Spellbinding and Crooning: Sound Amplification, Radio, and Political Rhetoric in International Comparative Perspective, 1900–1945

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Sound Technology as a Political Problem

On Wednesday, 11 March 1936, at 8 p.m., both Dutch radio stations interrupted their programming for breaking news. Responding to international tensions related to German Führer Adolf Hitler, Prime Minister Hendrikus Colijn used the radio to address the increasingly worrisome situation (fig. 1). Four days earlier Hitler had proclaimed that Germany would unilaterally withdraw from the 1925 Locarno treaties; then German troops had driven the French occupational army from the Rhineland. It was clear that Hitler considered himself no longer bound to the restrictions the international community had put on German military strength. Was this a precursor to war? Colijn kept quiet for days but at last decided to call back a few hundred soldiers from leave to better guard the Dutch-German border.

Confronted with public anxieties, Colijn decided to use the mandate of the government to require transmission time on both national radio stations. For twenty minutes he tried to soothe public worries about the possibility of war. His radio speech ended with an explanation of the precautions the Dutch government had decided to take and concluded thus:

It is better that one can say afterwards that the government was too cautious than to reprimand her for dozing during a moment that called for vigilance and a sense of duty. I therefore ask the listeners to get a good night’s sleep, just as they get probably every night. For the time being there is no reason to be worried. And with this, dear listeners, I leave you to the amusement the radio usually offers you. Good evening.”

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The next day the full text of this speech appeared on the front pages of all Dutch newspapers. The leading liberal newspaper, Algemeen Handelsblad, characterized the speech as “confidence building” and “sincere” and wrote that “the strength, but above all the calmness of the words of Colijn, are important; they express high esteem for the population.” Reading this assessment, it is surprising to discover that after the Second World War the Colijn speech became instead a symbol of old-fashioned politics. Later critics would again and again cite Colijn’s wish that listeners should get “a good night’s sleep” as proof that prewar politicians ignored the dangers of National Socialism. Indeed, the clip is one of the most recycled excerpts in Dutch radio history. In these interpretations, Colijn represented a political style that misled the population, shushing public anxieties with bedtime fairytales.

Why is Colijn understood as old-fashioned, rather than a modern and effective user of radio communication? Other politicians of his generation, like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Adolf Hitler, are praised,
admired, or feared for their effective and shrewd use of radio. Exploring the answer to this question can help in a more broad examination of the relationship of media technology and political culture. Media technology creates new forms of “logic” in which media frame political reality. Debates about this “mediatization of politics” are of great importance in studies in political and communication sciences, but the historical dimensions of the question are often forgotten in such work.²

This article concentrates on the challenges that four leading politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands faced when new sound technologies developed. Where most studies have concentrated on radio, this article takes a broader look at the interconnected technologies of sound amplification and radio. Sound amplification created the opportunity to reach a wider public, but microphones had fundamental effects on the rhetoric, behavior, and speaking style of politicians. Radio created a new “soundscape” that had to negotiate its position within the existing media landscape. In this negotiation the culture of listening changed and the boundaries between public and private spheres were redefined. Radio created “despatialized simultaneity,” as John B. Thompson describes the reordering of space and time through the advent of new media communication at the beginning of the twentieth century.³ In the new and contested soundscape, traditional political culture with its distance between official politics and the private spheres of the electorate changed into a more intimate but mediated relation between politicians and the public.

The Tradition of Spellbinding Politics

The nineteenth century saw a growth of mass politics in the Western world. Next to the debates of liberals and conservatives in parliaments, socialist and radical politicians tried to mobilize the masses by adding pathos to their public presentations. At mass meetings their emotional presence, exciting rhetoric, and polarized positions vis-à-vis their opponents created an atmosphere of hope and common belief. The German socialist leader Ferdinand Lassalle, for example, could silence a hall by making determined gestures combined with a voice in which “the thunder of the Niagara rolled from the ceiling.”⁴ Well-known pictures show communist leader Vladimir Lenin shouting at thousands of people gathered in squares in Russian cities. The later propaganda of the Soviet regime encouraged the false belief that Lenin mainly used his voice and physical presence to convince the Russian proletariat that a revolution was needed (figs. 2–4).

² Huub Wijfjes and Gerrit Voerman, eds., Mediatization of Politics in History.
⁴ Karl-Heinz Göttert, Geschichte der Stimme, 432–33.
But pragmatically, how could one reach or move a mass public with a relatively weak voice? This dilemma was most urgent at open-air rallies where tens of thousands might gather to hear a political speech (fig. 5). Human voice generally did not reach beyond the first rows, even if the politician was shouting in the loudest possible way. It was an old problem. Ancient Greeks and Romans designed amphitheatrical buildings and structures in which sounds could be “amplified” (acoustically) for a bigger crowd. But even in the churches, theaters, and concert halls built in later times, where these acoustic techniques were applied in more sophisticated ways, attendees in the back rows often couldn’t hear more than a few fragments of what was said.5

At open-air political meetings stewards constantly called for total silence, and repeated the politician’s words. At most of these mass meetings tens of speakers addressed parts of the audience from pulpits and rostrums. And still attendees needed to use coiled newspapers as artificial

5. Ibid., 260–70; Emily Thompson, The Soundscape of Modernity, 13–57.
FIG. 3 Lenin speaking to thousands of people on Red Square, 1 May 1919.

