Radio visions:
Technological, commercial and artistic radio utopias

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When Heinrich Hertz established the existence of radio waves and Marconi invented the wireless telegraph, this sparked the emergence of far-flung ideas, hopes and dreams in the early twentieth century.

One of the first radio visionaries was Nicola Tesla, who was born in Croatia and later emigrated to the USA. He has a committed group of followers, who are in equal measure dedicated, fanatic and prone to conspiracy theories about the suppression of his inventions. Tesla primarily conducted basic research and invented, among other things, the alternating current induction motor. Marconi, who established the first commercial wireless telegraphy empire, was one of his students. However, the transmission of information via radio waves was not what interested Tesla. He believed in the possibility of a wireless transfer of energy. The experimental lab he erected on Long Island had the form of a large tower: it was to emit electrical energy. ‘Emit’, however, is not quite the right term, as Tesla believed in an equilibrium of energy that merely needed to be tapped into in order to win enough energy to cover the needs of all of humanity. This energy would, in his vision, simply be distributed via a system of transmitter towers. The Tesla fans’ conspiracy theory is based on their conviction that the concept of ‘free energy’ was deliberately suppressed, since the ready availability of sufficient energy for all would, after all, remove the most important reason for wars and commercial rivalries in one. Hence, Tesla’s followers remain convinced that dark forces had ensured that his inventions would never see the light of day. Tesla’s energy transmitter tower was damaged in a storm decades after his death and subsequently demolished. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the German artist Günter Held replicated Tesla machines and conducted high voltage experiments.

White Marconi extended his network of radio-telegraph stations during the early years of the
twentieth century, others were already conjecturing the notion of a personal wireless radio system, in other words: mobile telephony. A series of inventors addressed the issues of the technology that was available at the time.

The first radio systems’ reliance on the creation of electrical sparks between two poles posed a serious problem: the loud crackle of the spark severely hampered the transmission of speech. Nevertheless, inventors like Lee De Forest managed even in the first decade of the twentieth century to overcome a distance of twenty kilometres and more and transmit intelligible speech between two transmitters/receivers.

Even then, the possibility of the wireless transmission of voice and music raised hopes for the creation of a more democratic and more egalitarian society. One billboard poster from this early period promised no less than the utopia of perfect wireless socialism.

The first stock market bubble due to speculation on the new wireless technology occurred around 1908. In a series of articles titled Fools and Their Money, journalist Frank Fayant described how inventive businesspeople were relieving investors of their money. Thus the Internet Bubble was preceded by almost a century by a Wireless Bubble, which rested not least on the promise of a national wireless telephone system in the USA. Well-staged advertising campaigns invited investors to sink their millions into worthless companies. Although one or two transmission towers were in fact built, it does remain doubtful whether the companies had ever even planned to set up functioning systems.

The technology simply needed much more headway – it would be another eighty years before mobile telephones began to make their mark.[2]

**Artistic radio visions**

Artistic radio visions began to flourish after the First World War, especially so among the Constructivists and Futurists. Velimir Chlebnikov wrote futuristic texts about radio as the ‘spiritual sun’. Used in the right way, he proposed, it would lead to eternal global peace. The current Slovenian artist Marko Peljhan runs the renowned and widely exhibited project Makrolab; his work is inspired by Chlebnikov.[3]

In 1933, the Italian Futurists Marinetti and Masnata wrote the manifesto La Radia.[5] To them, radio was ‘Freedom from all points of contact with literary and artistic tradition’. They were convinced that radio would render obsolete all previous forms of art, including even cinema, young as it was at the time. Their manifesto makes for highly engaging reading: it contains a plethora of nonsense typical for its time, Futuristic notions and politically dubious ideas thanks to its proximity to Italian Fascism, but it also contains almost prophetic words. Writing that ‘Words in freedom children of the aesthetics of machines contain an orchestra of noises and noise-chords’, their words evoke the description of music styles like industrial, techno and drum&bass. Other sections, like, e.g., item 6, which has radio as a ‘pure organism of radio sensations’, turned out to have less mass appeal, yet can still be understood as an anticipation of experimental radio practices, such as those used by radio experimenters including DFM in Amsterdam and Jupitter Larson in the United States.

In 1952, the sculptor Lucio Fontana was able to present his manifesto Movimento Spaziale on Italian TV. Like his Futuristic predecessors, he hoped that TV would bring about a liberation of visual arts. The conjunction of geographically far
apart spaces and different cultures played a prominent role in this manifesto, as well as the circumstance that this new medium was able to reach wide sectors of the population, thereby bringing contemporary art beyond the traditional elites.[5]

In light of the historical circumstances, it must be recognized that many of the early radio visions had totalitarian traits. The wireless medium and its potential to reach ‘everyone’ was simply too thrilling in the early twentieth century. It was not until the 1960s that a new paradigm slowly began to gain ground: the dogma ‘for all’ was replaced by a participatory ‘by all’. The emancipatory power of new technology became a central topic again with the emergence of computer networks and achieved speculative heavyweight status during the 1990s, as illustrated, e.g., in Howard Rheingold’s Virtual Communities and the more recent publication Smart Mobs.[6] The interplay between technology and society remains a controversial topic to this day.

REFERENCES

[1] For information on and texts about Nicola Tesla, see http://www.amasci.com/tesla/tesla.html


