

H-Net Reviews

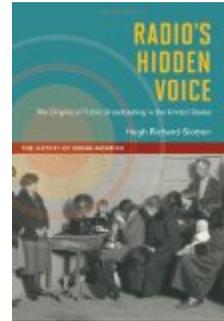
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hugh Richard Slotten. *Radio's Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Illustrations. viii + 325 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03447-3.

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A Gem of a Look at Public Broadcasting

A gem of a look at the birth of public broadcasting from personal correspondence to perfectly reproduced photographs, Hugh Richard Slotten's *Radio's Hidden Voice* brings the birth of public broadcasting to life. The pioneers of public service, noncommercial radio were primarily from U.S. universities: engineers, faculty from a variety of disciplines, and students with incredible opportunities to create a new medium from the ground up. Slotten takes a rather expansive premise: to tell the story of these early pioneers, to show how their experiences intermingled with the birth and evolution of commercial radio, and then to trace how the medium nearly strangled and died with the growth of governmental regulation. The archival work Slotten undertook to complete this book is impressive; the documents he used are rare and serve as a strong foundation for further research that could amplify each university's role in the growth of the medium. These pioneers' personal stories and letters, some professional and some personal, give the reader a glimpse into the fun, the successes, and, of course, the failures of early noncommercial radio.

The book opens dramatically: "A few days after Christmas in 1929, Ralph Goddard died while regulating equipment in the generator room of the radio station at New Mexico State Agricultural and Mechanical College. Goddard, a professor in the school's engineering department, was forty-two years old. The circumstances of his death remain unclear—no one witnessed the accident—but he seemed to have been electrocuted after walking from

the studio in a drizzle to the building that housed the generator. The fatal spark could have been conducted by moisture on his shoes and on the wooden stick he used to adjust the generators." This event marked the end of an era for the radio station KOB (p. 1).

Through a myriad of primary sources and stories, such as Goddard's, Slotten demonstrates how faculty dabbled in technology first, with students generating master's theses from their new designs for transmission. The growth of content closely paralleled the technology. With university faculty and students creating this new medium, content emerged from faculty lectures and research. In fact, Slotten writes, "the scripts of the first lectures at the University of Wisconsin (WHA) were read by station announcers because the faculty did not consider speaking into a microphone a dignified practice" (p. 43).

Aided by an increasing mass of amateur radio enthusiasts, these professors and students built crude radio sets and marketed them. "Any boy can set up a receiving out-fit.... The apparatus will cost about \$10 so that there is no reason why the [weather] forecast can not be received in every Village and on every farm where there is an intelligent boy, by 11 AM," wrote University of Wisconsin physics professor Earle Terry in 1916 (p. 25). Adding to the richness of Terry's personal letters included in this text, even one to his mother, is a superbly reproduced photo of him in his dusty lab peering through a small scope (p. 13). Faculty also wrote manuals

that taught purchasers how to build a set, and sometimes consumers could buy a partially constructed set to finish on their own.

As faculty members with loyalties to the academy, these radio pioneers saw the value in promoting their own schools. They partnered with administrators, governing boards, and, sometimes, state legislatures, to carve out ways in which radio could serve as a public service to the people in the university's market area and to promote enrollment and university stature. Their focus was on public service, improved transmission, reception, and educational content. And, of course, that educational content meant faculty lectures (noted above); informative talks by experts in business, education, and government; and classical music and jazz.

Slotten provides details of the newly refurbished facilities at WHA at the University of Wisconsin during the 1930s: "The visitors' lounge was particularly unique. An instructor in the art department designed the modernistic furniture made by local cabinetmakers using native Wisconsin oak. The lampshades were shaped like Indian 'tom-toms.' A sandstone frieze on the walls of the room reproduced Indian petroglyphs from cave walls in Wisconsin. The prehistoric carvings represented animals native to the state. The rugs on the floor as well as cushions on the couches and chairs were made by Native Americans" (p. 180). Slotten does not mention what happened to this incredible work of art nor whether the visitors' lounge is still a part of one of the oldest radio stations in the nation.

While all this program creativity and technological entrepreneurship expanded throughout the early 1900s, commercial broadcasting was emerging, as was governmental regulation. The tension that grew among these players was significant. Slotten does a good job pointing the reader to the tighter and tighter stranglehold these latter two behemoths had on public radio, on its educational mission, and on the stations' vitality and the station operators' dreams of uplifting their listeners.

