

Marcel Hartwig, Evelyne Keitel, Gunter Süß (Eds.)

Media Economies

Perspectives on American Cultural Practices

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American Cultural Practices /**

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Trust and Sprawl: Seriality, Radio, and the First Fireside Chat¹

Frank Kelleter

1.

The power of the modern nation – bounding space into territory, equipping people with identities, shaping subjectivities, defining the law, waging war, making peace – sometimes detracts from the unlikelihood of national existence. A nation receives reality from continued acts of self-invention: it exists, in Benedict Anderson’s felicitous phrase, as an “imagined community,” perpetually produced by a costly system of practices, institutions, and technologies.

It is tempting to reduce this insight to a restatement, however critical, of the liberal nation’s self-description, as if the national imaginary consisted chiefly of a people’s shared fictions and agreed-upon conventions. But the gist of Anderson’s concept is not about manufacturing consent or establishing descent.² Its point concerns the curious fact that modern nations are composed of people who never have to meet, who need not belong to the same family, ethnicity, religion or political party, who are not required to live in the same place, not even in the same time zone, and who do not have to hold identical or even similar opinions in order to recognize themselves as members of the same community and feel emotionally attached to it (in positive or negative ways). Existing neither as a genealogical population nor as a contractual entity, emerging neither from descent nor consent but forcefully employing both origin stories to explain and sustain its presence in the world, the modern nation is “imagined” in the very sense that it is never given but always made. It requires work more than coercion, effort more than control. National order arises from a million daily acts of often unforced routine. Its identity is largely habitual, its production always reproduction: “not a building in need of restoration but a movement in need of continuation” (Latour 37).³

¹ For assistance and critique, I would like to thank Christy Hosefelder, Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, Alessa Johns, Susanne Krugmann, Ruth Mayer, Jason Mittell, Daniel Stein, and Madita Oeming.

² On the terms consent and descent, and their interaction in modern cultures, see Sollors.

³ For “acts of unforced routine,” see similar descriptions in Appadurai, Goffman; compare also Foucault’s distinction between early modern forms of disciplinary authority and modern governmentality. The quote from Latour originally refers to “society,” not the nation.

In other words: modern nations are by definition dependent on the operations of mass media. They maintain a sense of coherence by means of space- and time-transcending technologies of communication that make them governable in the first place.⁴ It is no coincidence that Anderson found his major example for the workings of imagined communities in the act of newspaper reading: a “ceremony” that is “incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar” (35). The repetitive and open-ended nature of such collectivization is crucial; it produces procedural communality where dogmatic communality is no longer probable or even possible.⁵ Numerous critical theories of “the culture industry” (Horkheimer/Adorno) have drawn on this point, explaining that mass media create ideology less by the content of their offerings than by a time-regime predicated on quotidian reinforcement; similar notions have been developed in the wake of Foucault’s concept of biopower. Large-scale collectivities thus emerge from simultaneous practice rather than merely propositional indoctrination: not just the newspaper’s content but the regularity of its consumption binds remote individuals together. Whatever one’s normative investment in these critiques, there is little doubt that open-ended recursivity – seriality, that is – can and does fulfill a nationalizing function. More than that: this function is really a systemic necessity; seriality is the very operation by which nations go on living.⁶ Stop printing the newspaper, suspend all traffic between mutually distant citizens, says Latour, and “you simply lose the grouping” (37).

All this is a matter of economy. More precisely: the seriality of the liberal nation – its dependence on adaptable repetitions of itself – coincides with the seriality of an economic system that for want of a better term is still best described as capitalism. Historically, this coincidence has proven so effective that it has acquired the appearance of nature: liberal nation-states inevitably think of themselves in conjunction with some arrangement of capitalist production, modern democracies find it all but impossible to imagine for themselves other economic identities than market ones. Conversely, global capitalism is just beginning to find ways of accounting for its factual independence from, and sometimes utter incompatibility with, democratic-national governance (or, for that matter, bourgeois class interests). Perceptive theories of modernity have always been aware of this troubled relationship – the “half fortuitous, but explosive, interaction” (Anderson 42) between modern nationalism and modern capitalism.

The present essay means to salvage this intuition for an investigation of popular seriality. As part of a larger project, it examines the “fortuitous but explosive” interaction of commercial and national media practices, focusing on a moment which challenged

⁴ On the relationship between “time-biased” and “space-biased” media in the management of large empires, see the classical study by Innis.

⁵ On “procedural” collectivization as the condition of possibility for the idea of an “extended republic” in the American constitutional debates of the late 1780s, see Kelleter 2002.

⁶ This essay’s interest in systemic operations is obviously indebted to Luhmann, but no rigorous attempt will be made to secure system theory’s own systemic coherence.

the natural identification of both spheres in fundamental ways: the banking crisis in the early days of the first Roosevelt administration (1933).

2.

