

## **1997 MAASA Presidential Address**

# **American Studies, A Context for Tech Talk?: Distance Learning, The Internet, and Other New Communications Technologies**

**Elaine Prostak Berland**

I recall a moment in the early 1980s when I was doing my doctoral research on the innovation of radio during the 1920s. One of the first pieces I came across was an article in *Scientific American*. It was 1922: crystal sets and Radio Boys, make-shift antennas hanging from apartment building roofs, new terms like “broadcasting”, “tuning in”, “dx’ing” and “giving a guy the air.” Less than .02% of American homes had radio sets. The concept of using radio as a mass entertainment advertising medium for a mass national audience had not yet been constructed. Nonetheless, radio was already hailed as “the greatest influence on modern civilization and the acceleration of the pace of progress.”<sup>1</sup>

What fascinated me in my early research was that people were using the radio to re-imagine their social relations during a time of intense modernization and urbanization. Writers and listeners hoped that this new technology would help them create and maintain a sense of social connectedness.

Imagine my surprise when I picked up the March 1997 issue of *Scientific American*—seventy-five years later to the very month—and found a series of articles proclaiming the promises of the Internet.<sup>2</sup> A sense of newness and wonder permeated the articles. As I continued to read, I was struck by the similarities in

this discussion to earlier writing about the innovation of communication technologies, and recognized that my research about 1920s radio might be useful in understanding more fully our current Tech Talk.

I suggest three points that I think provide useful frames for thinking about communications technologies and their commentary on social connectedness. After all, this is one of the primary objectives of American Studies: to provide a way to think about what things mean within American culture.

**1. Talk about technology is not new.** In the *Scientific American* Special Report “The Internet: Fulfilling the Promise,” several themes emerged that are strikingly similar to 1920s radio talk.

One theme is **the** dream of universal access. Today, the Internet is talked about as **THE** new communication technology that “will revolutionize information distribution” and provide “universal access in a digital age.” During the 1920s folks were just as certain that radio would be **THE** means to revolutionize the distribution of intelligence.<sup>3</sup>

Today there are visions of using the Internet in combination with other distance learning technologies to extend education beyond the campus. College offerings range from an occasional “virtual course” to entire “virtual degrees.” This year Duke University will graduate its first class of students completing master’s degrees in business through distance education, while the governors of thirteen Western states plan to open the Western Governors University, a fully-accredited virtual university. Walden University, a free-standing “virtual university,” advertises a Ph.D. that can be earned in 2 1/2 to 3 years.<sup>4</sup>

There also were visions of schools taught entirely by radio: free common schools for children, radio night schools for workers, “colleges of the air.” Kansas State University, a Midwestern state land-grant institution, was among the earliest and most successful. There were even calls to endow “a super radio university” wherein “every home has the potentiality of becoming an extension of Carnegie Hall or Harvard University.” Education—not entertainment—was imagined as among the earliest and most important uses for radio, “The sky was the limit” for “the little red school house had taken wings.”<sup>5</sup>

Coupled with the theme of universal access is social promise. The Internet is envisioned as the means to fulfilling “the utopian vision of an all-encompassing repository of human knowledge.” The Internet will become “a place where the musings of Homer, Shakespeare and Lao-tzu will reside just a mouse click away from school lunch menus and agendas for the next city council meeting—a permanent record of all human activity....”<sup>6</sup>

Press commentaries in the 1920s likewise celebrated radio’s transformative and redemptive properties. Radio was proclaimed “the fifth estate” with the potential power to rival established molders of public life such as the press, school, church, and platform. Convinced that the success of democracy and the measure of civilization depended upon well-informed citizens, both reformers

and status quo supporters in the 1920s saw radio as a user-friendly, cost-effective means to insure universal access to information.<sup>7</sup>

Not everyone in the 1920s or 1990s, however, share such glorious promises and hopes for either the radio or the Internet: expression of fear is also a powerful theme. Two events that occurred last month (March 1997) illustrate the intensity of the fear and anxiety surrounding the innovation of new communication technologies. After promising to put computers in every classroom and every child on the information highway, the Clinton Administration defended the Communication Decency Act before the Supreme Court. The Decency Act is the latest federal contribution to a series of local and state calls for rating systems on program content, lock boxes on cable and television sets—an indication of the fine line and tension between universal access and local control.

