

book review

Wiring the Wireless

Networking Early US Radio Broadcasting

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Points on the Dial

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The history of radio broadcasting in the United States from the early 1920s to the early 1950s, a period often referred to as the Golden Age, is well worked territory, as the fifteen-page bibliography of *Points on the Dial* testifies. The same nostalgic phrase, the Golden Age, is used for that period in Australian radio but it is a very different story here, in at least three matters: the economics, the ownership and control of radio stations, and the means of program distribution.

Alexander Russo, assistant professor of Media Studies at the Catholic University of America now adds further dimensions to the story of radio broadcasting in the United States with *Points on the Dial*. Scholarly or professional concern about radio broadcasting, its programming, the determination of various metrics of its audiences, and its corporate history, is almost as old as radio broadcasting itself, so it was pleasing to see names like Paul Lazarsfeld and Erik

Barnouw acknowledged for their early work on radio and of communication studies generally.

Russo relates the emergence of the great national radio broadcasters of the United States, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) during the 1920s. These institutions morphed into television broadcasters when that consumer technology was introduced, post-World War II, in part to employ the vast electronics industry that had emerged during the war to serve military communications and weaponry needs.

Other histories of radio in this period are told either from the perspective of these national companies or through their eyes. These are the histories of the connection of audiences with centrally originated content either directly via their owned and operated stations or through the network of independent stations, either closely or loosely affiliated with the big broadcasters. These are also the stories of the branding of corporate America through sponsorship of radio for the masses.

For the first time in the history of any community, mass audiences were simultaneously exposed to the same cultural experience. In a way, it is the time when the United States of America became considerably more than a political construct. Cinema and radio provided cultural spaces where the citizen saw and heard representation of national cultural, social and economic interests, and saw conflict resolved 'the American way'. Cinema and then radio changed the way Americans learned about themselves, largely displacing popular oratory, and diminishing the role of the printed word, as carriers of cultural unity and identity.

In Australia, this task of national building through radio was set for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, a story told by Ken Inglis in *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932-1983*. Commercial radio remained focused on local audiences until recently.

Despite the complexity and multi-layered nature of these cultural transformations undertaken by radio, the US story is commonly cast as a clash of two media empires and their attendant lords and lackeys. CBS and NBC are the empires competing for the favour of the American listener. Where they cannot reach audiences directly because the United States government imposed strict conditions on the issuance of radio licenses, their access is mediated by their henchmen, the regional networks and affiliated stations. The henchmen are out there riding the

range, herding audiences for CBS and NBC. Perhaps the classic Hollywood frontier text has become the narrative form for radio's US history.

Russo's contribution is to pay close attention to radio broadcasting at a level below that of the empires, to document and report the influence of regional and local networks and of individual operators, especially entrepreneurs like John Shepard III, whose independence in relations with the empires was most vexing to the networks.

These were exciting time in broadcasting as Russo relates. The language and practice of radio were being developed, financial and creative risks were being taken, theatre, vaudeville, and the concert hall were being mined for modes of entertainment for the new medium, and ways for the business turn a profit negotiated.

Initially, at least, no one knew anything: So it was surprising how quickly certain practices like live networked programs came to dominate national broadcasting practices, another matter that *Points on the Dial* explores.

Russo also considers the differing practices of program production and distribution employed by the diversity of players in US radio of the period. And in technical matters, the engineering aspects of broadcasting were also developing. Emile Berliner's flat phonograph record, first one-sided then quickly two-sided, had rendered Edison's cylinders instantly obsolete less than two decades earlier, microphones were massive and insensitive, and vacuum tubes, the glowing heart of radio transmitters, still unsophisticated and frail. However, Russo's focus is not on the technology as such, but on the economic and cultural consequences of the deployment of various modes of production and distribution, and the different experiences of audiences as a consequence of these technologies.

Though radio broadcasting began in Australia at much the same time, the contrast with the Australian experience is quite clear. For example, by the 1920s the telephone was widely in use throughout the United States, with large capacity trunk circuits reaching out to even the smaller cities. Thus in 1926, when American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) acquired monopoly rights to supply broadcast-quality audio circuits to radio station across the US, it could reach quite small communities. (21) Simultaneous networking of programs live from central studios was then both technically and commercially feasible, and the technical quality—and

star casts—explains in part the early popularity of these programs. In addition, the networks promoted live programs as having greater ‘authenticity’ and ‘spontaneity’, denigrating stations that used transcription programs as ‘self winding phonographs’. (87–8)

The privileging of live broadcasting over recorded programs by networks, and by interest groups such as studio musicians led to outright bans on the use of recording first by CBS in 1927, then by other networks. The Federal Radio Commission helped by introducing regulations that required the broadcast of transcription recordings to have front and back ‘announcements [that] were couched in terms of fraud and deception’. (88) The bans were not effectively defied until 1947. (184)

In Australia, that quality of trunk telecommunication was little available outside the capital cities. Consequently, regional and especially rural radio stations relied heavily on transcription disks for programming of city-produced shows. Indeed the autonomy of local stations to determine to their own programming from available transcription offerings ensured that we developed a robust rural and regional commercial broadcasting sector in Australia that endured into the late twentieth century.

But population densities, and therefore advertising revenues and the wealth of the communities generally, were greater in the United States, especially before the Great Depression and these factors mark out other areas of difference for early radio broadcasting in Australia. The development of radio broadcasting followed somewhat different political, economic and cultural paths in Australia.

In *Points on the Dial* Russo also discusses the different modes of consumption of radio. Once the loud speaker replaced headphones it allowed radio to be enjoyed as a family experience in the home. With the development of radio receivers robust enough to endure installation in a car, consumption patterns and advertising changed again, and changed once again with the rise of television. *Points on the Dial* concludes as radio is rescued from oblivion by rock’n’roll, the DJ and the transistor.

This is an exceptionally well-referenced book: almost one third of its 278 pages given over to supplementary notes, the excellent bibliography, and detailed index (even the end notes are indexed). While the history is specific to US radio

broadcasting in the four decades before the introduction of television, its examination of the interplay of ownership and control of radio at a local and regional level, and the impact of competing production, distribution and consumption practices, suggests that the history of broadcasting in other countries would respond to similar analysis and benefit our understanding of the business, technology, and politics of the media of mass communication.

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