FIG. 4 On 29 March 1919, a recording was made of a Lenin speech, using a rather primitive phonograph. Such records were played at public propaganda rallies, hoping this would contribute to the consolidation of the Soviet regime.
hearing aids. Because it was impossible to speak in complete sentences understandable to all, a good mass speech was a constant repetition of the most meaningful words. These words had to be shouted in all directions and were repeated by people in the crowd in a ripple effect. Newspapers and pamphlets enabled attendees to read afterward in more detail what was said.6

In order to create the right atmosphere, organizers of these rallies used rituals and symbols, including flags, songs, drums, and greetings. The speaker’s gestures were especially important, underlining his conviction, determination, and sincerity. The most frequently used gestures were: agitated walking back and forth to demonstrate despair and longing, clenched fists to show anger and willpower, arms lifted to heaven in exaltation, and stamping feet to show indignation or despair. Gestures allowed the speaker to transfer emotions, experiences, and convictions to the public. The

6. Descriptions of these kinds of mass meetings taking place between 1890 and 1920 are in the archives of the Dutch socialist movements SDB and SDAP, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.
politician, journalist, and theologian Abraham Kuyper, who over the course of forty years perfected the art of mobilizing groups of reformed Christians and ultimately became prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905, wrote about the ability to speak in public: “The ‘born speaker’ places himself before his audience, feels the contact between his mind and the spirit of his audience and opens the valve. Almost automatically the words begin to stream and his thoughts flow and frolic. A psychological piece of art is in the making.” 7 This kind of speaker wanted to create a spark, a visceral connection with the audience through visual, verbal, and even physical contact with the attendees. In performing emotions and making suggestions of sincere belief, the speaker showed authenticity. In political communication scholarship this behavior is characterized as spellbinding. 8

Sound Amplification, Radio, and Crooning

In the seventeenth century artificial aids such as a “speaking trumpet” or a megaphone were developed to amplify the voice while speaking. 9 Of course this wasn’t amplification in the strict sense, but rather concentrating sound on a specific point where the listeners were. The real breakthrough in amplification came from the electrical revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, which brought, among other things, radio telephony and electrically produced sound amplification (fig. 6). The technological roots of radio are well known thanks to its extensive historiography. Guglielmo Marconi made telegraphy wireless in the last decade of the nineteenth century, soon bridging enormous distances. Reginald Fessenden and others combined this wireless telegraphy with a continuous carrier wave and it became wireless (or “radio”) telephony. Radio developed into a mass medium from 1919 on, and radio stations soon created programs for culturally differentiated publics. 10

Sound amplification was an equally important technology for the history of political communication. In early telephone technology, carbon microphones amplified sounds in order to make long-distance telephone traffic possible. This technique—patented from 1877 in different versions

9. English scientist Samuel Morland claimed to have designed a “megaphone” in 1671; Athanasius Kircher designed such an apparatus around the same time. Göttelt, Geschichte der Stimme, 350.
by Thomas Edison and Emile Berliner—also played a role in sound recording on tinfoil rolls (Edison) and gramophone discs (Berliner). Both techniques used horns to concentrate the sounds to the exact spot where the needle made a recording on a roll or disc. For listening to these recordings, a person had to sit before a horn that was directly connected to the roll or disc. Sound-recording techniques seemed promising for politics; during the 1908 presidential campaign for example, William Taft made gramophone recordings of his speeches that were used in faraway areas in

the Northeast and Midwest to inform the voters there about his mission and points of view. It was a more effective use of the campaign funds than traveling to these sparsely inhabited areas.12

In the first decade of the twentieth century, when the search for radiotelephony began, amplification was a pivotal point. The most important breakthrough was the 1906 invention of the Audion vacuum tube by Lee De Forest, followed by his triode tube a year later. These tubes not only facilitated better detection and amplification of radio signals but also enhanced electrodynamic voice reproduction. In the lab of General Electric, Danish technician Peter L. Jensen and his associate Edwin S. Pridham, in their search for a better radio detector, produced a major development in sound amplification (fig. 7). In 1915 they placed an “old gooseneck horn” of an Edison phonographic system on a detector connected to six carbon microphones. With the support of an Audion tube they were able to amplify sound enormously. On Christmas Eve 1915 they demonstrated their “Magnavox” on a square in front of San Francisco’s City Hall. More than 100,000 people could hear the Christmas carols amplified by this machine (figs. 8, 9). A week later Governor Hiram Johnson gave a speech in his house that was sent through a cable to the Civic Auditorium a few miles away. There the speech was amplified in a hall where 12,000 people attended and listened, fascinated.13

This was the start of what became in 1917 the Magnavox Company, which supplied equipment for amplified sound on location. In 1919 Magnavox installed the “public address system” (a few years later the word “loudspeaker” came into use) for the amplification of a speech by President Woodrow Wilson in San Diego, underscoring the role the new technique could have in political communication. In the 1920 election campaign amplification was used at several locations, and President Warren Harding’s inauguration speech on 4 March 1921 was amplified with a Magnavox system. On 8 December 1922 he was the first president to deliver the State of the Union address speaking through a microphone connected with loudspeakers outside Congress.14

When AT&T and the Marconi Company began to invest in sound amplification, distribution of the new technology developed quickly. “Loudspeaker systems” were installed in stadiums and exhibition grounds. In the Netherlands the Magnavox system was demonstrated in The Hague in March 1923 for a small audience of technical experts.15 The first public use of loudspeakers in the nation was at an International Eucharist Congress between 23 and 27 July 1924 in the big sports stadium of Amsterdam.

12. Walter Welch and Leah Burt, From Tinfoil to Stereo; Steve Lubar, Info Culture, 167–84.
15. “De sprekende lithografische steen”; “Versterking der menschelijke Stem.”
A crowd of 40,000 listened to choir music, a mass, and several speeches. A few days later a crowd on the beach near The Hague was addressed through a “loud speaking telephone system” made by Western Electric, the production company of AT&T. A spectator with technical interests showed his unbridled optimism: “While until now no more then 500 people could hear a speech a little bit, with the application of this new system we cross the line that leads to a million and maybe even more.”

The possibilities seemed endless, but some people pointed out disad-

FIG. 8 The Magnavox sound amplification system. (Source: Photo courtesy of Audio History Library and Museum.)