The second event was unfortunately far more dramatic. In late March 1997, a group of adults, who were living together in San Diego as members of a religious organization calling itself Heaven's Gate, were led by a strong charismatic personality, and supported themselves by designing web pages, committed a ritualistic mass suicide in a misguided effort to have their souls transported via space ship to the Hale Bopp Comet. The multiple Heaven's Gates suicides and the live real-time satellite coverage of their discovery served to heighten fears about the powers of the Internet: "a scary place" where "...networks of people lurking out there with alien values... that anyone, any age, might stumble onto...with a mouse click."<sup>8</sup> The Internet, often referred to as the "global village," a huge but close-knit community that shares common values and experiences, might now be better termed, some critics suggest, with a more apt metaphor of "the city" with its suggestion of unlimited opportunities and myriad dangers where many cultures coexist and at times clash.<sup>9</sup>

Similar outcries came against the wireless as "the work of the devil" or as Martian signals from outer space that threatened the well-being of cattle and children. A more common fear was that radio was yet another unpredictable cultural force wrought by modernization and urbanization that would corrupt the traditional moral development of children and erode parental control. Radio, it was feared, would introduce novel, foreign ideas into the home: "No locks will keep this intruder out, nor can the parents shut their children away from it."<sup>10</sup>

My study of 1920s primary sources uncovered many such accounts detailing these major themes, which have resurfaced with the innovation of most new communications technologies. While there is a vast technological difference between the 1920s wireless and 1990s digital communication, **the way in which we think and talk about the social use and promise of these technologies to create, save or destroy our society is strikingly similar.** Talk about technology, then, has a history. But it is not simply a history of science and technology—or, for that matter, a history of media alone.

2. Talk about technology is also talk about communication, culture, and community. Implicit in all talk about technology are concepts of culture and society.

When talk about technology is historicized and contextualized, when the links between technology, culture, and communication are made explicit, that is, when we move beyond simplistic technological determinism, some interesting thinking and questioning emerge.

Americans of the 1920s expressed a particularly heightened concern for the relationship between communication and culture. Caught between a fading old cultural and social order and an emerging yet not fully-articulated new order, diverse groups within the United States looked to the new technology of public communication as a way to hold together a society that seemed to be quickly coming apart. Writer Wademar Kaempffert captured this anxiety when he wrote that the nation “had become disconnected”: The “United States” had become, he wrote, a nation separated by time and space with “only an idea of ‘our country’” holding together its some 106 million inhabitants.

In 1922, F.W. Parsons announced that the world was entering a new era—the “Age of Air”. A writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Parsons claimed that the element of air, like its predecessors of steel, steam and electricity, was transforming the very essence of American daily life. Already the airplane had converted the air into a highway of travel; nitrogen enriched farm soil; argon filled electric bulbs. And, radio, “perhaps air’s most wonderous marvel,” was converting space into a powerful medium of communication.<sup>11</sup>

In many ways Parson’s metaphor illustrates the complexities and paradoxes of the 1920s. During the 1920s, increased economic productivity, technological innovation, urbanization, and an unprecedented material abundance characterized a new phase of industrialization in America. Just as the nineteenth-century frontier myth of open lands had once lured settlers west in search of plenty and social mobility, the twentieth-century dream of a new frontier based on technology promised opportunities for national progress as infinite as air.

The winds of change, however, also stirred up waves of reaction among many Americans. Increased immigration of “new ethnics” from eastern and southern Europe, southern blacks, and rural folk into cities, as well as changing concepts of gender roles and the “modern,” fed a realization that “America” was changing. By the 1920s, Americans faced the complex task of adapting themselves, their cultures, and social institutions to the social changes embedded in an on-going process of industrialization and urbanization. The manner in which Americans adjusted to the air’s wonders would form the foundation of modern twentieth-century society. As F.W. Parsons accurately predicted, the radio would be a critical navigating tool in America’s voyage into the new frontier.

It was neither technologically given nor historically inevitable that radio would become institutionalized as it was by the end of the 1920s as a mass entertainment medium funded through advertising and structured through a sender-controlled national network system that would dominate broadcasting for almost the remainder of the twentieth century. That this monolithic definition of broadcasting dominated thinking about media use until only recently may be

because we forget that there were—and are—other possibilities for using communication technologies.

In essence, what 1920s critics glorified or abhorred about radio was related to their ideological positions on modern, urban, industrial, consumer society, and to their desire to control the rapid social and cultural changes taking place in the United States. In a highly polarized social and cultural milieu, many Americans imagined radio technology as a solution to persistent social problems of poverty, ignorance, class and ethnic difference, a solution that existed outside of history and politics and required no major economic or social restructuring.

Thus, talk about radio and other communication technologies is talk about group life, a social construction wherein real-lived peoples are imagined as an audience in market terms. At issue were whose voices would be amplified, silenced, or marginalized. Radio, it was argued, would bring different groups together, promoting cultural homogeneity, blurring diversity, and legitimizing values consistent with consumer capitalism. Technology, assumed to be neutral and non-problematic, became perceived of both as a term characterizing and a source of unity for a modern society struggling to create itself while simultaneously displacing an older way of life.