It has often been said that Franklin D. Roosevelt allayed the banking crisis by the sheer power of broadcasting, making swift and competent use of the nationalizing power of radio. During the Depression era, American radio was well suited for such rescue missions, precisely because it did *not* exist as a nationalized medium dedicated principally to public service or government communication. In the course of numerous policy battles throughout the 1920s, influenced to a large degree by Roosevelt's predecessor Herbert Hoover (who had acted as radio's principal regulator from 1921 to 1927), the American radio system established itself in the tradition of earlier regulatory models in US media history as a "profit-motivated, network-dominated, and advertising-supported" broadcasting system (McChesney 251). Radio's commercial foundation (networks basically emerged as national advertising agencies that chose to describe themselves as associations of local providers) was in full accordance with the procedural production of citizenship that has distinguished the American political system ever since *The Federalist Papers*. Small wonder that a network ad from 1939 anticipated Anderson's imagined community in all but name, showing "a picture of a farmer and a city dweller with the caption, 'They've never met, but they're all one family ... to CBS'" (qtd. in Brown 5).⁷

Connecting disparate domestic realms through synchronized media practices, radio broadcasting helped create the imaginary but no less real effect of a continent-wide neighborhood. The sense of public involvement which such unlikely collectivization fostered both for listeners and producers was almost impossible to disentangle from a sense of market involvement. Unlike in other countries, where "the perceived nationalizing powers of this new medium placed it firmly under the aegis of centralized government" (Hilmes 7), radio in the United States operated essentially as an advertising medium endorsed by federal governance. If broadcasting created a national public – among other things, by popularizing a trans-regional, "nonaccented" English in political oratory that played no small part in the success of Roosevelt's radio addresses – this national public existed at the same time as a national market, "familia- rizing millions of listeners with the brand names and slogans of nationally available household goods" (Craig 279).⁸

⁷ On Hoover and radio, compare Craig 36–58; on networks as centralized commercial agencies, see *ibid.* 34. For proceduralism and *The Federalist Papers*, see footnote 4 above. A discussion of American radio specifically from the perspective of Anderson's concept of imagined communities is provided by Hilmes.

⁸ On "nonaccented" English and the impact of US radio on public speech, compare Hilmes: "Soon even widely accepted accents, such as the elite southern, became unacceptable on

Like all reciprocities, the interaction of national and capitalist media interests was ripe with conflict. As a commercial industry overseen by government regulators and committed at least nominally to didactic quality standards, American radio from the beginning was torn between the differing demands of “public service and private profit” (Hilmes xx). In the same manner, government or partisan attempts to utilize the medium for political purposes were forced to engage with radio’s commercial production culture. This meant linking the modes of national self-reproduction to the special conditions of an oligopolistic market competition with unique creative possibilities and constraints. Most notably, a national-capitalist broadcasting system generated intensely serialized entertainment formats, such as the soap opera, whose formal accomplishments – simultaneously standardized and variation-prone, diegetically bound and generically profuse – were absent for a long time from the centralized radio cultures of countries like Germany or Great Britain.⁹ It does not come as a surprise, then, that Franklin Roosevelt’s media management of the Great Depression took the explicit shape of a continuing series of immensely popular radio addresses collectively promoted as “Fireside Chats.” The serial structures of these programs – their recursive unfolding of a narrative of national crisis management, their self-dramatization as an ongoing sequence of public policy announcements, their reflexive media practices – attest to the conflicted nature of America’s commercial and national reproduction in the 1930s and beyond.

3.

It is an interesting question why seriality, a popular storytelling mode in almost any culture at almost any time, only comes into its own as “a reigning principle of cultural production” (Dyer 14) in capitalist economies.¹⁰ Narratives generating further narratives, money generating further money: more than analogy holds between these types of serial generation and their respective practices of *continuation*. Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats are a good place to examine this relationship, because the first installment of the series arrives as an explicit plea to continue – many things, including

national network broadcasts”; radio English began to serve as “a ticket into the middle class” (19).

⁹ Many of the themes discussed in the following have been developed in the six-project Research Unit “Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice” at Göttingen University (Germany), <<http://popularseriality.uni-goettingen.de>>; also see Kelleter 2012c. In accordance with this research group, I use the adjective “serial” as a general term for all types of commercial seriality, not just narratives extending story arcs over many episodes, as in the series/serial distinction common in Anglo-American media studies (see Williams). This approach (and the set of studies linked to it) assumes that the difference between what television scholars call a “series” and a “serial” is not as clear-cut as often suggested; see Kelleter 2010, 2012a. On the relationship between sameness and renewal in serial forms, see Kelleter/Stein.

¹⁰ Compare also Wunsch quoting Dyer. On the commercial basis of serial storytelling, also see Hagedorn 1985, 1988.

itself. Appropriately, then, Roosevelt's address opens with a paradox. It is a paradox that characterizes the serial production of culture in general.