FIG. 9 At the end of 1915 the Magnavox sound amplification system was demonstrated for the first time in public. A large crowd gathered before City Hall in San Francisco on Christmas Eve and listened to Christmas carols. (Source: Photo courtesy of Audio History Library and Museum.)
vantages. The microphone forced the politician to take a static position and at the same time removed the speaker’s view of much of the public. Combined with the poor sound of the first generation of carbon-granule microphones, it disappointed many. Listeners said that politicians sounded as if they were talking “through a vacuum cleaner hose” or that “someone was frying eggs” between the speaker and the microphone.17

Even when the electromagnetic (condenser) microphone began to replace the carbon-granule microphones after 1924 and the quality of sound improved considerably, many of the more experienced speakers detested sound amplification. No emotion could be carried through the microphone, which they saw as a threat to their “histrionic abilities.”18 A Dutch author of books on eloquence, P. H. Ritter Jr., even called the microphone “a guillotine for eloquence.”19

Radio increased the problem. How could one reach a larger audience and create a feeling of mutual affinity and experience? The radio seemed to create unique possibilities for simultaneous experiences without direct contact between speaker and audience, but radio listeners did not form a visible cohort that showed mass behavior. Radio shaped a despatialized form of simultaneous experience. Most radio transmissions were heard through headsets and therefore the first mass of radio listeners was a mass of individuals. This changed when after 1927 radio sets with integrated loudspeakers occupied a central place in the living room. There they addressed audiences like families, who often listened with friends and neighbors.20

Radio listening became social, intimate, and domesticated, with major consequences for programming. Radio was experienced as an uninvited guest intruding on family life. Because of this intrusion, radio programs could be successful only if they “fit” into domestic culture and paid attention to norms of decency felt to be important in private spheres, especially in the middle class. Programs also had to fit into the rhythm of everyday life and suggest authenticity and sincerity.21

The first radio program makers experimented with these peculiarities and in doing so, they invented radio traditions. Similar processes of socialization of a new medium by gradually adjusting existing forms of old media are historically well-known.22 In the broadcasting industry, the lecture, the sermon, the story read to children, the political speech, the con-
cert, and the play were copied. But the rhythm, length, tone, and volume of these cultural forms did not fit perfectly in the radio medium. And so the 1920s and '30s saw the invention of new traditions such as the radio play, the sitcom, radio reportage, and the radio chat.

The cultural consequences of this transition are illustrated in public singing practice. In the preamplification era singers sang loudly, trying to make contact with the public through expression in their voice, supported by gesture and movement. After microphone sound amplification, the quality of vocal expression could change. The singer was forced to stay in place behind a microphone on the stage, but the singing itself could become soft and tender. Since radio did not include visual contact, the music focused even more on character. It segued into a new and popular form of intimate singing: crooning. Artists including Al Bowlly, Gene Austin, Bing Crosby, "Whispering" Jack Smith, and Vera Lynn whispered their songs directly into the heart of the listener. Traditional music critics despised this; in their view it was sentimental, not authentic, and also artificial, technically limited, and without expression. To them, crooning was not “real” or “sincere.”

The Speech and Radio

The same process of adjusting sincere and authentic performance to what seemed an artificial form is seen when we look at the political radio speech. Politicians faced a dilemma similar to that of singers: how to suggest to a distant, amorphous public their sincerity, and even reality? Ritter sketched this dilemma after his first radio appearances in 1925:

He who speaks before a visible audience has contact with the people, he reads from their faces if they like him or if he is boring. He has the gesture and the sudden change to turn a yawn into a smile. But the radio speaker is dependent on his lonely voice. He must get inspiration and power from his subject only; he doesn’t control his performance. . . . He cannot amuse with his looks, with his gestures, with his build-up; he cannot interrupt or wait for effects, because his speech is placed in the merciless framework of time.

As explained in a popular American magazine on mechanics in 1924: “Picturesque and vivid personalities are lost on the radio audience” (fig. 10).

This was the discovery of “radio logic,” and not every politician was willing and able to make the transition. The first political radio speakers tended to perform as if they were talking in public, which meant for some


25. “Political Spellbinding by Radio.”
FIG. 10 President Calvin Coolidge was one of the first presidents to make use of sound amplification and radio in his political career. His inauguration speech on 4 March 1925 was the first to be broadcast live in the United States through radio. (Source: “Popular Spellbinding by Radio,” Popular Mechanics 42, no. 6 [December 1924], p. 879.)
forty-five minutes they were mainly improvising. When reactions revealed that most listeners could not stay tuned for so long, the political radio speech became briefer and carefully prepared on paper. In the 1930s the usual length was ten to twenty minutes and speakers were encouraged to write every word in advance because the programmers said “experience shows that putting the text on paper is absolutely necessary to talk to an invisible public that doesn’t experience the thrill of being at a real event.”

The consequences were huge, because the diminished length required careful choices. Not everyone could adjust; there was fear of losing content, authenticity, and control. In early 1937 a Dutch broadcasting official wrote: “A lecture of forty-five minutes is absolutely impossible because the public cannot stand it. Most programs now last for twenty minutes or less. Every sane man must acknowledge there are huge objections against this sort of *spiritual sightseeing*.”

The radio speech also demanded different diction. Ritter called for good articulation (without “falling into the trap of excessive practice”), practice in breathing, and careful rhythm. Strict rules applied, because the listener heard every noise the speaker produced and these sounds triggered the imagination: “All that is personal and peculiar of the speaker is noticed better by listeners tuned in on radio than the public in a hall or an open-air venue.” The speaker therefore must be regular in tone, as if chatting. “The swelling and downfall of the voice can be more moderate in a public hall. . . . The experienced microphone speaker can trigger fluctuations in tone and coloring with his voice that cannot be produced in a hall with even the best acoustics. He can *whisper through the microphone*. In short: the good radio speaker was a real crooner.

This created problems for politicians whose strength was spellbinding. A characteristic example is Dutch socialist leader Pieter Troelstra, who was confronted with a radio microphone after operating for more than thirty years as Labor Party leader without such aid (see fig. 5). His party had arranged a live broadcast of the meeting celebrating his farewell on 19 September 1925. In his memoirs Troelstra wrote about this peculiar experience:

...some of my friends had emphasized that I shouldn’t walk away from this weird apparatus. The first minute all went well, but then I got the taste of it, I forgot all about this microphone and began to walk back and forth on the podium. My dear friend and old comrade Jan Schaper was forced to draw me back, pulling my jacket; I needed to take my place again.

29. Ibid., 99–100.
Troelstra was not the only spellbinding politician who had difficulty adapting to microphones. Next we shall see how Roosevelt, Hitler, Churchill, and Colijn made the necessary adjustments. Or did not.