Radio amateurs certainly gave considerable support to faculty members in the early days of radio, but these same amateurs began to see the value in commercializing the medium, too. Universities were tied to their region, so their content remained localized and informative. The commercial interests found value in the network system, providing more and more programming at a cheaper cost. As Slotten writes: "If, beginning in the late 1920s, commercial networks worked to standardize American society to better serve national advertisers promoting a

homogenized ethic of consumption, educational stations committed to noncommercial ideas affirmed connections to local communities with targeted programming, personnel, and listening practices" (p. 79).

This standardization to better serve national advertisers did not change when Herbert Hoover and the Department of Commerce began to regulate radio in the early 1920s and then codified it all in the 1927 Radio Act. Mass entertainment and network connections were at the heart of the regulation, Slotten notes, but the vague and ill-defined public interest standard apparently represented Hoover's own ambiguity regarding the superiority of commercial broadcasting versus noncommercial radio. Hoover believed the market would drive the growth and development of radio, with the caveat that all radio should be educational and informative, not purely entertaining.

The Federal Radio Commission (FRC), however, viewed the commercial interests as the only practical method of radio growth, maturity, and financial health. Thus, the FRC used its regulatory powers to provide substantial airtime and preferential frequencies to commercial stations. Small, low-powered stations, often owned and operated by individuals with a unique personal perspective on the world, were given less desirable frequencies. The FRC also began to label some of these small operations as "propaganda" stations, and unfortunately, smaller, lower-powered university stations fell into that category. When the commission began to allow stations to compete for frequencies, it came as little surprise that the commercial stations had the power and the financial resources to send their best and brightest to argue for superior frequencies. University station managers, reliant on university financial support, often had to go to Washington themselves without legal counsel, or had no funding to go anywhere and were given the poorest of frequencies. Noncommercial broadcasting began to experience a decline, not because of content, but because of commercial competition and federal regulation.

Slotten's treatment of the period after the 1930s is less focused, primarily because of the vast array of influences on the growing medium. Adding to government and commercial interests, noncommercial radio also had to deal with the rise of television and the impact it had on every medium in existence. And by the postwar years, noncommercial radio became recognizable for us in the twenty-first century. A participant "in the establishment of public broadcasting argues that WGBH and other community stations 'represented something of a noblesse

oblige: the responsibility of the educated, the prosperous, and the privileged to look after the less fortunate majority' ” (p. 242).

Slotten’s information surrounding the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 draws together a variety of voices trying not only to regulate but also to steward the medium’s growth. And Slotten provides a clear look into the whys of this medium’s new label, “public broadcasting,” which included both radio and television. The act created The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), and under it, PBS was not allowed to develop its own programming while its sister, National Public Radio (NPR), was required to do so. One result: “From the beginning NPR faced an essential tension in its operations. A number of early leaders of the new network were not convinced that public radio should move away from the traditional academic focus on excellence and quality. They believed that expert opinion and structured presentation were more important than cutting-edge experimentation and a diversity of voices. This tension was partly inherited from educational radio as practiced by broadcast stations at state universities. University stations often had conflicting objectives: in some cases, to mainly serve all citizens with useful, educational programming and, in other cases, to mainly seek to ‘educate the educated’ ” (p. 248).

By the 1980s, this tension had permutated into political pressure for both radio and television to find their own sources of funding. Corporate contributions and listener support became bywords of financial solvency. Slotten notes that despite this change, the fundamental patterns created by noncommercial broadcasting pioneers still held—educational, uplifting, and informative.

The archival work unearthing personal letters and photographs constitute much of this book’s allure. The significant number of primary sources, such as those discussed above, and the photographs of the major and minor players in this burgeoning medium are impressive. Indeed, Slotten’s work stirred this writer’s own interest in the history of her own university’s public radio and television stations (and finding but a few fragments, there is work to be done here).

The weaving of several threads of events—the rise of commercial radio, the development and changes in governmental regulation, and the personal stories of the noncommercial radio developers—is admittedly not always seamless. There are some problems with reliability of the index, as well as some contradictions in assumptions. However, this book is priceless in its extent of archival work. The flavor of the people and the places that gave birth to noncommercial radio are housed in these pages, and for that Slotten has provide us with a true gem.

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