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ABSTRACT

Continuing education professionals have long been interested in telecommunications media because of their potential value in extending instruction to distant students. The first mass medium to offer a timely means of distance instruction was open-broadcast radio. During the 1920s and 1930s, 13 United States colleges offered credit courses over the airwaves. Yet radio did not live up to its seemingly great potential; by 1940, instructional college programs had vanished. The State University of Iowa (currently the University of Iowa) offered perhaps the best university program of that area. Research into the program at Iowa shows that it started with great enthusiasm and eventually enrolled almost 100 students from many distant points in combined radio-correspondence courses. However, as time went on, the technical limitations of radio, the lack of well-defined target populations, and the failure to create an adequate faculty reward system eventually spelled the doom of the system. Thus, as has been the case with other technical advances in education, the potential of radio was oversold, badly marketed, and eventually unrealized. (KC)

PIONEERING INSTRUCTIONAL RADIO IN THE U.S.: FIVE YEARS OF FRUSTRATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, 1925-1930

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ABSTRACT

Continuing education professionals have long been interested in telecommunications media because of their potential value in extending instruction to distant students. The first mass medium to offer a timely means of distance instruction was open-broadcast radio. During the 1920's and 1930's, 13 U.S. colleges offered credit courses over the airwaves. Yet radio did not live up to its seemingly great potential; by 1940, instructional college programmes had vanished. The University of Iowa offered perhaps the best university programme of that era. By investigating instructional radio there, it is possible to better understand that medium's demise.

PIONEERING INSTRUCTIONAL RADIO IN THE U.S.: FIVE YEARS OF FRUSTRATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, 1925-1930

Every new development in telecommunications seems to be accompanied by exuberant predictions about how it will radically alter American education. Thomas Edison, for example, believed that motion pictures would make texbooks obsolete. Similar prophecies followed the development of radio, television, and now interactive computers.[1] But while all of these products have been integrated into the United States educational system, none has substantially changed it. This is particularly true at the postsecondary (tertiary) level, where most classes are still taught in much the same manner as they were in the nineteenth century. Although the various telecommunications media have proven useful for adult students unable, or unwilling, to attend resident classes, their use has never matched the expectations of early devotees. In short, the electronic media have been oversold. This is particularly true of radio, the first widely-used electronic instructional medium.

In this paper, the terms instructional radio and instructional broadcasting refer to one specific type of educational broadcasting--that is, formal, nonresidential, collegiate-level instruction. The terms educational radio and educational broadcasting refer to all noncommercial programming offered by educational institutions.

Many U.S. colleges and universities were pioneers in the development of radio, often via experimental stations in their electrical engineering departments. Immediately after World War I, college- and university-owned stations proliferated. By 1936, the federal government had issued broadcast licenses to 202 colleges, universities, school boards, and proprietary schools; the majority of the stations, however, did not

survive.[2] Most universities and colleges used their licenses to broadcast cultural and informational--or "educational"--programming. Others envisioned using radio to extend their faculties, to make collegiate education accessible to distant students, particularly adults.

To many, instructional radio represented a bold, even revolutionary, development. One enthusiast predicted. "It is possible and probable that radio broadcasting will become a great free common school in the not distant future--a common school with classes numbering thousands."[3] The administration of The University of Iowa, a fairly conservative institution, asserted that "it is no imaginary dream to picture the school of tomorrow as an entirely different institution from that of today, because of the use of radio in teaching."[4] Such statements emanating from colleges and universities contributed to the overselling of radio in the two decades after World War I.

Despite glowing predictions, most U.S. universities approached instruction via radio tentatively. Few were eager to place their imprimatur on this form of instruction. Of the 36 institutions that experimented with course delivery via the "ether," only 13 offered courses for college credit. The others either did not grant credit or else used broadcasting only to supplement existing means of course delivery, mainly correspondence study. For the 13 that did broadcast courses for credit, the experiment was short-lived. By 1940, instructional radio had disappeared.[5] Subsequent efforts to develop radio as an instructional medium in the United States have been sporadic and not remarkably successful.

A case study of one institution that did have faith in radio's potential for distance instruction offers an opportunity to examine some of the reasons for its initial failure. The University of Iowa--or State University of Iowa (S.U.I.) as it was called then--became involved in

radio, as did many other colleges and universities, through experimentation in its College of Applied Sciences (Engineering). After a brief wartime moratorium on broadcasting, S.U.I. purchased its first voice and music transmitter in 1919, and began broadcasting with an experimental license. On June 26, 1922, the University received a standard broadcast license and was assigned the call letters WHAA, which were changed to WSUI in 1925.[6]

From the very early days of WHAA, the University's administration considered radio an important educational medium. In the inaugural WHAA broadcast programme President Jessup declared, "It is but the logical outcome in the field of applied science that radio, [sic] broadcasting will make available new fields of educational activities," including "a direct educational service of an extra-mural character."[7]

The academic wheels began turning in 1924. Dean of Engineering William Raymond, Extension Director Edward Lauer, and a newly created Faculty Senate Radio Board met to consider credit course programming. They recommended developing such courses to a subcommittee of the Senate's Committee on Course of Study. This group, in turn, recommended that new correspondence courses should be written around radio lecture series. The various academic departments and the Dean of Extension would oversee course content and development respectively. Each two semester hour course would consist of 16 written lessons and a proctored, written final examination. Apparently development was already well underway, because the subcommittee recommended approval of "all radio and correspondence credit so far arranged" by Extension.[8] Lauer and Helen Williams, Director of Correspondence Study, worked with academic departments in the development of course outlines and study materials.

