

BOOKS *et al.*

SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

Picturing the future

A new film celebrates a mid-century illustrator who stoked imaginations with prescient comics

By **Dov Greenbaum**

Directed by Brett Ryan Bonowicz (*The Perfect 46*, 2014), *Closer Than We Think* is an eponymous documentary about a mid-20th-century comic strip and its creator, Arthur Radebaugh. The film provides important insight into what made the comic a foundation for other popular science fiction endeavors. More important, however, it shows how the strip directly encouraged nascent engineers and scientists to actualize the future described therein. To this end, Radebaugh's efforts succeeded where so many other science communication efforts continue to fail.

Published weekly from 1958 through 1963 in the Sunday funnies of more than 200 newspapers, Radebaugh's educational futurism provided playful, tongue-in-cheek visions of a technological utopia that the public

could readily understand and appreciate. His predictions were based on information that he obtained from researchers, which he dutifully recorded in each strip. In one panel, for example, a colorful rendering of a solar-powered car accompanies a pithy interview with the vice president of the Chrysler Corporation, James Zeder. "If we continue to increase the efficiency of these [silicon] converters, and if we are able to develop small, efficient energy storage cells, solar powered cars will be feasible," Zeder explains. In the future, translates Radebaugh, "[y]our solar sedan will take energy from sunrays and store it in accumulators that work like a battery."

Bonowicz's documentary stresses that Radebaugh's relationships with researchers were central to the success of his predictions, which included the VCR ("[W]hen a worthwhile program comes over the air ... you'll be able to preserve both the picture and sound on tape for replaying at any time"), Skype and the globalization of the job market, and driverless vehicles ("Future trains will be fully automatic—robots that can regulate their own

speed and control their own movements").

The film suggests that Radebaugh's ability to connect to the lay public can also be attributed to his technological optimism. By rejecting the dystopian tropes common to science fiction, he enticed a younger generation to become interested in science and technology, encouraging them to envision fantastical technological futures. This mirrored a growing feeling in society: Even during the chaos and fear of the Cold War—*Closer Than We Think* was bookended by Sputnik and Kennedy's assassination—it was also a time of growing hope that technology could be harnessed for the betterment of mankind.

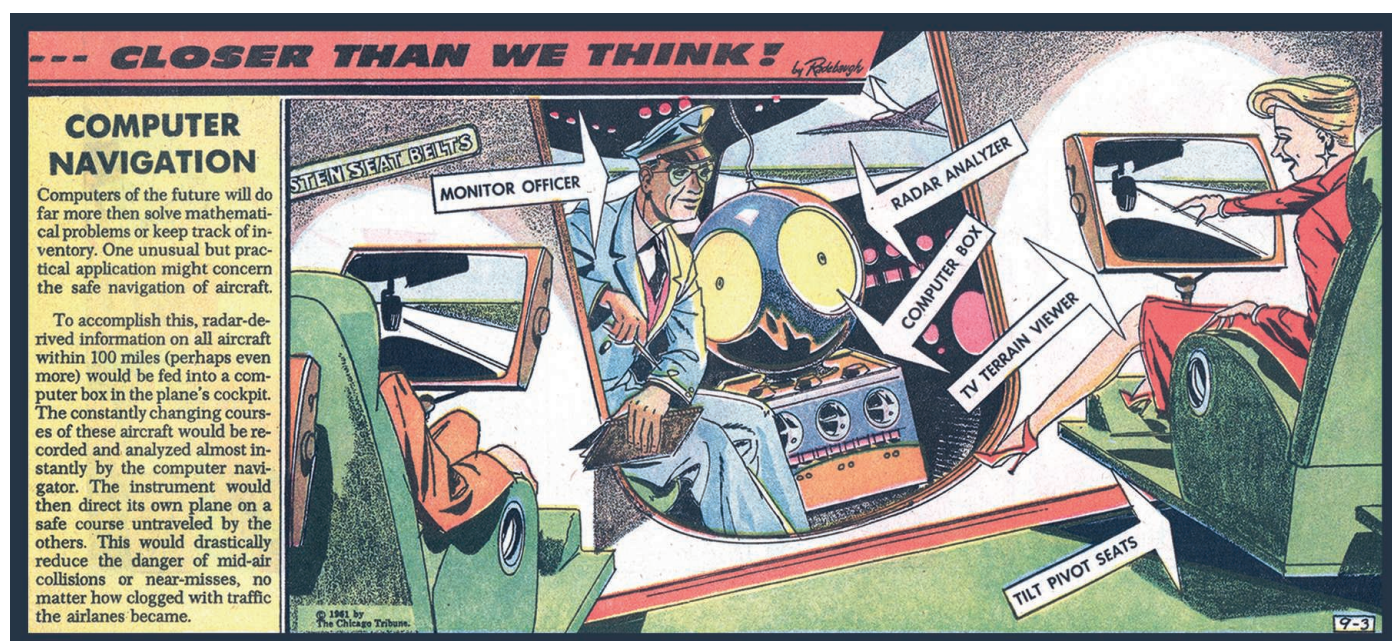
Before *Closer Than We Think*, Radebaugh was a well-regarded commercial illustrator who saw the demand for his work plummet as photographs began to take the place of drawings in print publications and television advertising began to obtain prominence. He moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1967, ostensibly to retire with his wife, Nancy. There, he fell on hard times and lived out his days in relative obscurity.

Bonowicz's film, although an exhaustive examination of Radebaugh's art and life, would have benefited from a more thorough exploration of both his scientific muses and his sources. A more in-depth exploration of those who were influenced by his work would also have been worthwhile.

Radebaugh's cartoons have an important take-home message for scientists: Learn to communicate with the public. They are listening, and they want to learn. You never know who you might influence. ■

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Radebaugh's vivid depictions of soon-to-be technologies resonated with the American public in the mid-20th century.