Cultural studies scholar James Carey suggests that we are again in the midst of a major shift with experiences not so different from what was experienced when a fundamentally new system of national communications, including the radio, was put into place. Perhaps clearer to see now that we are leaving it, the system of “the modern” stretched from the birth of the national magazine and mass, urban newspaper in the 1890s through the creation of the first national broadcasting network system in the 1920s through the disintegration of the network era in television in the 1970s. “Since the late 1970s we have been undergoing a similar communications revolution,” Carey posits, “but one whose scalar dynamic is at the global rather the national level.” While the wondrous technology of digital communication has created a virtual convergence of new and old media wherein the internet and live CNN satellite coverage daily span the globe and appear to bring the world together, the narrative and images these new technologies bear are those of divergence: enormous cultural and social diversity, single-interest politics, ethnic identity clashes, and wars. For as scholars of the global have observed, social convergence does not simply follow technological convergence. Rather, cultural fragmentation and homogenization may not be opposing views of what is happening but two constitutive trends of a single global reality.

How are we, then, to reconcile the urge to embrace technology for the greater good it might bring with the urge to preserve community and cultural identity from external encroachments? What have reflections on technology, historically, led peoples to express as the greatest goals of ourselves as a nation: the promise of democracy? universal access to education? <sup>12</sup>

3. Ultimately, talk about technology is talk about ourselves.

In many ways, this is a very different time from when I was growing up. I went from kindergarten through high school in the same parochial school that my mother attended, with children from the same Polish-Catholic background. The extent of the diversity within my high school of about 150 students was a girl whose father was Italian. Teachers cautioned us about befriending those who were too different, namely Protestants. I remember my first TV in the early 1950s: black and white with three channels. All the children on the television screen, from *Captain Kangaroo* to *Father Knows Best*, were white, middle-class, and lived in nuclear families. And girls were meant to be seen and not heard. *Donna Reed* admonished her teen-age daughter not to be too smart and to make her boyfriend's interests her own interests.

My 16 year-old daughter Kate thinks the reruns of *Donna Reed* are satire. My 12-year-old Rachel, upon finding my third-grade class picture, remarked that the picture looked funny. When I asked her if she meant we were all wearing outdated Peter-Pan collar blouses with our navy uniforms and our page boy haircuts, she replied, "No, mom, because you all look the same!" Same meant "all white", as unself-consciously noted by my Rachel, a product of post-segregation public schools.

My daughters will have to navigate their own multiple realities, including a multi-media environment that includes a 50-channel steady pastiche of three decades of television programming collapsed in time, of MTV and digitized computer-enhanced images of anorexic females that further blur distinctions between real and imagined worlds. They will have their own identity work to integrate both the richness and the contradictions of the multiple worlds they inhabit.

Ultimately, it is important to identify and name what has been changed, as well as what has not changed, in our dominant cultural landscape. It is critical to realize that, once institutionalized as communication media, these emergent technologies become powerful cultural frames that shape the way we see our world.

The question, then, is not "should we change" or "should we use computers, the internet, the satellite, etc." The fact is we are living in a period of continuing intense change with new communications technologies abounding. The question is *how* we will change: how will we understand and imagine change and what the changes mean? How will we as a people manage the social uses of our new technologies? Who will be included in this virtual new world? Which communities, physical and imagined, will gain access to the dazzling new technologies? Whose stories, voices, and power will be amplified?

And, perhaps equally significant: who will be denied access, and significantly silenced? Will the rituals of exclusion continue? What will be lost in the process of choosing? What merits being preserved even at the expense of technological efficiency and economic profit? For what things come to mean

depends upon what they do not come to mean. What are the values and visions that will guide decisions about using “web, wires and waves”?<sup>13</sup>

Currently, concerns about culture, community and communication are not loudly expressed in the dominant public conversations about the introduction of new communications technologies and their impact. In a R&D, S&T (research and development/science & technology)-oriented society, it seems that we are continually amazed and enamored with what appears to be yet another miraculous birth of a yet bigger and better machine, coming into a virgin land.

It is easy to get swept up in the energy and optimism of TECH TALK. Or, on the other hand, one can withdraw from concerns about new technologies on the grounds that “I do books” or “I am a computer dinosaur.” As long as Tech Talk remains a text without a context or history, it is easy to lose track that talk about technology is a way to talk about relationships and social connectedness, the stuff of everyday life that is complex, often contradictory, messy, and difficult to articulate.

So, now I have come to the time to close tonight’s Presidential Address. Note that I did not say “conclude”, for the Tech Talk of course continues. As I listened to the diversity of thought-provoking research papers and the engaging discussions through this conference, I am once again convinced that an American Studies voice has much to offer public conversations about critical issues of the day, including new communications technologies and their social uses. American Studies is not a newcomer to the study of social and cultural issues related to periods of transition. It brings historical context to the conversation. American Studies is particularly well-positioned to take part in the conversation while it stands apart: its central concern for culture and community as well as questions of identity can help us to understand what gets eclipsed when the dominant language obscures who the “we” is. American Studies can insert alternative language to address questions of how Americans make sense of change, as varied new technologies, peoples, and ideas become part of the great social experiment, an experiment in which diverse peoples still imagine and attempt to live together in this idea of “our country”.

