acknowledged the limitations of farm life, usually relative to the urban experience. "The greatest handicap held by the American farmer and small town dweller in his race for prosperity with the city dweller can be summed up in one word—isolation."<sup>58</sup>

Occasionally, the discourse was more balanced, suggesting that city and country were coming into greater harmony rather than that the country was simply acquiescing to urban values. Senator Arthur Capper of Kansas commented in 1930 how radio was helping to foster greater understanding between urban and rural communities. Farmers hearing reports of unemployment, relief efforts, and business conditions "feel a sympathetic understanding and an active interest in the people of the city." At the same time, city dwellers were exposed to the speeches of agricultural leaders and learned that "the success of the urban community is bound up with the rural community of which it is the center." Yet Capper, usually the staunch defender of rural America, could not resist extolling the advantages of city life, which ultimately were wedded to the ideal of American progress. Radio, he said, was making the farmer more like the city dweller in making him a better and more active consumer, which, Capper asserted, would eventually move the country ahead at a "rapid rate."<sup>59</sup>

## Exporting Urban Values and Rural Transformation

Radio quickly became an ambassador of urban values, and those values became a standard by which to judge rural life. If the cities teemed with people, then the sparsely populated farms were isolated. If urban women had access to laborsaving appliances, then rural women were surely overworked. Rural people, then, could transform themselves by adopting the technology. A *New York Tribune* article noted that thanks to radio farm women were "asking for information of government, information [about] household appliances which will relieve their drudgery, knowledge of how to plan their home gardens so that they may gain the most beauty therefrom, and last but not least they are asking over and over again for music, good music, and amusement."<sup>60</sup> In short, with radio farm women were

57. "Radio Down on the Farm," *New York Tribune*, 25 January 1925, radio supplement.

58. C. M. Jansky Jr., "Making Use of Radio on the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 12 June 1925, 815.

59. Arthur Capper, "What Radio Can Do for the Farmer," in *Radio and Education*, ed. Levering Tyson (Chicago, 1932), 223–40. Capper owned a radio station in Kansas, as well as a farm newspaper, and had a vested interest in promoting the technology.

60. Walter Chappell, "What Radio Means to Isolated People," *New York Tribune*, 22 February 1925, radio supplement.



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transforming themselves into city women. Men were transformed, as well. An RCA Radiola ad, arguing in Puritan fashion, asserted that ownership of a radio was a sign of a “progressive” farmer.<sup>61</sup> An Atwater Kent advertisement featured a farmer testifying that the regular radio market reports “gave me so much to think about that at the end of the winter I was a better farmer.” The ad also pointed out that listening to church services made him a more tolerant man.<sup>62</sup>

The city represented the standard—in words and pictures—by which farmers could measure themselves. Radio promised access to timely information, like city folk had. “It will put a [stock market] ticker in the farmer’s home.”<sup>63</sup> A 1924 ad for Eveready batteries showed a cityscape of soaring buildings, then noted that radio had improved the modern farmer’s income by keeping him as “well posted on market prices as the brokers in the big cities.”<sup>64</sup> A Radiola ad boasted: “Laughter, song, music, plays—everything the city has to make life joyful comes right into the farm home now.”<sup>65</sup>

The head of America’s most powerful radio enterprise did nothing to dispel the belief of urban superiority. J. C. Harbord of RCA told the New York chapter of the Advertising Club of America that “The farm has to be made more attractive, both in the actual work done and in the actual living of its life.” As the “miracle of the ages,” radio was suited to the task, Harbord said. “The voice of radio broadcasting penetrates the cottage of the humblest farmer as readily as it does the palace of the Fifth Avenue millionaire.”<sup>66</sup> Radio was also penetrating the humble tenements on New York’s Lower East Side, but the urban ideologies inspired by radio ignored this development. Similarly, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who exercised ultimate regulatory authority over radio before the creation of the Federal Radio Commission in 1927, argued that radio’s march of progress went through the city. “The radio is steadily enriching our homes. More particularly to our farmer folks it is bringing more of those contacts that the town populations have alone enjoyed up to this time.”<sup>67</sup> A city man writing for a farm publication went so far as to say that because of radio, “The city dweller’s monopoly on the benefits of civilization is doomed.”<sup>68</sup>

Advertisements for radio receivers—particularly those in publications

61. “You can make Radiola 20 pay for itself in better crops,” *Wallaces’ Farmer*, 3 October 1926, 1321.