On Sunday, March 12, 1933, at 10 p.m. Eastern Time – eight days after his inaugural address, four days after his first press conference as President – Franklin D. Roosevelt took to the national airwaves “to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking” (12).¹¹ Banks, he explained, are vital to national well-being but there is one thing one needs to understand about them, and this is that a bank in its proper economic function does not do what its name would suggest: it does not ‘bank’ other people’s money. Instead, “the bank puts your money to work to keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning around” (3). In other words, banks are credit institutions whose chief purpose, rather than to simply preserve savings, is to lend money for further profit – profit which according to numerous liberal welfare theories has a social surplus, because it powers a system of ongoing exchanges, each single one of which produces more value than went into it by making further exchanges possible.

Roosevelt thinks these standard creeds of liberalism need explaining, over national radio no less, because in the spring of 1933 some of the most fundamental assumptions and practices of American capitalism are at stake, not least among them the self-evident conjunction of the very terms capitalism and America. After the stock market crash of 1929, an international debt crisis had undermined public confidence in banking institutions. Americans began withdrawing their deposits in unprecedented numbers. By the spring of 1933, “some \$ 226 million in gold reserves [had been] removed from banks (with more than \$ 100 million in gold in domestic hoarding) and some \$732 million in currency withdrawn as well)” (Kiewe 41–42). The outgoing Hoover administration feared that a further run on banks might cause the financial system to collapse. Hoover, who understood the Great Depression as a worldwide monetary crisis whereas Roosevelt as candidate favored domestic-populist descriptions which framed the Depression as a crisis of American agriculture, urged the President-elect to prevent further flight of money into domestic hoarding. Hoover suggested that Roosevelt temporarily close all banks and explain this step in a public address: “I am convinced that a very early statement by you upon two or three policies of your Administration would serve greatly to restore confidence and cause a resumption of the march of recovery” (qtd. in Kiewe 39). Roosevelt’s implementation of these policies marked a significant departure from his rhetoric as candidate. In fact, the first Fireside Chat was co-authored by key holdovers from Hoover’s Treasury department who also prepared the new administration’s plan to close banks.¹²

¹¹ In the following, unspecified page citations refer to Roosevelt 1993. The Fireside Chats were broadcast simultaneously on all national networks.

¹² On Hoover’s internationalist outlook, see Kiewe 13–14. By contrast, Roosevelt tended to strike a Jeffersonian tone, arguing for the relief of “local lenders” and small banks, rather than large centralized institutions, to restore the buying power of American farmers. According to

What are the economic and what are the cultural achievements of the first Fireside Chat in view of these developments? At a fundamental level, concerning its immediate effects, Roosevelt's radio lesson in economic continuation justified and successfully reinforced a self-sustaining system of capital flow. The first Fireside Chat not only explained but facilitated and restored the banks' ability to keep in motion what they had received as static deposits, to make fluid what was supposed to be secure. It appears like an alchemist's tale about the production of value out of value, but on closer inspection, the weight that Roosevelt put on forward-driving verbs like *continue*, *resume*, etc. points to a more dynamic paradox: the paradox of an ongoing self-generation that promises to create stability out of change. This paradox resides not only at the core of capitalism as an economic system but at the core of all serial production of culture. It explains why theories of seriality from the most diverse fields of knowledge (philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, media studies, etc.) all tend to distinguish – and often normatively waver – between two opposing meanings of their term of interest: seriality as free-moving, arc-spanning, complex development on the one hand and seriality as dependable program and episodic modulation on the other.¹³

The challenge is to theorize the mutuality of these seemingly incompatible modes of sequentiality, that is, to describe their relationship not in terms of alternative qualities but in terms of an evolutionary dynamic: one variety needs the other to establish itself, both persistently endanger one another. For what does it mean to continue something, be it a narrative or an economy? On the one hand, under conditions of commercial mass-production, to continue can never simply mean to iterate but always to expand, to spread, to differ(entiate) while trying to remain the same. Competition, i.e., the simultaneous presence of similar interests observing each other, ensures that continuation cannot even aspire to mere repetition. Rather than to stay, to hold, to rest, or to remain content with a regular motion, competitors are obliged to maintain repeatability through perpetual variation, recognizability (and recognition) through surprise, identity through motion: seriality as sprawl.

On the other hand, this is a risky process, as centuries of troubled reflection and critique attest. The horror at the heart of countless tales of modernity is the horror of time passing, or more precisely: the horror of time *accelerating*, the horror of an ever faster turnover of dependabilities, securities, homes.¹⁴ Capitalism has produced an

Kiewe, Roosevelt at the time saw the problem caused “by the imbalance of having too many people reside in cities and employed in industrial firms” (23). On the drafting question, see Kiewe (76–82), who concludes: “the expertise of managing the banking crisis was clearly in the hands of Hoover’s treasury officials” (59). On the often unacknowledged debt of Roosevelt’s New Deal to Hoover’s economics (also compare Craig 83) continuities and discontinuities between the New Era and the New Deal are discussed in Barber.

