
5 EFFECTIVE RADIO SPEAKING

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In my experience, radio broadcasting is practised most effectively by those who understand and appreciate the characteristics of the audience and their own peculiar (and unnatural) position in relation to that audience. This understanding unlocks the door to the commonsense techniques of broadcasting, for effective radio broadcasting is not an esoteric art but is available to anyone who will take the trouble to understand the medium he intends to use.

First - and you will forgive me for saying the obvious - radio is not a visual medium. Allow me to make clear just what the lack of a visible speaker means to the radio audience and what the lack of a visible audience means to the speaker. When you are speaking in the lecture room or in the auditorium your audience is present in person and, through visual aids - like the way you are dressed, like shaking your head or extending your arms, or pounding the table or smiling or moving about - you try to keep your audience interested in what you have to say. They not only hear you; they see you. The radio audience on the other hand can only hear you, and you have to rely on your voice alone to hold their attention. Effective radio speaking is therefore not just a matter of uttering words. In the way you put across your message you have to make up for the absence of visual aids. More about this later.

And what effect does the lack of a visible audience have on the speaker? As you know, public speaking is usually a type of circular social behaviour. The speaker first stimulates his visible audience but, just as important, the audience in turn stimulates the speaker. Those of you who have done some form of public speaking will realise the subtle but potent influences the audience has upon you. The best speaker is inclined to be the one most sensitive and responsive to these influences, one who has the "feel" of the audience. Radio, however, has entirely broken the chain of this circular process for the speaker. In radio, your audience may react to you, but you cannot react to them. And at the time of your broadcast, you can't even tell for sure that they are reacting to you.

Another important psychological factor in broadcast speech lies in the distribution of a radio audience. In total, thousands of people might be tuned to your broadcast, but in reality those thousands are split up into small groups and individuals located in their own homes, or offices or cake-shops. An audience divided up such as this deprives a speaker of all the advantages to be gained from inter-stimu-

lation so commonly noted in crowd psychology. Those infectious waves of emotion that sway a large mass of people seated or standing elbow to elbow at a public rally are lost in radio for in this medium we are dealing with a large collection of people each completely uninfluenced by all the others.

Furthermore, radio listeners are entirely free of those social inhibitions, compulsions and conventions which dull speakers often rely upon to keep a visible audience in their seats. People who would be embarrassed to walk out of an auditorium while some would-be spell-binder is speaking do not hesitate to switch off the radio speaker who bores or irritates them.

These factors should force the radio speaker to be more painstaking in the preparation and presentation of his talk. Few of us realise until put to the task, the extent to which the eye and the ear, when working together, are influenced by impressions that come through the eye. When you pluck out the eye, as in radio, when the sense of hearing alone is involved, we have a very different and much more difficult problem on our hands.

So then, the radio speaker has only one set of stimuli to work with instead of two. He can use only the audible speech symbols and he has no appeal for the eye. Effective radio speaking is, therefore, not just a matter of uttering words. In the way you put across the message, you have to make up for the absence of visual aids. Your voice is the sole instrument for projecting your whole personality through the air to your audience. It seems, in fact, that broadcasters are sharply divided into those who are unable to feel the unseen presence of their audience and those who are acutely conscious of it as if it were visible before them. Both sides are, of course, equally aware that their audience exists, but the first type cannot take the imaginative steps which will enable them to act on their knowledge, or else they lack either the urge to communicate or the childish delight in make-believe which actuates the good broadcaster.

The cardinal principle of good broadcasters is the use of a direct conversational tone. The whole emphasis should be upon a sincere direct contact with the members of an audience that will achieve the effect of face-to-face conversation. No speaker at the National Park or elsewhere, even when amplifiers are provided, addresses a crowd in the terms and tone he would use when talking quietly and colloquially to an individual, and the larger the crowd the wider the divergence in his style of address and the more general and less intimate his contact. On the other hand, the broadcaster who feels the presence of his audience must keep his pitch down so that he can express himself with the immediacy of a private conversation. He is not impressed by the fact that his audience may run into thousands. He sees with his mind's eye an individual or a small family group relaxing in the living room or engaged in domestic tasks. People thus situated resent an oratorical or pedagogical tone of voice in a guest, seen or unseen. They expect the radio voice to talk to them, not talk down to them.