62. “California is just one trip but radio takes you on hundreds” (n. 53 above).

63. James H. Collins, “Putting the Farm on the Ether,” *Country Gentleman*, 2 September 1922, 21.

64. “The air is full of things you shouldn’t miss,” *Farm Journal*, April 1924, 49.

65. “Laughter, song, music, plays,” *Wallaces’ Farmer*, 11 September 1925, 1167.

66. J. G. Harbord, “Radio is an Important Factor in the Life of the Farmer,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, 20 September 1925, sec. 20.

67. “Big Radio Problems Pictured by Hoover,” *New York Times*, 8 February 1925, sec. 5.

68. William Dublier, “Broadcast Blessings,” *Country Gentleman*, 6 January 1923, 10.

aimed at farmers—routinely presented the city as an ideal and radio as a benefactor of farm life. A 1925 Atwater Kent ad offered a dialog between a doctor's wife in a small town in Oklahoma and a "pilgrim who was inquiring about radio." The copy reveals the "pilgrim" to be a man from the city. The woman admits she had "fought" radio for three years—until she heard a friend's set. She tells her visitor: "Don't you realize, you people living in the big cities, that this is the only way we have out here of hearing really fine music? Don't you realize that it has increased our interest in life just 100 per cent—that it is making the word home mean more than it ever did before?"<sup>69</sup> The choice of a man from the city as the foil pushes the discourse beyond the mere technology. It is not just radio that is saving the farm; rather, it is radio that comes by way of the city that is rescuing farmers from their dreary lives. Another Atwater Kent ad juxtaposed a farm scene featuring silo and barn with the towering skyscrapers of a city and the huge antenna towers of transmitting station. Alerting farmers to the inadequacy of their social sphere, the ad says: "Now Radio takes you to bigger and farther Main Streets."<sup>70</sup>

Having been out of reach of normal communication, farmers were portrayed as more than simply out of touch with everyday events; they were viewed as not entirely of this world. An RCA Radiola ad made this point with an election campaign theme: "Today, the most distant farmer listens in on the making of history. The farmer's vote—and his wife's—based on up-to-the-minute contact with the world and its doings, count heavily today in determining local and national issues."<sup>71</sup> The implication is that the farmer's natural status was not of the world. Similarly, an Atwater Kent advertisement asserted that the farmer "and his wife and children are finding that [radio] makes an end of isolation; brings good cheer, companionship, fun, information, education, church services—whatever they most want—from the throbbing world outside right into their sitting room."<sup>72</sup> A Music Master ad offered this: "The farm home may lie off the main-traveled road, but Music Master brings every home close to the heart of the world of today."<sup>73</sup> The unstated ideological assumption is that the "world" and the city are one and the same.

Occasionally, discourse about radio portrayed rural America as superior to the cities. For instance, broadcast reception outside the cities was generally superior, thanks to the absence of large buildings, electric streetcars, and electrical power plants, all of which interfered with signals.<sup>74</sup>

69. "She fought radio for three years," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 25 September 1925, 1248.

70. "Now radio takes you to bigger and farther Main Streets," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 26 November 1926, 1545.

71. "Listening in on the campaign," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 16 October 1925, 1361.

72. "The farmer makes his choice," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 6 November 1925, 1467.

73. "Evening is the playtime of the world," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 November 1925, 1491.