¹³ See, for instance, Anderson’s distinction between bound and unbound seriality; for a critique see Chatterjee, Mayer.

¹⁴ On the role played by monetary theory in such self-descriptions of modernity, see Kelleter 2006.

impressive array of tropes that serve to channel this fear of sprawl into narratives of regularity and progress. In Roosevelt's early Chats, the term "recovery" – presented as the goal of "our whole great national program" (15) – fulfills this purpose.¹⁵ It is complemented by the claim, omnipresent throughout these radio messages, that the restorative quality of the New Deal *continues* national time exactly by *returning* the nation to an earlier state of prosperity: "I hope you can see, my friends, from this elemental recital of what your government is doing that there is nothing complex, nothing radical, in the process" (15). Dependable as a calendar, the nation continues – "we go forward," closes the second Chat (27) – by going back to a momentarily lost state of equilibrium.

The implication is that capitalist markets would actually be saturated, that their need of expansion would *stop*, when this goal is reached. The goal is for markets to resume a regular motion around an unmoving center, as suggested by the comforting metaphor of "the wheels of industry." But entities which exist by imaginary auto-investment and self-sustaining recursivity – nations, markets, etc. – can never afford to rest their forward motions. In a crucial sense, this is true also for serial narratives: even when they come to an end, as all of them must sooner or later, their final installments are typically characterized by generic connectivity (inviting new starts, spin-offs, imitations, exploitations) rather than diegetic closure.¹⁶ With each television series that fulfills its run – exhausts its possibilities, really – the industry is richer in narrative resources. Capitalist discourse has managed, once more, to re-code the potentially disturbing aspects of such sprawl in terms of probable expectation. In market analyses, the term "growth" – describing serial continuation as a progressive movement drawn forward by its own future objectives – routinely works this way. An invention of economic theory all the more powerful for inviting mathematical measurement, the metaphor of economic growth assigns health and naturalness to sequences of succession that otherwise would be better described in terms of proliferation and metastasis. Of course, a truly natural growth would come to a standstill at some point, say, when a state of maturity is reached. Capitalist growth, by contrast, is self-referential, hence proliferating, in exactly the sense that it perennially programs tomorrow's unhappiness about situations whose achievement only yesterday was set as a target for today – without any substantial change in resources or wants occurring in the meantime.

This is another way of saying that capitalist growth is less concerned with meeting concrete material demands than with ensuring the conditions of its own continuation. As Joseph Vogl has argued, once set in motion, capitalism as an economic system only functions under the condition that it will continue to function in the future; credit

¹⁵ Compare the National Industrial Recovery Act, signed by Roosevelt on June 16, 1933.

¹⁶ The self-serialization of series is further discussed in Kelleter 2012b. On serial endings as moments of narrative crisis which often prompt the continuing narrative to retroactively re-define itself as a closed work, compare Kelleter 2010.

transactions are profitable – in fact, possible – only on the assumption that they will enable further transactions.¹⁷ It is in this sense that Roosevelt, one week into his presidency, reminded America's radio audience of "the simple fact that when you deposit money in a bank the bank does not put the money in a safe deposit vault. It invests your money in many different forms of credit – in bonds, in commercial paper, in mortgages, and in many other kinds of loans. In other words, the bank puts your money to work [...]." (13)

Panic happens in such self-sustaining systems when a promise of future fails. For credit economies, heavily dependent on trust in ongoing dealings, the possibility of stoppage – even of slowing down – must appear like the incursion of irrational choices in the self-regulated (hence rational) balancing out of market interests.¹⁸ From less involved perspectives, such panic may appear as a moment of truth, revealing that economic trust is founded on little else but the powerful belief in its own persistence. Bubbles burst, illusions collapse under the weight of their own elaboration, a fantastic sense of normalcy is disrupted by material need: great depression.

As the first measure in what will become an impressive series of government initiatives to save capitalism for a continuing American nation, Roosevelt thus promotes a fitting intervention, one which intervenes in the economic artifice of temporal succession itself. The President suspends time: the banks will remain closed so that the markets can carry on. Underlying this simple solution, already proposed by Hoover, is the understanding that in a time of panic, when material realities invade an auto-imaginary system of reality-production, credit can continue to perform its future work if some owners are prevented from enforcing their present claims. As Henry Thornton wrote in an early theory of credit (1802), a monetary economy based on paper – that is, credit emancipated from dependence on material assets – is bound to collapse only when all who have a right to do so suddenly demand encashment. Vogl, quoting Thornton, remarks that this confirms the hybrid character of capitalist money: part loan (with future value options), part currency (with direct exchange value).¹⁹

Accordingly, Roosevelt's decision not to allow "money to go into hiding" (20) performs a bail-out that lays open the paradoxical foundation of the liberal market by inverting some of its key premises. Where "hoarding" (that dangerous enforcement of stasis) could really be seen as the citizens' complement to bank mortgage foreclosures (which had grown alarmingly after 1929), Roosevelt asks Americans to suspend their

¹⁷ Compare, in particular, Vogl's chapter "Die Zeit des Kapitals" (53–82).