The similarities between discourses on the potential of radio and the Internet are striking. There is a long tradition of ambivalence in American response to new and innovative technologies. Images of technology as a panacea to all problems or as “the machine” threatening to destroy the garden are so firmly woven into the cultural fabric as to almost be invisible or natural, “just the way things are”. The challenge is to understand that what 1920s or 1990s critics glorify or abhor about new communication technologies is related to their ideological positions and to broader cultural values, and to the desire to control the rapid social changes taking place in the United States and today, in a dynamic, rapidly changing world at the turn of a new century. In a highly charged milieu, many Americans imagine new technology as a solution to persistent social problems of poverty, ignorance, class and ethnic difference, a solution existing outside of history, politics, and social

structure that requires no major economic or social restructuring. If the social promise of new technologies is ever to be realized, history, politics and social restructure must be studied and addressed.

My presidential message, then, is a simple but difficult call to encourage us as scholars, critics, and teachers to bring the richness of what we are learning not only to our journals and classrooms, but also to the larger public conversation in an effort to make culture, community and communication a recognized national priority.

## NOTES

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1. Much of the research underpinning this address comes from my dissertation, Elaine Prostak (Berland), "Up in the Air: The Debate Over Radio Use During the 1920s" (University of Kansas, 1983). Specific references will be cited as examples: Austin C. Lescarboua, "Radio for Everybody," *Scientific American*, 126 (March 1922), 166-68. Also see Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting 1899-1922* (Baltimore, 1987).

2. "The Internet: Fulfilling the Promise," Special Report, *Scientific American*, 276 (March 1997), 49-83.

3. Herbert Hoover, "Radio's Great Future," *Radio Broadcast*, 1 (September 1922), 433; F.W. Parsons, "Up in the Air," *Saturday Evening Post*, 194 (April 15, 1922), 6; Joseph K. Hart, "Radiating Culture," *Survey*, 54 (March 18, 1922), 949, and Stanley Frost, "Radio: Our Next Great Step Forward," *Collier's*, 69 (April 8, 1922), 3.

4. "Degrees of Freedom: Colleges Offer Flexible, On-line Classes," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 6, 1997, 7B and Neil L. Rudenstine, "The Internet and Education: A Close Fit," Point of View, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 21, 1997.

5. Leon Whipple, "Red Radio," *Survey*, 54 (July 1, 1925), 407; J.J. Tiggert, "Radio in the American School System," *Annals of the American Society of Political and Social Sciences*, 142 (March 1929), 71-77; "College Courses by Radio," *School and Society*, 23 (June 12, 1926), 746.

6. "The Internet: Bringing Order From Chaos," *Scientific American*, 276 (March 1997), 51.

7. H.V. Kaltenborn, "On the Air: Radio's Responsibility As a Molder of Public Opinion," *Century*, 112 (October 1926), 671; "Radio and Public Information," *Literary Digest*, 73 (June 24, 1922), 24.

8. George Johnson, "Image Problem: Old View of Internet: Nerds. New View: Nuts," *New York Times*, March 30, 1997, Section 4, 1 and 6.

9. Paul Resnick, "Filtering Information on the Internet," *Scientific American*, 276 (March 1997), 62.

10. Sidonie Mastner Gruenberg, "Radio and the Child," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 177 (January 1935), 123-28.

11. Examples of critical works that contextualize and problematize new communications technologies include Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982) and Robert McChesney, "The Internet and U.S. Communication Policy-Making in Historical and Critical Perspective," *Journal of Communication*, 46 (Winter 1996), 112-117.

12. Waldeman Kaempffert, "The Social Destiny of Radio," *Forum*, 71 (June 1924), 764-72. Also see Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York, 1995) and Warren Sussman, "Culture as Communications" in *Culture as History* (New York, 1984), 256-58.

13. Parsons, "Up in the Air," 6.

14. James Carey, "Everything That Rises Must Diverge," in Philipp Gaunt, *Beyond Agendas: New Directions in Communication Research*, (Westport, Conn., 1993), 171-184. Also see A, Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Culture Economy," in M.

Featherstone, *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity*, 295-310 (Newbury Park, CA, 1990).

15. Hazel Dicken-Garcia, "Linking Technology, Media, Community," *Clio Among the Media*, 28 (Summer 1996), 1-10.

16. "Inventing the Future: Frontiers in Cyberspace," Advertising Supplement, *New York Times Magazine*, April 20, 1997, 28.