On February 4, 1925, the first five radio courses commenced. The offerings included "The Psychology of Learning," "Modern English," "Current Social and Economic Problems," "Appreciation of Literature," and "The

American Constitutional System." Of the 76 enrolled students, 64 eventually completed their courses and received credit. Many were school teachers, for whom some of the courses had been targeted. Williams thought that only tardiness in mailing bulletins kept enrollments as low as they were. Even so, administering the courses required so much clerical work that routine correspondence study work had to be postponed.[9]

At the end of the semester, Williams and Lauer pronounced the experiment a success. Williams was particularly pleased about the lack of technical problems, having received few reports of static and only a single complaint about interference from another station. The student at the greatest distance--Stillwater, Oklahoma--regularly sent in his detailed notes of the lectures to prove that he was receiving the lectures clearly. Although Lauer conceded that the enrollment figures were small, he considered them satisfactory for a first attempt.[10] The following Fall semester, 97 students enrolled in seven courses, an increase of nearly 25 percent over Spring. Williams considered the results "not at all spectacular."[11] Yet, these figures represented the peak semester enrollment in radio courses. As in the Spring, most students lived in Iowa, but one S.U.I. alumnus living in Earl Grey, Saskatchewan, enrolled and had very little trouble receiving the lectures.[12]

Despite continued intense promotional efforts and extremely hard work on the part of Correspondence Study personnel in the subsequent four semesters, the number of students, and then the number of courses, declined, slowly at first, then rapidly. By the Fall of 1927, three courses drew only 14 students. With the end of the Fall, 1927 semester, true radio courses--those with direct, paced instruction over the airwaves--ended. Because of a lack of faculty interest and cooperation, Helen Williams was unable to put together a schedule for the Fall 1928 semester.[13]

In the Spring of 1927, Extension began another experiment. WSUI broadcast lectures in elementary French and Spanish. However, no courses were developed around the lectures. Anyone who wanted college credit had to enroll in the conventional correspondence courses, for which attention to the lectures was not even required.[14]

In order to replace the true radio courses of 1925-1927, WSUI and Correspondence Study tried yet another arrangement in the Summer of 1929. Professor Frank Luther Mott offered a course entitled, "The Short Story," which was broadcast in the daytime from a specially-equipped classroom, before an audience of resident students. Distant students could take the course simultaneously by submitting written work, as set forth in a syllabus, turning in their notes, and passing a proctored examination. Only two students enrolled on this basis. In spite of the poor response, Correspondence Study offered two more "in absentia" courses the following Fall, then five more in the Spring. Except for the summer term, no record of in absentia student enrollments appears to have been kept; instead, they were included in the other correspondence course enrollments. At any rate, it seems that very few students enrolled in absentia. As Williams noted, most of the people who wanted to enroll in radio courses were school teachers who could not listen to daytime broadcasts.[15] From the surviving records it is impossible to determine precisely when this practice ceased, but there is no mention of such enrollments in Correspondence Study's monthly reports after late 1929. Broadcasting from the classroom would continue for more than three decades, but only as educational/informational programming, not as course work.

Given S.U.I.'s commitment, why did its radio courses not succeed? Years afterward, Helen Williams stated succinctly:

As time went on and neighboring stations increased their power, it became difficult for any but those in this section of the state to "get" our station. Then, too, the novelty had worn off, and the instructors objected to the extra work for so little pay.[16]

While Williams spoke in oversimplified generalizations, she did touch on the major reasons for the cessation of Iowa's ambitious and pioneering effort. Technical limitations, the lack of well-defined target populations, and the failure to create an adequate faculty reward system were indeed the major reasons.

The constantly changing and usually more restrictive broadcast power and frequency authorizations bear out Williams's first point. Between 1925 and 1929, WSUI had to change its frequency and/or broadcast power six times, and to share scheduling time with three different stations. The resulting confusion could not have benefitted either the University or prospective students. Whereas in 1925 students from as far away as Saskatchewan were able to take Iowa radio courses, by 1931 WSUI had an effective range of only 100 miles.[17]

Williams was also correct that the novelty of instructional radio had worn off. No one seems to have given any thought to identifying a continuing audience for radio courses or of establishing an external degree or certificate program, for example. Except for schoolteachers, who could improve their salaries by taking random courses, few people believed they needed these courses. And when radio courses were shifted to daytime broadcasts from the classroom, they lost even the schoolteachers.[18] For one man, however, radio courses were perfect. Clifford S. Lindeen, of Burlington, Iowa, was only a few credit hours short of a degree from the University in 1917, when the U.S. declared war on Germany. He returned from Army service in Europe severely disabled, crippled by arthritis, and quickly going blind. He managed to take enough radio courses in the Spring

of 1925 to complete the requirements for a B.A. President Jessup conferred his degree over WSUI, during its broadcast coverage of commencement.[19]

Another factor contributing to the demise of instructional radio at The University of Iowa was the lack of incentive for the faculty to participate. Without their commitment, it was impossible to continue. On the surface, this observation would not seem valid, for some of the University's most distinguished professors participated. The renowned historian Louis Pelzer, Pulitzer Prize winner Frank Luther Mott, and George Gallup, who would achieve fame for his development of public opinion polls, are three examples.