¹⁸ See Vogl on the logic of credit, which ensures that "jedes Haben zugleich ein Nicht-Haben, jedes Zuviel ein Zuwenig, jeder Überfluss eine Knappheit und der Zusammenbruch des Systems nur durch seine endlose Fortsetzung vermeidbar, d.h. aufschiebbar ist" ("every having is simultaneously a not-having, every affluence a scarceness, and the crash of the system can be avoided, i.e., delayed, only through its endless continuation," 78; my translation).

¹⁹ See Vogl 75; the reference is to Thornton's *An Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Paper Credit of Great Britain* (1802).

property claims once the banks open again and to feed their money and gold back into credit institutions for purposes other than safeguarding. It is as if they were returning their money where it belongs: in circulation. Long before the triumph of the neo-liberal realignment of state and economic institutions in the second half of the century, this small episode of the Great Depression sets an inevitable routine for all coming financial debt crises: private citizens will pay creditors whose speculations have brought on the crisis in the first place.²⁰ People are paradoxically asked to surrender money to an economic system that promises to make them rich. Thus, the credit economy is kept alive by the financial commitment – in this case, waiving one’s right of withdrawal – of those it claims to benefit. The rationality of these apparently illogical procedures resides in the undesirability of the only definitive alternative on offer: the breakdown of the financial system’s self-sustaining force and with it the possible termination of the link-up between capitalist and national continuation.

4.

Roosevelt’s radio address succeeded spectacularly on its rescue mission. Correctly perceiving the banking crisis as a crisis of trust rather than of assets – in the parlance of the day, a “psychological” crisis which, in less involved terminology, really showed up the need of self-referential systems for imaginary investments – Roosevelt’s solution was adequately rhetorical: “words and only words changed human behavior and action” (Kiewe 15). The most famous sentence of Roosevelt’s inaugural address, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” takes on an unexpectedly constructivist meaning in this context: economics to a large degree is make-believe and storytelling.

Roosevelt’s rhetorical skill has been analyzed frequently and thoroughly.²¹ I would like to stress an additional factor in Roosevelt’s accomplishment of money transfers all over the country and convincing people “to redeposit patriotically” (Kiewe 127): his successful mediation between two conflicting if mutually dependent manifestations of serial production. The first Fireside Chat managed to construct a largely plausible relationship between seriality as a self-propelling sprawl of (mostly monetary) values and seriality as a controlled program of (mostly narrative) offers. While the un-

²⁰ This is not to belittle the differences between the New Deal’s regulatory policies, which split up multifunction banks and established genuine control of financial institutions (e.g. through the SEC), and the later rescue policies of the Bush and Obama administrations, which in the words of Joseph Stiglitz privatized gains and socialized losses (thus fostering bank mergers and bolstering the power of rating agencies). However, the actual difference between both approaches lies in the changed possibilities of government action and stock market innovations after the neo-liberal dismantling of politics as a key system of national governance since the 1980s, not in any fundamental disagreement about the national role of monetary markets.

²¹ Among others, see Houck, Kiewe (specifically on the first Fireside Chat), and Ryan (on Roosevelt’s “rhetorical presidency”).

checked serialization of money, i.e., speculation, portends “fear” (a key-term both in the inaugural and the first Chat), Roosevelt’s radio message worked hard to re-describe complex flow in terms of unfolding iteration. In the end, this amounted to redefining the relationship between government and economy, ultimately between nation and capitalism, as one of containment rather than identity. America *has* an economy, Roosevelt insisted, instead of being run by one. In what can be described as a hierarchical division of cultural labor, the federal government created trust in the persistence of monetary flow exactly by declaring supervisory control over its continuation. This is the logic of the series as a well-ordered program.

As a result, Roosevelt’s speech takes care to draw as little attention as possible to the staggering scope and inevitable futurity of credit dealings. Their open-ended proliferation merges into the etcetera formula “and many other kinds of loan” (13) and is then balanced out by the trustworthy continuity of Roosevelt’s own invocation (paradoxically multiplied throughout the series) of “first, second, third,” etc. steps: a sequence of government measures supposedly unfolding with the reliability of newspaper editions or church sermons. The President here is handing out narrative promissory notes and declares them to be safe by the nature of their federal origin – although their sheer number over the years should be enough to conjure up the specter of inflation. Indeed, the major rhetorical challenge for Roosevelt’s radio series, and one of its foremost narratological occupations for an entire decade, will consist in retroactively explaining away the structural similarity of New Deal programs with the serial self-momentum of speculative sprawl.