Franklin Roosevelt Croons for the Common Man

American politicians at the beginning of the twentieth century began to notice a growing dependency on media to gain public support. The rise of mass press and press photography foreshadowed what was later called the “media presidency.” Managing the media became an indispensable quality for a modern presidency.31 How could sound amplification and radio be managed? It wasn’t always a question of training the politician because some politicians were blessed with more talents than others. President Herbert Hoover for example (served 1929–32) appeared to be among the less gifted when it came to radio speaking skills. Observers said that on the radio he sounded like he was “reading a textbook on engineering.” In contrast, a president with moderate political talents, Calvin Coolidge (served 1923–28), did a wonderful job speaking on the radio, especially in the 1924 campaign, the first in which sound amplification and radio played a major role. Coolidge had a friendly, lightly vibrating voice and he spoke slowly and coolly, carefully articulating and without raising his voice. In a hall and in political debate his performance was not likely to make him a winner, but in the living room his voice created tranquility and trust. Contemporary observers wrote that his voice and diction were “almost ideally adapted to the radio.”32 Coolidge made little jokes, spoke about domestic happiness, and wished the listeners a very good night when he finished his speech. At the close of the successful 1924 campaign he ended a radio speech with these words: “To my father, who is listening in in my old home in Vermont, and to my other invisible audience: Good night.” Coolidge was the good friend everyone liked to have as a guest in his home.33

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945) was even more talented. He spoke eloquently in what contemporaries called “a rich and melodious voice.” His presence became problematic after he contracted polio in 1921.34 The devastating disease created a physical handicap that forced him to stay in place when delivering a speech, constantly leaning on a stick. Nominating Alfred E. Smith for president on 26 June 1924 in Madison Square Garden, Roosevelt performed for the first time with a microphone.

31. Stephen Ponder, Managing the Media. For Roosevelt’s managing of the press, see Becky Winfield, Roosevelt and the Press.
33. Cited in Fine, Roosevelt’s Radio Chatting, 44. Coolidge also was the first president to deliver his inauguration speech through radio, on 4 March 1925. Ranson, The Role of Radio, 19–42; Edward Chester, Radio, Television and American Politics.
34. Conrad Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 165.
Where other speakers hated the necessity of staying behind the microphone, for Roosevelt it became an ideal means to distract attention from his legs and it directed attention to his voice only.35 As governor of New York between 1929 and 1932, he performed more than fifty times on the radio in a style characterized as “friendly persuasion.” Calmly chatting, he connected himself to qualities such as “openness” and “reliability” and portrayed his opponents as greedy, selfish, wicked, and irresponsible.36 He would develop this style to perfection during his presidency (fig. 11).

On Sunday evening, 12 March 1933, Roosevelt was scheduled to speak for fourteen minutes on NBC radio about the crisis in banking. He did not bother about difficult analyses of economic aspects, company policy, or government regulation, but told a simple story about the many recent closures and bankruptcies and the fear of many Americans that their money was not safe in the banks. Roosevelt tried to restore the public’s violated trust by pointing to some positive developments. Just before most listeners went to bed, he ended his talk full of confidence: “I can assure you, my friends, that it is safer to keep your money in a reopened bank than under the mat-

35. Ibid., 164–65.
This was the first of a series of radio talks that became known as "fireside or bedtime chats. "Bedtime" referred to the moment of broadcasting, "fireside" to the location of the talks. Roosevelt spoke sitting next to a fireside in the reception room of the White House. This homely atmosphere was evoked artificially of course; the crackling fire noises were fake.38

Between March 1933 and June 1938 listeners heard thirteen of these chats. Trying to restore confidence in politics, Roosevelt wanted to bring political culture back to the common citizen. In radio he found the ideal means to speak to Americans in their most intimate surrounding, without journalistic interference. In every carefully directed chat he talked about problems American society faced. Meticulously he summed up his concrete solutions and no detail escaped his attention. Experienced copywriters wrote his texts, but he remained in control all the way. He even ordered the manufacture of paper that didn't rustle in order to keep listeners focused on the chat. He also took care that a small number of friends and relatives were present in his "fireside studio," thus addressing his chat directly to them and assuring a friendly tone. And of course he spoke in plain words everybody could understand. At carefully directed places in the text he inserted the phrase "my friends." He used the word "we," placing the listeners on an equal level. He also invited them to send in reactions.39

It all contributed to solving the problem of how to create a common and intimate experience for millions of people in different places and circumstances.40 Roosevelt sounded sincere and real, an ordinary person with exceptional powers. It worked perfectly, as the reactions showed. Hundreds of thousands of listeners, proponents and opponents alike, sent letters to Roosevelt. He created an imagined community, giving the impression that he cared about all these individual problems. As attorney general Robert H. Jackson stated: "Others might orate, but he would simply talk to a neighbor—the country set at its receiving sets—and each felt that he was being talked with."41

38. Ibid., 121–59.
40. The most extensive research on this growth toward an intimate political culture, focusing on radio in the United States, is in Craig, *Fireside Politics*, and Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public*.
41. Robert Jackson, *That Man*, 159. For the concept of “imagined community” in the historical development of nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. 
Spellbinder Adolf Hitler

The rise of German National Socialism is surrounded by myths. One of them is the overestimation of the role of modern media. Media sociologist Marshall McLuhan, for example, argued that Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) “thanked the possibility of his political existence directly to radio and other means of addressing the public.” McLuhan apparently believed the Nazi propaganda produced after the takeover of power in 1933 that Hitler was the superior agent of the people because he used modern media. The party proclaimed Hitler a master of speech, and according to his political advisor (and minister of propaganda from 1933) Joseph Goebbels, Hitler was a good radio speaker simply because he stood above the petty party quarreling of the old Weimar Republic and appealed directly to the spiritual needs of the German people, bringing them together as one nation with one goal.

However, a more careful look at historical reality shows that the new sound techniques, especially radio, created significant problems for Hitler and his ideologists. Hitler became a celebrity speaker in the 1920s before sound amplification made a breakthrough in Germany. His secret was a psychological bond between himself and an audience who experienced the speech of a totally committed figure willing to make daring sacrifices. He always began quietly, making rational arguments and building up tensions to a big apogee. With his passionate voice and intimidating presence, he could hypnotize the audience.

