This article analyzes the 1940s radio series You Are There, originally titled CBS Is There. The series illuminates media history in two ways. First, it provides insight into a time of momentous change in the broadcasting industry. Its creative blend of fact and fiction challenged conventional definitions of journalism and documentary at a time when significant changes were sweeping U.S. broadcasting, underscoring the power and authority of audio journalism even as television was starting to eclipse radio as a national medium. Second, You Are There demonstrates how popular culture’s depictions of the past typically speak as much to contemporary concerns as they do to those of the past. The series expressed the optimistic liberalism of its producer-director Robert Lewis Shayon in addressing postwar debates over isolationism, prejudice, and freedom of thought. At the same time, You Are There told stories of heroic individualism that celebrated classically American virtues and reproduced consensual, patriotic interpretations of US history.

Scholars and critics have long been interested in popular film and television’s depictions of history. Some criticize such depictions for trivializing or falsifying the historical record. Others argue that historically based movies and TV shows should be viewed in the proper context and not be judged according to the usual criteria of professional historians. Those scholars add that such movies and shows actually can enhance our understanding of the past while serving as useful historical artifacts in their own right.

The latter perspective can be fruitfully applied to the 1940s radio series You Are There, originally titled CBS Is There. The program is better known for its television incarnation that CBS would

By Robert L. Kerr

This article documents the late seventies behind-the-scenes battle led by Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., that forged a five-justice majority for a narrow Supreme Court holding in First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti to bring corporate political media spending within the protections of the First Amendment. It shows that justices on the Court then recognized the holding as a considerably greater alteration of established law than another five-justice majority would maintain in 2010—when it expanded the influence of corporate money on democratic processes and the marketplace of ideas far beyond that seventies precedent. Justices William H. Rehnquist and Byron R. White remained so dissatisfied with the result in Bellotti that each authored harsh dissents declaring the majority holding to be completely at odds with settled law, and both remained on the Court long enough to have the opportunity to help form majorities in a series of subsequent cases that served to substantially narrow its holding. Nevertheless, Bellotti established a firm enough footing in the case law to allow the majority at the Court in 2010 to extend its reach far beyond what was established in 1978.

The second decade of the twenty-first century had just begun when the Supreme Court opened the door, via the First Amendment, to permit greater influence of corporate money on democratic processes than ever before. In the wake of that decision, it is instructive to look back at the original developments that made such an immensely consequential change possible a little more than a quarter-century later. It was in First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti in the spring of 1978 that the Court first
In the 1920s, the newspaper industry had to adjust to an upstart medium, radio. Initially, newspapers saw natural synergies with radio and became radio’s primary booster. However, the newspaper industry’s enthusiasm for radio quickly peaked, and for the latter half of the decade, newspapers resisted the encroachment of broadcasting. This cooperation-competition dialectic predates the so-called “press-radio war” of the 1930s and provides a pretext for that later conflict, in which newspapers and radio battled over the right to deliver news and sell advertising.

Competition between old and new media systems is a recurring theme in history, with the older forms either being displaced or having to adapt to new types of content, new business models, and new audience expectations. In the 1920s, as radio expanded from point-to-point communication to broadcasting, the long-established newspaper industry had to adjust to the growing significance of an upstart medium. Initially, newspapers saw natural synergies with radio, and a few, such as the Detroit News, quickly started their own broadcast operations. However, the newspaper industry’s enthusiasm for radio quickly peaked, and for the latter half of the 1920s, newspapers in general resisted the encroachment of broadcasting.

Most historians trace the breakdown of press-radio relations to the early 1930s and competition over the right to deliver news. Lacking their own newsgathering apparatus, opportunistic radio stations began broadcasting news using primarily copy from the wire services—businesses that were controlled by the newspapers—as their sources. As a result, the radio stations could scoop the local
At the onset of the Depression, Virginius Dabney, editorial writer for the Richmond Times-Dispatch, advocated state solutions to the South’s ills. He soon realized that extreme conditions called for federal interference. At first, Dabney enthusiastically supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal measures and attacked anyone who opposed them. After the court-packing incident of 1937, Dabney became critical of the president and the New Deal. He came to see Roosevelt and his policies as too radical and returned to his belief that state control was best. His shift from support to criticism of the New Deal fits with historians’ descriptions of southern liberals’ reaction to New Deal measures. Even so, because Dabney’s actions did not fit with certain aspects of his own definition of liberalism, it seems that he never was firmly on the left. The extreme circumstances of the Depression pushed him to a more progressive stance than he was comfortable holding, which accounts for his constant wavering. However, his overall position hardly changed. The leftward shift of the administration, and indeed liberalism as a whole, made Dabney appear more conservative.

When newspaper editor Virginius Dabney recalled the Depression era, he acknowledged that he was more liberal at that time than he later became. “I suppose,” he declared, “most people tend to be more liberal when they are young.” On another occasion, he claimed that he never changed; his views remained the same while everyone else became more liberal.¹

Perhaps Dabney’s first statement is true, but the second is