Proceeding on this understanding, we have only to ask ourselves what are the most effective means of speech in an ordinary conversation? What is the winning and attractive tone to use: The situation calls for an intimate and informal tone. The radio listener is quick to detect insincerity in our speech, so we must not put on airs, or try to be precious, coy or pompous, unless we naturally are, in which case we have no right being on the radio anyway. I appreciate that the effort to carry on an imaginary conversation can result in the loss of forcefulness somewhere between the microphone and the listener. Something I do when I am broadcasting is to imagine the listener sitting about four feet from me, and he is blind. Thus, in order to convey to him my thoughts and emotions, I must try to express everything in my voice by variations in pitch, in emphasis, in intensity and by pausing here and there. Inflections of the voice are vital to the good radio speaker, for they give colour and life to what he has to say. I may be reading a script but I don't have to sound as if I am reading. If the use of quiet gestures will help your delivery when speaking on the radio, by all means use them. Psychological experiment has shown that the muscles of the body respond in perfect accord with speech efforts. If one were to record in waves, on a strip of paper, the voice of a speaker and also the subconscious movements of any part of his body, for instance the arm, one would find that these two curves agree. A close correlation exists between body movements and thought processes. So point your finger at the imaginary listener. Shake your fist. Smile. One of the first bits of advice I give to a new broadcaster is: Before you open the microphone, put a smile on your face. A smile is heard over the radio because it changes the quality of your voice. Do not neglect these aids to speech. At the same time - a word of caution - make no gesture or movement that would cause extraneous sound. A bang on the table sounds like thunder through the microphone, the rubbing of an unshaven chin like a motorbike revving up.

Above all else do not be dull. Indeed, it is difficult to exaggerate the deleterious effects of dullness. Not long ago, I listened to a talk, or part of a talk, on a subject in which I was much interested. But, alas the drawling monotony of the delivery was such that I switched off under the impression that I was listening to an outpouring of half-baked commonplaces. A week later I read the same talk in print and was amazed to discover an interesting and well-written article. A proof, you will say, of my stupidity! Undoubtedly, but what was it that stupefied me?

There is no better training for radio speaking than the reading aloud of all types of material. If you are going on the air for the first time, you should sit down with a friend and tell him what you intend to say, and then read him a part of your talk. The person listening can tell you exactly how your conversation differs from your reading style and tone. It would be a better test if your friend would close his eyes and turn away from you while listening. Simple words are the best for radio. Excessive use of sibilants, alliteration and tongue twisters should be avoided on the radio. (That

very phrase "Excessive use of sibilants" has so much hiss in it that I would never attempt it on radio). More than this, it is a good general rule to keep sentences short. Subject must not be too far separated from verb. In this connection, you must remember that the eye can take in a whole sentence at a time; it can see the beginning and the end at once, and get an idea of the general shape of the sentence. The ear takes in a sentence word by word, it must wait until the end of a sentence to discover its shape; it cannot flash back, as the eye can.

I come now to the question of audibility, of clarity. When the listener has to make a great effort to catch the broadcaster's words or his meaning his concentration on what is being said is seriously impaired. Consider for example what happens when by a sudden dropping of the voice or vagueness of articulation the speaker blurs a word or two. The very first time this happens the listener becomes involved in a nerve-racking process. He stops listening and tries to guess at the missing words. Whether he succeeds or fails hardly matters because, by the time he is listening again, the talk is a whole sentence ahead of him. The best he can do now is to cut his loss and listen for all he is worth in the hope of picking up and holding the remaining length of thread. But once again the speaker garbles his words and the thread this time is irretrievably lost. The effect of this on the listener is to induce in him a nervous deafness and he begins to miss what he actually could have caught. Here it is no question of mood: even the most persevering and sweet tempered listener is hopelessly lost and had better curtail his agony by switching off.

A contributing factor to lack of clarity in speech is speed of delivery. You should never talk too fast on the radio, because it is hard for the listener to follow you when he cannot see your lips moving. On the other hand, too slow a delivery may make an audience restive. The best advice I can give on this point is that the would-be broadcaster should vary his rate of utterance depending upon the weightiness of the material. The tougher the stuff, the slower the pace. And be careful how you breathe. Do not rely on ordinary punctuation but go through your script and mark off groups of words which bring out your thoughts. None of these groups should be too long that you run out of breath. When speaking off the air, you can afford to take a deep breathe through your mouth without distracting anybody, but you dare not do this on the radio for it would be clearly heard. On the radio you must inhale more quietly and deliberately through the nostrils, and never exhaust your breath entirely before taking another one. Also you do not breathe directly into the microphone unless you want to sound like a windstorm.

So to sum up: Radio speaking is a one-way conversation with a vast audience of individuals. The radio speaker must have something interesting to say and must say it attractively. He will use the rising and falling inflection of ordinary conversation. He will be emphatic, soothing or inviting through his flow of words, and at all times will endeavour to project his personality pleasantly to the distant listener.