

PRESS & MEDIA

Renaissance on the Airwaves

THE SOURCE: "All Programs Considered" by Bill McKibben, in *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 11, 2010.

THERE'S SOMETHING OF A mini-renaissance taking place on America's radio waves—particularly on public radio—but you'd be hard-pressed to find any note made of it in most newspapers, on television, or even on public radio itself. Compared with other media, "radio may be the least discussed, debated, [and] understood," remarks author and environmental activist Bill McKibben.

It's not that no one is listening. NPR's flagship news programs, *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*, each draw about 13 million listeners in the course of a week, audiences that dwarf the number of subscribers to major print publication such as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.

And these well-regarded news programs (polls show that public radio is the most trusted news source in the country) are just the tip of the iceberg—a panoply of high-quality call-in shows, local talk programs, and interview shows such as *Fresh Air* round out the standard NPR station's offerings.

Not too long ago, "radio was dead," remembers Robert Krulwich, a host of the science- and philosophy-focused *Radiolab*. "All the smarties were at the *Times* or *The Washington Post*. . . . This group of nutty people wandered in and said, let's do radio. We'll reinvent it." Today, those nutty people run the show, "and now they have a little of the swagger of the *Timesmen*."

McKibben argues that the success of the NPR news programming has "tended to wash out some of the distinctiveness." Today, the creativity is happening elsewhere, in programs such as *Radiolab* and Ira Glass's *This American Life*, a weekly hour that prides itself on producing so-called driveway moments—segments so

good you can't leave your car. Both programs have tackled subjects many traditional news outlets would shy away from. The hosts of *Radiolab*, in "an almost comic attempt to make their job hard," have explored topics such as time, morality, and memory.

The Internet's ascendance has meant that audio files can circulate among friends, and that a program, once aired, has a second life online. Before the Internet, says *Radiolab's* other host, Jad Abumrad, "it was hard for us to justify the amount of labor we put into it. Because it was disposable, just out there in the world and then gone."

But the economics aren't quite working out, for stations and producers alike. Podcasts are nearly universally offered for free, and many stations can't afford edgier, more experimental programs. One independent producer, Benjamin Walker, estimates that he made \$80 on a widely promoted show called *Theory of Everything* that ran on six NPR stations across the country. "If I thought about it too hard, I would just quit."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Catholicism's Lessons for Islam

THE SOURCE: "Making Muslim Democracies" by Jan-Werner Müller, in *The Boston Review*, Nov.-Dec. 2010.

IN 2008, TURKEY'S RULING Justice and Development Party (AKP) narrowly missed being out-

lawed. State prosecutors argued that the conservative AKP—whose official platform includes economic modernization and EU membership—was bent on Islamizing the secular state and moving toward theocracy. Some may see the AKP as

the model of a Muslim party, appealing to believers while playing by democracy's rules, but many others within Turkey and elsewhere continue to fear that Islam and democracy are incompatible.

Concerns that religion and democracy do not mix aren't new, writes Princeton political theorist Jan-Werner Müller, nor are they confined to Islam. In the 19th century and far into the 20th, Catholicism was the big worry. Many blamed Catholicism for "the persistence of dictatorship in Latin Amer-