Already in the first Fireside Chat there is a moment when this similarity becomes apparent: among the three steps toward recovery laid out by Roosevelt is a law allowing the Federal Reserve Banks “to issue additional currency on good assets,” so that, should people continue to withdraw and hoard money in large numbers, “banks that reopen will be able to meet every legitimate call.” To allay fears of inflation, Roosevelt assures his listeners: “It is sound currency because it is backed by actual, good assets” (14). In the course of the series, this declaration is frequently repeated and gradually broadened to encompass not only federal gold reserves but also “our natural resources” and “our human resources” (21), which means: the nation itself.

Thus covering the outlay of a national economy with trust in the continued existence of the nation, the federal government prefers to produce new money, more money, before the old one just stays put unused. This is sensible policy and sensible psychology as long as it works. That it *does* work is owed decisively to the routine operation of national mass media, in this case: the program-medium of radio which day in day out keeps packaging proliferating narratives and information into schedules, forms, and genres that sustain the illusion that the new and unexpected will always reach us in the reassuring shape of what is already known.

5.

The President asks the people to lend back their holdings to an economic system that is failing them and the people heed his call. Coercion may have played a role; the administration actually planned to publish “the names of those who withdrew gold since February 1, 1933” (Kiewe 54). Gentle persuasion certainly did its part, with Roosevelt striking the tone of a well-meaning but determined father who, as authorities are wont to do, expresses his imperatives as declarative descriptions of fact (“it is my belief that hoarding during the past week has become an exceedingly unfashionable pastime” (15)). But most of all, the unforced force of Roosevelt’s argument derived from the fact that the President interacted with his audience as a media character, more precisely: as a *radio voice*. As mentioned, the first Fireside Chat promoted policies that had been already envisaged and prepared by Hoover’s Treasury Department. But, as one contemporary observer remarked, “if Herbert Hoover had spoken the same words into the microphone, the stock market would have fallen another notch, and public confidence with it” (qtd. in Ryan 19).

More than a difference in rhetorical talent or personal affability is at issue in this statement. Roosevelt’s deliberate, indeed methodical cultivation of a radio voice affected the register (simple), diction (“nonaccented”), pace (slow), timing (early nighttime, when the more prestigious radio programs aired) and frequency (avoiding overexposure) of his appearances in the medium.²² What is more, among contemporary politicians Roosevelt was rare in respecting the technological constraints and demands of radio, “pa[ying] attention to microphone angles and respond[ing] to his cues,” as a 1940 *Broadcast* article put it (qtd. in Brown 41). Technicians and producers apparently loved him for it, which goes a long way towards explaining Roosevelt’s special relationship with the broadcasting industry. While this was certainly a relationship of mutual power bargaining, in which commercial and state interests over regulation and access had to be negotiated, something more immediate about the affordances (the action-governing force) of this particular communication technology comes into play here.²³ Roosevelt’s decision “to interfere as little as possible with the networks’ commercial commitments” (Craig 156) concerned not only questions of institutional supervision but the technological conditions of radio itself. In particular, Roosevelt was almost unique among statesmen of the day in valuing radio’s identity as a medium of scheduled programs. Hoover, too, during his presidency had understood the political utility of broadcasting but typically went over time with his numerous addresses, often infringing on popular programs. Such sense of entitlement did not endear him to popular audiences or producers. By contrast, Roosevelt meticulously timed his speeches and, in cooperation with the networks, scheduled and

²² On Roosevelt’s radio oratory, see Brown 17, Lenthall 89, Kiewe 98, Ryan; specifically on his voice, see Loviglio 5, Miller 79. On the differentiation process that divided daytime from nighttime radio, compare Hilmes 151–229.

²³ For the term “affordance,” see Gibson, also Norman.

announced them in such a way that they felt, for all practical purposes, like part of the schedule (which was saturated with serialized programs), not interruptions of it.

In other words: the voice of the President reached its audience not only as carrier of a political event but as the speaking voice of a media character among others. This and the media-savvy production of Roosevelt's speeches accounted for their tremendous popularity – as well as for the *type* of popularity they enjoyed. Addressed to listeners who were used to fictional characters “visiting” their homes every day like “friends” (key-terms in radio fan mail of the 1920s and 1930s), the Fireside Chats thrived on a commercial culture of storytelling that ever since the first serialized mass-market novels of the nineteenth century had advanced the phenomenon of “parasocial contacts” between media figures and audiences.²⁴ Calling attention to Roosevelt's own position in this imagined sphere of communality, his long-time advisor and speech writer Samuel Rosenman remarked upon the President's death: “Millions of people in America [...] seemed to have lost a close relative or dear friend – even though they never laid eyes on him” (qtd. in Brown 126). Appropriately, the first memorial to America's longest-serving President, opening in 1997 in Washington, D.C., “included a sculpture depicting a family gathered around the radio during one of the president's fireside chats” (ibid.).