The Nazi Party (NSDAP) exploited the image of Hitler as a spellbinder in all possible ways. He was presented as the man who would lead the German nation out of its economic and political crisis and end its feeling of humiliation. In this campaign the NSDAP began to stress that Hitler was the ultimate speaker, an example that every party official should try to imitate. However, sound amplification created a dilemma. On the one hand, bigger audiences could be reached and the intimidating effect of the voice could be amplified enormously. But when Hitler spoke for the first time through a microphone in 1928, he was forced to stay in place and avoid his usual means of getting attention, which included firing a pistol at the beginning, jumping around, and making exaggerated gestures.

Goebbels faced real problems when the Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft (German national radio organization) granted the NSDAP half an hour of

42. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media.
44. About the myth created around “Führer” Adolf Hitler, see Rudolf Herz, Hoffmann & Hitler.
46. Göttert, Geschichte der Stimme, 445–47.
broadcasting time for 14 June 1932. Of course there were significant possibilities for influencing public opinion on a larger scale than ever before, but the problem was the Führer himself. Given his proclivity for shouting in a high voice, Hitler was not very suitable for radio in the living room. He had conquered a large part of the German population without its aid, so he had no experience. Hitler turned down this opportunity because the radio authorities wanted to censor his text in advance, something he found intolerable. He handed the opportunity to two of his closest comrades: Gregor Strasser spoke on 14 June and Joseph Goebbels on 18 July.47 When Hitler finally spoke in autumn 1932, with the censorship temporarily lifted, he was forced to chat for a relatively short time. He did not perform badly, and in this first radio talk as chancellor, directly after the cabinet had met on 1 February 1933, his performance was satisfying enough. But he had been very nervous because he was forced to speak calmly and could not feel a vibe from an audience48 (fig. 12).

As chancellor, Hitler felt obliged to communicate with the German people and aim for his authentic style. Between February and October 1933 he forced himself to talk dozens of times from a radio studio. He and Goebbels worried that radio allowed listeners to turn off Hitler’s voice or defile his messages. The same fear gripped other clerical, political, and royal authorities of this time. For them the idea that listeners could drink coffee, read the newspaper, or, even worse, tell jokes or get drunk during a radio speech of the king or president or during a radio sermon from a church was repulsive. But its very nature allowed radio to demystify.49

On 11 March 1933 Goebbels took control of the newly formed ministry of “enlightenment and propaganda”; he saw one of his tasks as maintaining the Hitler myth through radio. This medium was supposed to be “the ultimate chain between our Movement and the Nation, between Idea and Human Being.”50 But Goebbels was not a fool; he realized the problems in the relationship of Hitler and radio. In October he decided that Hitler wouldn’t appear in a studio except when strictly necessary. Goebbels and other more moderate speakers would do the studio talks on behalf of Hitler. That month Hitler appeared for the last time in a studio; in the future his public speeches would be broadcast as live events, preferably heard not individually but by large crowds in public halls, factories, restaurants, and stadiums. Listeners’ minds should be changed from what Eugen Hadamovsky, later the boss of the national socialistic radio organization, called

“the anarchistic intellectualism of the individual” to the “organic spirituality of the community.”

The organic community didn’t form automatically though. Some incentives were created in line with what can be called “the festivalization of everyday life,” a process by which politics and ideology were integrated into festivities everyone could enjoy. Radio programming was an integral part of this strategy. For example, after 1933 Nazi radio officials used popular music, a preference of the German radio public, to help lure listeners to national socialistic transmissions. Hitler’s speeches were programmed as national events. The first was in the Berlin Sportpalast on 10 February 1933. Broadcast live on all German stations, it was presented as an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to the new leader of the German people. Goebbels played a crucial role, not only as creative director, but also by giving the introductory remarks in the hall and subsequently performing as an overenthusiastic radio reporter and commentator.

51. David Welch, The Third Reich, 33.
52. Carolyn Birdsall, Nazi Soundscapes, 73–120.
54. Göttert, Geschichte der Stimme, 447–48. The text of this Hitler speech is in Domarus, Hitler, 203–7. The text of Goebbels’s speech and radio report is in Heiber, ed.,
Throughout the 1930s, when Hitler was about to address the nation, loyal Funkwarte ("radio guards") installed loudspeakers at public places and caught people's attention by sounding sirens, keeping an eye on the public during these Stunden der Nation ("hours of the nation"). All sorts of manipulation techniques attempted to compensate for the lack of visual spectacle. Reliable reporters created an atmosphere before the speech by describing the ambiance and speculating about what Hitler would probably say. In the hall where Hitler spoke, loyal party members showed enthusiasm by clapping and shouting at intervals, when strategically placed microphones were opened so listeners everywhere could hear the enthusiasm of the attendees through "sound closeups." This gave Hitler some time to recover from his anxieties and take a quick drink of water. Afterward, commentators were invited to summarize the highlights and give positive comments.55

With these methods, Goebbels succeeded in creating a public for the speeches that—according to his own, rather optimistic, figures—exceeded 56 million in 1935.56 In reality, the number of radio sets in Germany in 1938 reached only 8.5 million; Goebbels's figures were based on the supposition that all German families gathered around these sets to listen. Immediately after the takeover in power in 1933 he had tried to increase listening by forcing the radio industry to produce cheap sets. Although some German radio companies had done this from 1926, the new regime forced all companies to develop cheap Volksempfänger—people's receiving sets. After the introduction in August 1933 of the first Volksempfänger, the 301 (a name linked to the day Hitler became chancellor on 30 January), sales rose to almost a million in 1934. Because this set was thought to be too big and too expensive, in 1938 a "small people's receiver" (DKE) was developed under pressure from Goebbels's ministry. In the long run this production policy succeeded. Between 1933 and 1941 the number of radio sets rose from 4.5 to 13.3 million.57

This strategy attempted to change the character of radio altogether. The medium should be in line with and subordinate to the traditions that had made the Nazi Party succeed. It could only be done if the state and the party had dictatorial powers. The dictator could only maintain his authority if he


55. See, for example, the description of the first big speech as chancellor in the Berlin Sportpalast on 10 February 1933: Kershaw, Hitler, 452–54, and Randall Bytwerk, ed., Landmark Speeches of National Socialism.