74. Collins, "Putting the Farm on the Ether" (n. 63 above).

Receivers were also more widely dispersed in the country, reducing the incidence of interference from regenerating receivers that caused the characteristic squeal and howl on nearby radio sets. One writer observed that a particular city dweller was so impressed with his improved reception during a visit to the country that he was “tempted to take up farming as a vocation and spend his evenings experimenting with radio as an avocation in a location where conditions for radio reception approach the ideal. The fact that receiving conditions are so much better in small towns and rural districts tends greatly to offset the fact that the city listener may be much nearer to a good broadcasting station.”<sup>75</sup>

### Rural Adaptation

For many farmers, buying into the ideology that went with the popular discourse about radio meant investing in an expensive technology. In the early 1920s, a radio receiver cost between fifty and one hundred and fifty dollars, about the same as a three-year-old used car. Because of their distance from transmitters, farmers often had to invest in more expensive receivers, which could bring in signals from farther away, and many could not afford them. Consequently, farmers did not uniformly adopt the radio according to the urban formula, and instead created their own unique technological communities.<sup>76</sup> In some rural communities, farmers got away with cheap crystal receivers or no receivers at all. The town of Oswego, Kansas, eliminated the need for radio receivers by installing speakers in many buildings, including the post office, drug store, cafe, barber shop, and department store. Broadcasts were received by a single, central receiver and then redirected to the speakers. Officials in Fredonia and Hiawatha, Kansas, wired central radio receivers to their telephone systems. A telephone subscriber simply called in and asked to be connected to the radio. In Bates County, Missouri, farmers received a phone call when the daily market reports became available, and then they were connected to the radio broadcast. Farmers also engaged in community listening in individual homes or in larger venues. In Marshall, Missouri, as many as three thousand people would gather in the town square to listen to a radio broadcast.<sup>77</sup>

The assumption that farmers could be lumped together in their listening or buying habits was not always borne out. Even the assumption that farmers wanted to hear market reports was periodically dispelled. A survey

75. Jansky, “Making Use of Radio on the Farm” (n. 58 above).

76. For examples, see Kline, Jellison, and Neth (n. 7 above). For resistance on the urban front, see Elizabeth Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grass Roots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s,” *American Quarterly* 41 (1989): 6–33.

77. A. B. Macdonald, “There Are No Creed Lines in the Air,” *Country Gentleman*, 25 August 1923, 1; *Iowa Homestead*, 18 March 1926, 26.

by the Sears, Roebuck station in Chicago, WLS, revealed that the first choice among farmers was not market news but barn dance music, followed by weather reports, band music, family talks, and orchestra music.<sup>78</sup> Some farmers also displayed their preference for pragmatism over modernism by refusing to wrap their radio sets in the wooden cabinets that often came as accessories. They were routinely advised by their farm journals that the cabinets were unnecessary. At the same time, some also challenged the pragmatist label when they acknowledged that they bought radios initially not for weather and market reports but to provide companionship and entertainment for their families.<sup>79</sup>

There were some farmers who, despite feelings of loneliness and isolation, could still justify going without radio altogether. A reader of the *Rural New Yorker* who signed herself "Mother Bee" offered the following rationale for rejecting radio: "Midwinter, and I suppose being three miles from a lemon I really should be properly lonesome. In fact brother-in-law says that if he lived here he would have a radio in each of the four corners of the house. Tastes differ. We have none as yet. . . . It would take too much time from our duties and rob the boys, in their growing years, of too much of their sleep."<sup>80</sup>

### From Producer to Consumer

This study highlights the special role of the popular press in promoting new consumer technologies. As part of its design and function, the press defines the boundaries of the norm by focusing on aberration. In featuring the loneliness and desperation of farm life—turning the farmer into an "other"—the press declared the reciprocal qualities to be the norm, and further implied that all—not just farmers—could benefit through the acquisition of a radio receiver. The press then took the extra step of connecting radio to other tenets of modernity in circulation—unity, democracy, and personal transformation.<sup>81</sup>

Regardless of whether the print discourse accurately reflected farmers' views, it presented the farmer as someone outside the urban, modern, and progressive norm. The burgeoning discourse about radio simply served to

78. Samuel Guard, "Martha and John Listen In," *Country Gentleman*, 11 April 1925, 8. On the role of barn-dance music in farm life and in the formation of a national radio audience, see Smulyan (n. 7 above), 20–31.

