

Stealing Calm: An Ode to Radio

CHANCES ARE, UNLESS YOU'VE EVER BEEN ALONE IN A radio booth, you have never experienced complete silence. I've had the privilege a number of times in the last few years, and have come to savor it. Whenever I'm scheduled to record a commentary or defend my point of view on a talk show, I try to show up a few minutes early just to bathe in the silence of the studio. Radio booths are generally cramped and are rarely much to look at—ratty carpet, corrugated walls (designed to nullify all sound waves coming from whatever angle), soft creakless chairs. But the stillness lends a cathedral-like quality. An unnatural calm slows down time. You can hear your own breath.

Of course, no one listens to radio in that kind of cocoon. We turn it on in the car, the backyard, the kitchen. But the silence of a radio booth says something important about the nature of the medium. As the delivery mechanism for a precious, fragile stream of audio, there is an uncompromising, almost militaristic component to radio's mission—that of vigilant protector. Seal the perimeter. Radio tightly focuses

perspective that fundamentally changed the way I think about music or politics or language or science. But I do know that I owe a good bit of my life and career to what I've heard on shows such as "All Things Considered," "Fresh Air" and "A Prairie Home Companion," and I have spoken to many others who feel the same way. With no disrespect to the many serious and talented practitioners of commercial and public television, TV is regrettably not a medium that regularly nourishes the spirit or challenges the mind.

A comparison with TV is particularly instructive in light of the impending televisionization of the Web. The other day I was asked to appear on CNN*fn* for a brief discussion about the cultural implications of the failure of Panamsat's now-infamous Galaxy4 satellite. Always happy to plug my book, I ironed my shirt and found my way to CNN's New York studios, near Penn Station in midtown. The differences between TV and radio were much on my mind as I arrived at the 20th floor and began to notice that everything about the studio, from the make-up to the polished veneer set to the antiseptic

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on a certain sound source to the rigid exclusion of all others. In a radio engineer's control room, there's a sanctity surrounding audio that you just don't see anywhere else in the media world. That's because with most other communications technologies, particularly anything with moving visuals, the task is not to slow down time, but to feed it as it ravenously marches forward.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the difference between radio and multimedia, wondering how it is that such a technically confined medium seems to me so intellectually superior. How does radio, with its limited bandwidth and narrow one-lane avenue of sensory impact, triumph over the audio-visual feast of television and even the World Wide Web when it comes to conveying memorable information, provocative ideas and deeply human feeling? Marshall McLuhan wrote that radio "is really a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords." I know I couldn't possibly count all the times, in 10 years of daily listening to a variety of programming on National Public Radio, that I have wept, had deep spiritual epiphanies, come up with provocative story ideas, or heard an idea or

dialog on the teleprompters, said: "Skim the surface." I wasn't there to truly discuss information proliferation; I was there to look the part of having a discussion about information proliferation, to mimic the type of discussions that might occur if the TV cameras weren't on. The audio would provide an appropriate backdrop for the image of the anchor and me speaking, looking into each other's eyes, exchanging penetrating remarks.

I did my seven minutes. It was, like the rest of the spots I saw that morning while I waited, unmemorable. I shook hands with the anchor, thanked him. Then, as I was heading away, a funny thing happened. One of the production assistants caught up to me and said, "Hey, interesting stuff, can I ask you a question?" We proceeded to talk for another seven minutes or so about computers, the Internet, Bill Gates and so on. It was about the same length as my conversation on air, and infinitely more interesting. It was an actual conversation, with a life of its own that couldn't have been charted in advance.

I don't fault the anchor or the producer for the drabness of the CNN*fn* conversation. I think the flaws are embedded in the video medium itself. There's an interesting paradox at