56. Bytwerk, Bending Spines; Welch, The Third Reich, 30–34; Pohle, Der Rundfunk als Instrument der Politik, 221–38.

57. An extensive analysis of the introduction of the people's radio set is in Wolfgang König, Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft, 25–99.
was shown as a sporting man, finishing the exciting game as a winner. Only then would he be “real.” In contrast to Roosevelt, who used the radio to create intimacy with his political audience, Hitler and Goebbels used radio to create a heroic, mythic distance between the leader and the nation.

Winston Churchill as “the Voice of the Nation”

In the United Kingdom, radio was established as a public service speaking to the entire population. Confronted with a general strike in 1926, the BBC and the government decided that the best way to serve the public need for news about this highly controversial event was to report impartially, or, as the critics say, to “deny politics.” Although England might be considered the cradle of political debate because of its long parliamentary tradition, the BBC banned political controversy from its programs, with the exception of some special broadcasts made by political parties themselves.58 As a consequence, opposing groups and individuals within parties were excluded from the medium. Among them was one of the great oratory talents of the twentieth century, Winston Churchill (1874–1965).59

During the first years of broadcasting Churchill was still active at the heart of British politics. When running for MP as an independent candidate with conservative support, he spoke for the first time on the radio, on 27 June 1924.60 He continued to speak at least once a year, on BBC radio. After 1929, as he was becoming more and more a maverick within the Conservative Party, which limited his political opportunities, Churchill spoke on the radio to recommend charities. From 1937 he fiercely opposed the appeasement strategy of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. The BBC decided that his intensifying alarmist calls not to reconcile with European dictators weren’t suitable for national radio. As a consequence, he did not perform on BBC radio between April 1937 and September 1939. Only via American radio could he explain his views on international politics.61

Chamberlain’s appeasement was overwhelmingly supported in England, so he made frequent radio speeches on the subject. But over time, British listeners became uneasy as the calming tone of government began to

59. Churchill is characterized as such in a series of twelve 1964 Decca records on which most of his speeches and parts of his memoirs were recorded: Winston S. Churchill, His Memoirs and His Speeches from Armistice to Victory, 1918–1945, radio collection C 5033, Sound and Vision. Of course, metaphors like “the greatest” or “the man of the century” are historical constructions. About the creation of “the legend Churchill” after 1945, see John Ramsden, Man of the Century.
60. The speech “The Study of English” was broadcast live from the London School of Economics. The text is in Robert James, ed., Winston S. Churchill, 3461–62.
sharply contrast with the alarming content of BBC news programs, which broadcast European dictators shouting their demands to the loud cheers of excited crowds. One listener wrote on 2 February 1939 in *The Times*: “we are subjected every night in BBC news bulletins to hearing only those words from abroad which must aggravate ill feelings and exasperate tired minds, so that nightly we can go to bed more certain that war must come.”

In September 1939 Churchill was back on the radio again, speaking more frequently then ever before (fig. 13). In his role as War Cabinet leader starting in May 1940 he became a legendary radio speaker. With endless study, practice, good advice, and careful preparation he developed oratory qualities to an impressive level. “Rhetorical power,” he wrote, “is neither wholly bestowed, nor wholly acquired, but cultivated.”

62. Ibid., 91.
Churchill’s rhetoric flourished most effectively in the House of Commons. There he could attack his opponents directly, supported by the backbenchers of his party. To become an effective radio orator was a different matter. Because of his slightly swishing diction (he had a lisp), use of complex sentences and pompous words, and polemical and ironic manner of debating, he was not initially seen as an exceptional radio speaker. He did not like talking through microphones, especially not in election rallies where thousands attended—all those people weren’t sensible enough to grasp the subtle meaning of his carefully composed arguments and witty backroom ironies. This style was problematic for radio too, and Churchill was not fond of preparing special radio speeches. Some of his famous ones therefore weren’t radio speeches at all, but parliamentary speeches recorded afterward by the BBC. His famous call of 4 June 1940 directly after the fall of Dunkirk that “We shall fight on the beaches . . . we shall never surrender” was never broadcast, but summarized and partly read aloud by a BBC newsreader. Some of the speeches were actually read by Norman Shelley, an actor able to imitate Churchill’s voice. Among them was the famous “This Was Their Finest Hour” in Parliament on 18 June 1940.

Nevertheless Churchill is widely remembered as the perfect radio speaker. But that is due more to the historic moments in combination with literary talent, and what a foremost contemporary politician called his “gift of expounding policy, and permeated throughout with the spirit of unbreakable resolve.” During the war Churchill performed sixty-five times on the radio; most of the speeches he is remembered for were made between 13 May 1940 and August 1941. Their themes were determination, unity, and hope, at a time when the British population needed those qualities most. His baroque language fit the atmosphere of these worrying times perfectly. Defined as “poetry in prose,” it never had attracted a large number of fans outside Parliament, but now it did, because it soothed worries in the dark months during the Battle of Britain. American radio correspondent Edward Murrow wrote in May 1940 from London: “Mr. Churchill can...
inspire confidence. And he can preach a doctrine of hate that is acceptable to the majority of this country.”

Because of constant repetition, made possible by after-war recordings of the speeches, Churchill lives on in collective memory as the man who produced rhetorical pearls such as “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat” (in the Commons on 13 May 1940 as newly appointed prime minister), “be ye men of valour” (19 May 1940, first speech as prime minister), “This was their finest hour” (in the Commons, 18 June 1940), “We are fighting by ourselves alone; but we are not fighting for ourselves alone” (14 July 1940), “Give us the tools and we will finish the job” (9 February 1941), and “But westward, look, the land is bright!” (27 April 1941). The speeches dating from later in the war, which reached more listeners, have fallen into the abyss of history.

Churchill’s success was due partly to the qualities he shared with Roosevelt, who also looked for ways to create hope in dark times. But unlike Roosevelt, Churchill did not work to create intimacy with common listeners by addressing them in plain language and speaking to the problems of everyday life. For this purpose, the BBC radio talks of socialist writer J. B. Priestley proved more suitable. Since the fall of 1939, his talks, known as Postscripts to the News, were broadcast directly after the 9 p.m. evening news. Priestley talked about common problems—rising prices, rationing, and the demands of the war industry. Without being too political, he thus indirectly criticized the authorities who threatened the interests of plain women and men. He used popular language, without any theatrical rhetoric. Priestley showed that the ordinary Englishman was not fighting because of great ideals, but out of practical hope to secure a better life for all.