79. "You can make Radiola 20 pay for itself in better crops," *Rural New Yorker*, 30 October 1926, 1403; Macdonald, "There Are No Creed Lines in the Air."

80. "From the Lonesome Farmhouse," *Rural New Yorker*, 13 February 1926, 294.

81. Leading social thinkers Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, and Robert E. Park offered these progressive qualities of communication technologies as means of counteracting the problematic effects of industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth century. See Czitrom (n. 7 above), 91–121.

emphasize and add to the distinctions between urban and rural life, especially along the lines of economic prosperity versus cultural uplift and utility versus leisure. While characterizations of city and country may have been stereotypes, the discourse surrounding the adoption of radio on the farm helped to cement them in the public consciousness.

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Having established the otherness of farmers, it became part of the modernist project to bring them into the urban way of life. Whereas years of Country Life “uplift” rhetoric had met with only mixed results on the farm, the presence of the black box in the farm home seemed to be striking a substantial blow for progress. Infused with modernist values, radio’s presence appeared to all but physically move farmers to the cities. Even though farmers did not uniformly tune in to the city for their programs, the technology came loaded with modernist urban ideology. To the degree that they adopted radio and the accompanying ideology, farmers displayed a badge of modernism in the form of what Jackson Lears calls “therapeutic self-realization.”<sup>82</sup> It allowed farmers to think about what they *could* be, to fulfill their potential. Owning a radio meant that they could be as in touch, as cosmopolitan, as worldly as anyone in the cities, if they chose. They had timely access to market information that put them on par with city businessmen. Access to news and speeches meant they could be as fully enfranchised and informed as the city voter. The agricultural information that flowed into their homes meant that they could be up-to-date and educated in ways that the Country Life Movement had said they were not. The opera and classical musical selections that they sometimes claimed to listen to (if only briefly, before tuning to barn-dance music) meant that they were potentially as culturally sophisticated as city folk attending the symphony. Farmers with radio were no longer tradition-bound, insular, isolated, lonely people. Their geographical identities had not changed, but their consciousness had.

The process of “othering” by the press was not unique to radio or any other particular technology; rather, it was (and is) an ongoing part of the news. However, the role of farmers relative to notions of progress and tradition in the 1920s was unique. Farmers in the twenties represented where Americans had recently come from; their lives exemplified the known. In moving to the cities and adopting a more modern consciousness, Americans were embracing the unknown. The nostalgic longings of the 1920s would not have existed except that Americans had recently begun leaving the farms in significant numbers. Consequently, farmers were essential to any formulations of progress, although the impetus for these formulations was generally urban.

82. T. J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930,” in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York, 1983), 3–38.

The utopian proclamations attached to radio and other new technologies have less to do with the future than they do with our sense of past failures. The "othering" of farmers was not a malicious campaign by advertisers, radio manufacturers, and other urban-based discourse managers. Rather, the presence of radio singled out farmers—as did the 1909 report of the Commission on Country Life—for their importance to the country's economic well-being; but whereas the Country Life Movement was concerned with the farmer's ability to produce, the arrival of radio as a mass-produced good signaled a shift in attention to the farmer's ability to consume—at the very least, the ability to consume the radio apparatus. As they did with the Country Life agenda, farmers resisted to a degree their reformation by radio; but by the 1920s the modernist message relative to radio—especially that coming from national advertising—had gained a hegemonic advantage that muted the subordinated farm press.<sup>83</sup>

Radio failed to save the family farm, and perhaps even accelerated its demise by making the city seem more attractive. New technologies are often placed in the role of savior, but they rarely save anything. They do, however, serve the important purpose of providing society with a mechanism for coming to grips with social change. Although hearing sounds over the radio in the early 1920s was astounding, the real revolution in radio was in the way it amplified existing social and cultural differences.

83. Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony" and *No Place of Grace* (both n. 9 above).