However, from the very beginning Extension experienced numerous and serious difficulties in recruiting and working with professors. Early on, Helen Williams complained that getting professors to agree to develop courses was her greatest problem. This only worsened as the programme progressed. By the end of the Fall semester, 1927, recruitment had become impossible. Williams worked well into January but was unable to recruit anyone. The Dean of the College of Education refused even to return her numerous calls.[20] Broadcasts of courses resumed only when professors could lecture from their daytime classrooms. This, of course, required a great deal less time and energy on their part.

A lack of planning, needs assessment, faculty and audience development, and the decreasing range of WSUI's broadcasts, caused the cessation of S.U.I.'s landmark venture in educational telecommunications. In spite of its shortcomings, however, the S.U.I. effort was widely recognized as the most sophisticated and comprehensive experiment of that age.[21] In fact, this venture can be labeled as a failure only because it did not immediately match the predictions of early enthusiasts. Like every subsequent development in educational telecommunications, its partisans oversold it. In so doing, they established a pattern that persists in continuing education in the United States.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the overselling of electronic media in postsecondary education, see: John A. Ohles, "The Microcomputer: Don't Love it to Death," T.H.E. Journal (August 1985):49-53.
2. S.E. Frost, Jr., Education's Own Stations: The History of Broadcast Licenses Issued to Educational Institutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 3.
3. M. P. Rice, "The Future of Radio Education," Journal of the National Education Association (March 1924):82-83, cited in Ohles, "The Microcomputer," p. 49.
4. "A Brief Stating the Position, Plans, and Projects of Radio Station WSUI," July 22, 1927, legal brief, President's Correspondence 1926-1927, folder 99, University of Iowa Archives.
5. Frost, Education's Own Stations, p. 3; Carroll Atkinson, Radio Extension Courses Broadcast for Credit (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1941), pp. 13-15.
6. Carl Menzer, "Fifty Years of Broadcasting at The University of Iowa," unpublished Ms., 1968, WSUI Papers, box 2, folder 2, University of Iowa Archives.
7. Walter A. Jessup, "Opening Program, Station WHAA," radio script, February 12, 1924, President's Correspondence, 1923-1924, folder 97A.
8. "Report: Subcommittee on Correspondence and Radio Courses," October 28, 1924, in "Records of the Correspondence Study Department" (hereinafter cited as CSD), 1920-25, Center for Credit Programs (hereinafter cited as CCP) University of Iowa; Proceedings of the National University Extension Association (Salt Lake City, Utah: n.p., 1926), p. 82.

9. "CSD 1920-25," report for February 1925. Atkinson, Radio Extension Courses, p. 64; Proceedings of the National University Extension Association (Salt Lake City, Utah: n.p., 1926), p. 83.

10. "CSD 1920-25," reports for February, April and May, 1925.

11. "CSD 1920-25," report for October 1925.

12. Ibid.

13. "Reports of the Bureau of Correspondence Study (hereinafter cited as BCS)," October 1927, CCP; CSD 1926-1928, report for January 1928. In an interview several years later, published in Atkinson, Radio Extension Courses, p. 63, Williams said that she had been unable to schedule courses for Fall, 1928. Actually, her own records indicate that all radio courses had ended one semester earlier.

14. "BCS 1921-29," report for January-February 1927.

15. University of Iowa, Service Bulletin (September 13, 1930):24:37; "BCS 1929-1934," report for July 1929; Helen Williams to Students, September 24, 1929, form letter, WSUI Papers, box 1, folder 2. Atkinson, in Radio Extension Courses, p. 66, erroneously states that the first three classes in this format were offered Fall semester 1929. Then he contradicts himself by quoting Williams as having said these courses were begun in the Spring semester, 1929.

16. Cited in Atkinson, Radio Extension Courses, p. 63.

17. Frost, Education's Own Stations, p. 132; Proceedings of the National University Extension Association (Boulder, Colorado: n.p., 1931), p. 41.

18. Atkinson, Radio Extension Courses, p. 63.

19. "CSD 1920-25," Report for October 1925; Proceedings of the National University Extension Association (Salt Lake City, Utah: n.p., 1926), p. 83; Bruce Mahon, "State University of Iowa Broadcast Correspondence Courses for Credit from 1923-1927, unpublished Ms., n.d., WSUI Papers, box 2, folder 4.

20. "CSD 1926-1928," report for January 1928.

21. See for example: W. S. Bittner and H. F. Mallory, University Teaching by Mail (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), p. 26; W. G. Chambers to Carl Menzer, July 27, 1929, WSUI Papers, box 1, folder 1.