“Feelings of quasi-private relationships with public figures” (Lenthall 7) are common features of commercial serial storytelling, and they do their work of cultural reproduction just as well when generated by policy statements with no overt narrative ambitions. According to radio historian Michele Hilmes, the American “culture of personality” is perhaps best expressed in the emergence of “the mass-produced celebrity” (58), because the exceedingly distant yet improbably close media celebrity perfectly embodies the conditions of social interaction in national communities. And indeed: an estimated 40 million people listened to the first Fireside Chat. Approximately 450,000 of those listeners acted upon the curiously personal quality of the broadcast and, trained by other programs to do so, wrote letters to Roosevelt.²⁵ After the third Chat, Roosevelt on the radio “had topped Jack Benny and Charlie McCarthy in the Hooper rankings”; he was “the greatest act on air” (Brown 21–22). Letters from listeners kept coming until the President's office had to create a special division for handling listeners' mail.

There are good reasons to regard these letters as fan mail. Like similar communications to film actors, soap characters, or serial authors, they expressed praise and gratitude but also offered critique and made suggestions for further plot develop-

²⁴ For radio characters as “visiting friends,” see Lenthall 66, Loviglio. On “parasocial contacts,” compare Horton/ Wohl, Vorderer.

²⁵ For those numbers, see Kiewe 101–102. On early network radio “training” listeners “to participate in a reciprocal, ‘two-way’ relationship with radio personalities by sending letters,” see Loviglio 6. Hilmes' discussion of the American “culture of personality” refers to Warren Susman's definition of the term.

ment.²⁶ From the third Chat onwards, Roosevelt explicitly invited such feedback, offering “the people of this country” roles as characters within the unfolding story of the New Deal. Performing as national actors in their everyday lives, listeners could profess loyalty and mark their active status by wearing “We do our part” badges specifically advertised by Roosevelt on radio (34).²⁷ Thus serial narratives typically transgress the bounds of their original media and continue (themselves) in different social spheres. One can call this a “participatory culture,” after Henry Jenkins, if participation, a term loaned from the repertoire of democratic self-descriptions, is understood in a non-populist sense, describing a dispersion of authorship among personal, objective, and aesthetic agencies.²⁸ A conflict here emerges that defines all forms of narrative seriality: a conflict between the self-dynamic expansiveness of serial narration (its tendency towards multi-authored accountabilities, audience participation, differentiation into conflicting spin-offs and revisions, etc.) and its simultaneous need for ideological or brand control, commonly including a desire for authorial and authoritative closure. In fact, like most serial authors, Roosevelt after the first round of Fireside Chats was soon occupied with defending his status of narrative responsibility – ultimately the responsibility of an explicitly political “leadership,” so much valued at the time and strongly enforced in viewer correspondence – against the infringements of participating commentators, amateur contributors, and even parodists that he otherwise kept inviting.²⁹

Thus the Fireside Chats developed the New Deal as a serial narrative for a mass media audience, with all the problems of recursive coherence-building this entailed. More than this: in doing so they developed an increasingly complex serial protagonist (the federal executive) whose character-function (embodied by the President) constantly had to be re-negotiated with its narrator-function (the friendly voice of FDR, speaking from one national neighbor to another). The American nation, impersonated by the government’s executive branch in cahoots with its electorate, waging a heroic battle against the failure(s) of capitalism: what better medium to make this story as real as it has become than one which transmitted individual voices to an anonymous audience? It has often been remarked that radio allowed Roosevelt, more than any other medium would have done, to create a self-fulfilling personality of strength and mobility which contrasted starkly but without political consequence with the disabili-

²⁶ A good sample of letters is provided in Levine/Levine; for analyses, see Loviglio, L. Sussman.

²⁷ Compare Loviglio: “Roosevelt used the Fireside Chats to enlist listeners as an indispensable corps of publicity agents during the depths of the Depression, and then as national security agents as the nation headed toward World War II” (5).

²⁸ For the concept of non-human agency in this regard, see Latour.

²⁹ On the question of parody, see in particular the case of Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg’s “Fireside Mystery Chat” (CBS, October 17, 1936), which offered a scornful collage of questions asked by the Senator and “answers” in the form of FDR recordings (discussed in Brown 33, Craig 130).

ties of his increasingly stationary body.³⁰ Among the many mass-produced supermen of the time, this was certainly one of the most incredible, if one of the most effective. And really, “isn’t ‘Clark Kent,’ at bottom, an action-figure embodiment of FDR?” (as Robert Gottlieb recently asked in a review of Morris Dickstein’s cultural history of the Great Depression (32)). And is it only happenstance that Huey Long, the one politician who for a while could match Roosevelt’s public clout, took his nickname, the Kingfish, from a main character in *Amos ’n’ Andy*, the most popular radio series of the day?