Where he created intimacy, Churchill created distance with his lofty and metaphorical language. In this respect Churchill resembled Hitler, who also needed the tensions of historical moments to convince his audience of his authentic determination and resolve.

Hendrikus Colijn and Dutch Radio Listeners

On the same day that Churchill delivered his first radio speech, Friday, 27 June 1924, Dutch minister of finance Hendrikus Colijn (1869–1944) talked for the first time via Hilversum radio. It was the first political speech ever broadcast in the Netherlands. According to newspaper reports it made


70. Churchill attracted 65 percent of radio listeners in the first year of the war. The most popular BBC broadcast ever, the news bulletin at 9 p.m. on D-day followed by a speech by the king, reached almost 82 percent of the population.

such an impression that city councils interrupted their evening meetings to listen. The experienced Colijn was not much impressed by the trappings of the radio experience, but he was aware that he was not speaking only for the fellow thinkers he usually addressed. His audience now was an unknown group of listeners with a variety of political, regional, and religious backgrounds.

That created uncertainty about the suitable way to talk to this public. Colijn grew up in a reformed Christian and agricultural environment where tradition was cherished and modernity mistrusted. In this socially rather closed culture, people focused on leaders who combined theological purity with political and cultural ideas. These leaders needed to have a firm sense of public duty and remain humble and authentic to God, just as the simple farmer or worker was obliged to do.

Colijn grew to be such a leader. After a career in the Dutch colonial army, he became minister of war in 1911. A growing number of party officials saw in him the ideal successor to theologian, journalist, and politician Abraham Kuyper, undisputed leader of the reformed Christians since 1870. In 1920 Colijn indeed became the new leader of Kuyper’s ARP Party, although he also had a career in big business. Between 1914 and 1922 he made his fortune in the Royal Dutch Shell oil company, but in the summer of 1923 he became a minister again, this time of finance.\(^\text{72}\)

In his professional and political life Colijn constantly demonstrated his skill as an international diplomat. He had a consistent and clear view of international politics and was admired for his sharp analyses of the world political situation. This may be why he was eager to use the technology of radio communication, although there was serious hesitation in reformed Christian culture about accepting this modern technology.\(^\text{73}\) Colijn had high expectations, but when he saw the primitive “studio” for his first radio appearance on 27 June 1924, he was disappointed (fig. 14). Some old curtains were hanging on the walls to mute the sound. The Round-Sykes moving-coil microphone (made by Marconi Company), an ugly piece of solid iron, rested on a cushion and connected to a sort of bell board. None of the radio employees had any advice to give him about broadcasting, so he spoke as he usually did in a public hall. In simple words and short sentences he made firm and doctrinal statements.\(^\text{74}\) He spoke for forty-five minutes in his usual rural tone. He sounded like a vicar, a complaint (and sometimes compliment) he had heard before.\(^\text{75}\) Yet he made sure to get a photograph of the

\(^{72}\) The most extensive and reliable biography of Colijn is Herman Langeveld, Hendrikus Colijn, 1869-1944, two volumes.

\(^{73}\) An analysis of traditional cultural attitudes against modernity in this period is in Dick van Lente, Techniek en ideologie.


experience, which he used afterward as propaganda for his election campaign, showing that although he was a conservative politician at heart, he had insight into the value of modern media for his political career.

Immediately after the speech listeners from all over the country called the studio in Hilversum to declare that they had understood what Colijn had said. Socialist F. M. Wibaut stated that he was eager to debate Colijn because he disagreed with him on almost everything. Colijn was thrilled by this reaction, as radio apparently could bring attention to his views. A year later he was back for what turned out to be the first election broadcast in the Netherlands. The memorable evening demonstrated the still-exper-

imemental character of the medium. The Hilversum broadcasting station had organized a series of evening broadcasts focused on politics. All the leading political parties sent their best speakers because much was at stake in the upcoming elections of 1 July 1925. The big question: Would Colijn and his party succeed in winning enough votes to lead a new government, headed by Colijn himself?77

The program guide announced that radio for the first time would serve “the distribution of opinions about how we run this country” and that the station would safeguard neutrality by giving every speaker exactly the same amount of broadcasting time. But not every party responded to the invitation. Some politicians feared that the election fire that normally warms up the leaders to deliver passionate speeches and fierce debate is cooling down because of this cold iron cylinder they are obliged to talk into. The only visible listener is a program director, sitting in a comfortable chair, holding a watch to measure the exact time.78

The program guide also informed people that outside the studio, and also at one of the biggest meeting grounds in Amsterdam, crowds could gather to listen to the speeches through a sound-amplification system connected to a radio set.79 Wibaut explained that it would be the first time he had prepared a speech on paper. Colijn stressed the necessity to stay calm and think properly. He called on listeners not to be carried away by the wild and revolutionary ideas of the socialist (fig. 15). His punch line was: “We’d better restrict ourselves to the bare facts and common sense.”80 In a retrospective, the program’s creator described the debate as a unique (for that time) experience which had stimulated political debates enormously: “It makes lively debate possible about the content and meaning of what the listener hears, coming with an advantage that is welcomed by everybody with political interest: the listener can observe politics himself with all his senses.”81

Though fascinated and impressed by this power of radio, Colijn worried that it could also be used for undesirable ideas and behavior. Fierce political debates in Parliament followed the election broadcast. They resulted in 1930 in regulation that put limitations to political broadcasting. “Political polarization” was forbidden and censorship was further tightened after Colijn became prime minister in May 1933. “Retaining author-

77. This goal was reached, but the first government headed by Colijn lasted only three months: Langeveld, Hendrikus Colijn, vol. 1, 274–86.
78. “De verkiezingen.”
79. “De partijleiders voor den microfoon.”
80. Ibid.; and Van Herpen, De Hilversumsche Draadloze Omroep. Deel 3.
81. Vogt, Spanne en Spanningen, 150.
Radio played a prominent role in this policy. For example, Colijn decided to prohibit the socialist broadcasting association VARA from airing the revolutionary anthem “The Internationale,” because he feared it would promote polarization. “Every night this song is heard through radio,” he wrote in September 1933, “fifty new fascists arise.” Shortly afterward, his friend and minister of home affairs J. A. de Wilde designed regulation by which the government could demand the use of radio for its own purposes. On 1 August 1935 Colijn first made use of this facility. He spoke

FIG. 15 “The party leaders before the microphone. An overview of radio election night on 30 June 1925.” Socialist Wibaut (above) is saying: “Is Colijn really a super human being?” Colijn is saying: “Let the facts speak for themselves.” (Source: Radio Luistergids, 3 July 1925. Courtesy of Sound and Vision, Hilversum.)
for twenty-five minutes, calling on listeners to stay united and firm in times of economic crisis.\textsuperscript{85} This “radio encouragement speech” impressed many and convinced Colijn he was on the right track.\textsuperscript{86}

Until 1939 Colijn regularly gave radio encouragement speeches. Among them was the speech noted at the start of this article. He carefully confined himself to factual accounts and reassuring words, avoiding controversy and trying to “croon” without exaggerating this new mode of talking to a big and anonymous public. On 11 March 1936, for example, he did not pass judgment on aggressive German politics. He also kept quiet about the most delicate subject his cabinet had discussed for days after the German invasion of the Rhineland: economic relations with Germany and the possible role of the Netherlands in future negotiations for a new international treaty.\textsuperscript{87}

Colijn was well aware of the requirements established by the use of radio. His 11 March 1936 speech therefore was not a strange nineteenth-century mode of communication. Creating intimacy, he talked about the coming night and the advantages of a good night’s sleep after listeners first had enjoyed amusing radio content. Talking casually in a conversational tone, he chatted in simple words, appealing to the common sense of listeners who worried about rising international tensions. He employed a highly modern form of political communication, part of a carefully planned media strategy acknowledging specific techniques demanded by radio.

In his radio speeches Colijn ignored Parliament. The Second Chamber (Tweede Kamer, or lower house of the Dutch Parliament), which had unanimously supported his temporary measures to intensify border controls, raised objections, but the criticism faded after Colijn argued that talking only with Parliament would have aroused more anxiety.\textsuperscript{88} His inspiration in this approach was clearly Roosevelt’s fireside chats, which he had discussed with media professionals such as radio reporter Gustav Czopp. In his memoirs dating from 1939, Czopp wrote that after Colijn rose to power in 1933 and social tensions and political anxieties mounted considerably, he advised Colijn to use calming radio speeches to create public support for his policies.\textsuperscript{89}

This idea grew from Czopp’s experience as a journalist and his preference for thoughtful speeches. As editor in chief of the conservative newspaper \textit{De Standaard} and as a member of the Dutch Union of Journalists he

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86. Letters to the prime minister are in archive-Colijn, 054, box 17, July–October 1935, Historical Documentation Centre for Dutch Protestantism, Free University Amsterdam.
87. Colijn deliberated before the broadcast with the minister of interior: Remco van Diepen, \textit{Voor Volkenbond en vrede}, 216.
88. “Questions to the Government Asked by Members of Parliament W. Vliegen (Labour Party) and P. Aalberse (Catholic Party).”
\end{flushright}
was familiar with how things worked in press circles. His relations with popular and politically neutral newspapers were excellent. He also viewed with approval world-famous press photographer Erich Salomon’s secret photographs from a Second Chamber session and his less-secret photo session at home with Colijn. In giving the photographer access to his home life, Colijn was certainly one of the first Dutch politicians to personalize politics. He was also the first to develop a strategy aiming to create and guard a public image in which he was presented as resolute, internationally oriented and modern, but respectful of religious, cultural, and social traditions.90

Conclusion

Looking at the history of sound technology it is clear that electric sound amplification shaped powerful possibilities for simultaneous experience, but that radio also created despatialized simultaneity. Radio therefore could construct an audience if the speaker used the right tone of voice fitting the social environment in which radio was consumed most of the time. This called for new speech strategies. In political cultures before modern electric sound and vision technologies existed, a direct contact was made between the politician and his or her visible audience. The public could see what politicians were saying and how they were performing. By showing what they felt while speaking, they expressed views and suggested they were sincere and authentic. The public could check this authentic belief by sharing in the spell politicians were trying to transmit. But through a microphone, and certainly through radio, this check on sincerity transferred to the sound and tone of a voice.

The possibilities for creating auditory intimacy in the form of “crooning” through a microphone confronted the spellbinding politician with the necessity of finding solutions for his own rhetoric and presentation; there was no simple solution that worked in every context. Politicians with a rhetorical talent like Churchill’s could try to find attractive metaphors, but their success depended heavily on the magic of the moment to get a political debating style and metaphorical words across to a radio public.

The political speech could also be presented as a live event, allowing spellbinders like Hitler to play to their strengths, but the circumstances of the live speech were controlled and manipulated to guarantee that the proper message came through. Goebbels found ways to make Hitler acceptable for radio listeners by presenting him as a mythical hero talking to the hearts of the public in a kind of “sacred moment.” It could only work with total control of radio practices—program control on the one hand and distribution and recipient control on the other.

The chat was better suited to the peculiar qualities of a medium that invaded the intimacy of individual listeners or households. Therefore, in the long run the radio chat was more effective as a new form of political rhetoric. Roosevelt and Colijn are excellent examples of this political crooning; Roosevelt made a more intensive and frequent use of the required techniques. They spoke in short, simple sentences and in a modest and non-polemic tone, appealing to the domestic circumstances in the home, where most people listened to radio.

Analysis of the rhetorical strategies of four leading politicians from the first half of the twentieth century thus clarifies the historical context of what is called “mediatization of politics,” a challenging concept that connects different fields of research, including social history of technology, political communication, and media studies. This kind of interdisciplinary research shows that new media technologies shape different sorts of relationships between politicians and the public. Sound amplification and radio produced technological possibilities to solve the problem of how to reach the “masses.” But politicians could only make effective use of it by adjusting their own rhetorical styles and presentation practices. In the constant collision between technological change in media and the political need to project authenticity, modern political culture was born.

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