When people write to their favorite serial characters to express sympathy or offer comfort, they usually do not do so because they confuse fact and fiction but because they understand, as Jared Gardner says, that they have a role to play.³¹ An imagined community is no less real for being imagined; it is not exposed as non-existent – as if it was an evil spell – when its fictionality becomes a matter of discussion. In fact, its dependence on feedback always threatens such narrative crises. In an important sense, this threat is the very risk of national existence, it accounts for the nation’s unlikelihood: never given, always made, but made by giving the impression of something that goes on, something to work for or against. Thus, when Depression listeners “often perceived broadcasting as a part of a two-way conversation” (Lenthall 74), this did not indicate a failure of the system’s sense of reality but, on the contrary, an act of systemic reality-construction. For this reason, when the system looked at itself, it sometimes tended to duplicate the communicative perspectives of its actors as political theory: various models of “radio citizenship” and “broadcasting democracy” of the 1930s – describing telecommunication technologies as improbable passageways for a self-despairing *Gesellschaft* to the original republicanism of *Gemeinschaft* – were predicated on the same theatrics of participation that allowed and prompted serial audiences to act as players in narrative worlds proliferating by exactly such means.³²

6.

“The Depression could have led Americans to question their political and economic system but radio gave capitalism an additional influential means of promoting its own ideals” (Lenthall 34). Radio thus functioned as a forum and a force in the conjuncture, increasingly discordant during the Great Depression, of capitalist economy and American nationhood. The productivity of Roosevelt’s first presidential radio program

³⁰ See, for example, Craig 157, Loviglio 8. For a study of the president’s body, see Houck/Kiewe.

³¹ Compare Gardner 2011 (lecture).

³² A question perhaps of interest for the burgeoning field of Digital Humanities; on the concept of radio citizenship in relation to 1930s debates about Ferdinand Tönnies’ distinction of *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* (society/community) and its meaning for a theory of modern republicanism, see Craig 170, 206–210, 282 (including comments on recent discussions of “netizenship”).

in this regard was not restricted to the level of content or “ideals” (radio as a purveyor of market ideologies) but resided more immediately and perhaps more efficiently in the mediality of the economic message itself (serial broadcasts as modes of national self-generation). No matter if the first radio address was preconceived as the start of a series – it seems it was, with networks having tried even before 1933 to turn presidents into regular contributors to their programs – its subsequent proliferation into a sequence of self-aware “Fireside Chats,” a title proposed by Harry Butcher of CBS, was inherent from the beginning in the speech’s medium and subject matter.³³ Itself concerned with the tension of sprawl and trust, Roosevelt’s address was necessarily animated by a need to continue, and the series that followed still has a lot to teach us about continuation as the founding paradox of “American capitalism,” a precarious and powerful combination producing both perpetual crises and critical stability.

The scope and complexity of Roosevelt’s radio series, spanning eleven years from the banking crisis to the final stages of World War II, this unexpected and ambiguous playing field in the continuing story of the New Deal, transcends the limits of the present essay. A long version might perhaps try to reconstruct trajectories only hinted at here. Regarding serial content, it might show how New Deal media produced a kind of democratic folk mythology of capitalism that has long survived the program’s economic reputation. Central assumptions of this folk mythology are still with us, in one inflection or another, among them the belief that a credit economy can and should be translated back into some “real economy” of elemental exchange relations; the belief that economic crises are irregularities and can be imputed to people or culprit institutions and their moralities or lack thereof; the belief that capitalism is a heroic endeavor or a conspiracy; the belief that governments can create prosperity and that, if they do not, the political personnel must be deficient in competence, character or humanity; the belief that a nation can “have” an economy as it has borders, however porous; the inevitable belief of democratic ideologies that people possess full access to their intentions, full understanding of their choices, and that it is actually choice which creates a world worth living in.

Regarding serial form, an extended examination of the issues raised here might show how the second Fireside Chat established the series as a series; how later addresses referred to their own seriality or tried to conceal it; how they competed with the media affordances of American newspapers (which were much less inclined to government cooperation at the time); how recaps, teasers and cliffhangers developed and were covered up again; how the New Deal’s Alphabet Soup was also an Alphabet Soap; how its story transgressed the boundaries of its original text and authorship; how pauses and intervals were employed to carry forward the narrative and yet make it look like an event again and again; how this required supportive paratexts and generated merchandise; how spin-offs, complements, and counter-

³³ On the networks’ interest in a series of presidential addresses, see Kiewe 76; for the origin of the term “Fireside Chats,” see Buhite/Levy xv, Lim 438, Kiewe 135.

series emerged; how these continuations reverberated throughout the entire system of serial radio in the 1930s and 1940s, far beyond the field of political speech, and how the Fireside Chats, like any popular series, developed in response to this a media theory of their own. Perhaps some of these questions can eventually be tackled in a larger project.

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