

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Loren Ghiglione. *CBS's Don Hollenbeck: An Honest Reporter in the Age of McCarthyism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. xiii + 330 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14496-4.

Loren Ghiglione, ed. *Radio's Revolution: Don Hollenbeck's CBS Views the Press.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xviii + 166 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-6758-9.

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Published on Jhistory (March, 2010)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker

Don Hollenbeck: The Later Years

Most journalism scholars know CBS's Don Hollenbeck, if they know him at all, from the 2005 film *Good Night, and Good Luck*, in which the actor Ray Wise played the haunted newsman as a tragic victim of McCarthyism. When Hollenbeck, broken by criticism and ill health, commits suicide, it is just a prelude to the real heart of the film—the point when Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly deliver their famous series of programs that save the day by finally turning the tide of opinion against the junior senator from Wisconsin. This is all well and good, but when I show the film in class students are invariably interested in Hollenbeck and want to know more. Fortunately Loren Ghiglione, professor of media ethics at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, has been hard at work bringing Hollenbeck's story out from under Murrow's shadow so we can answer those students. And what a story it is. Partly a straight biography and partly a careful analysis of Hollenbeck's bout with McCarthyism, *CBS's Don Hollenbeck* is an excellent read for any journalism scholar. Ghiglione's companion volume, *Radio's Revolution*, an edited collection of many of the best *CBS Views the Press* transcripts, is an extremely valuable addition to the small literature on mid-century press criticism. Read in conjunction with the chapters in *CBS's Don Hollenbeck*, the transcripts are good for any media historian, especially someone with an interest in broadcast.

Hollenbeck's late career, when he was a lightning rod for criticism, is the major focus of the biography. Several chapters trace the pre-CBS years, but most readers will be seeking information on the McCarthy era. Ghiglione carefully explains how Hollenbeck's past and liberal politics, including a stint with the liberal journal *PM*, made him suspect in an era when anyone with left-

ist leanings, real or imagined, became a potential security risk. Hollenbeck's media criticism program angered some on the Right, who felt that the program was biased against conservative papers. He also won few conservative friends with his on-air editorial comments praising one of Murrow's controversial programs on McCarthyism. Readers will be partly familiar with the story, but Ghiglione's account is useful because it traces Hollenbeck's relationship with CBS and with Murrow much more fully than any previous account (or the movie for that matter). What was it like to work at CBS in the era of loyalty oaths and blacklists? This book gives us one answer. It also takes care to show that Hollenbeck's suicide was not merely the result of a handful of critical comments about his program in the papers, but came at the end of a long path of depression, heavy drinking, and other personal problems.

Although the book's main focus is the Red Scare hot-house that ultimately broke Hollenbeck's spirit, readers get a great deal more for their money. Ghiglione also tells the story of one mid-century journalist's career trajectory as new media technology, the rise of New Deal liberalism as a political force, and World War II transformed the field. Hollenbeck started out as a newspaperman in his native Nebraska, but like many of his generation he was attracted to new opportunities. He served for a time as a photo editor for the Associated Press. When war came, he worked for the Office of War Information like many journalists. Hollenbeck's story would have been familiar to many reporters who ended up in radio, or later, television, and it is instructive for historians to have this study at hand. Hollenbeck also dabbled in liberal journalism, taking a position at the short-lived journal *PM*, where like-minded reporters and editors sought to

make a difference, and frequently opened themselves up to later criticism as fellow travelers. To some extent, Hollenbeck's career helps us understand the difficulty of balancing a progressive vision and an objective professional code. Students in journalism programs, many of whom are legitimately concerned about the future of their chosen profession, might enjoy reading about how Hollenbeck navigated uncertainty and changing times to rise to the top of his profession.

Even more useful is the book's look into the world of postwar press criticism, a topic that is vastly understudied. To this reviewer, in fact, the material on the *CBS Views the Press* program is more valuable than the story of Hollenbeck's feud with Jack O'Brien of the *Journal-American* and eventual suicide. Ghiglione goes to great lengths to track the development of the landmark show, which ran between 1947 and early 1950 with Hollenbeck at the microphone. In the program, Hollenbeck took a close look at the newspapers of New York City, which at that time ranged from the professionalism of the *Times* and *Herald Tribune* to the gossipy tabloids, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily News*. For fifteen minutes each Saturday evening, Hollenbeck offered measured but often pointed critiques of the week's news coverage. Radio, still very much the junior partner in the American news media, had rarely held up such a mirror to the well-established newspaper press. Many of the topics were of local interest, New York city politics and policy, but the program also took wayward newsmen to task on stories of national importance, like the sensational, biased, or sloppy coverage of the Alger Hiss perjury trial and the emerging civil rights story. Hollenbeck also occasionally used his time to profile notable journalists, including George Polk, who was murdered while covering the Greek Civil

War, and Bill Laurence, the Timesman who was "embedded" with the Manhattan Project during World War II and first translated the story of the atom for the American people. Although the program could be critical, it was by and large regarded as bold, judicious, balanced, and, above all, well written.

It was, of course, the criticism of the right-wing papers, especially the *Journal-American*, that drew out the attacks that would eventually push Hollenbeck over the edge. In *CBS's Don Hollenbeck*, Ghiglione makes the interesting choice to include a "minibiography" of O'Brien, Hollenbeck's chief antagonist. O'Brien used his column to attack *PM* and CBS, but he seemed to take a special dislike to Hollenbeck. Media historians are familiar with Westbrook Pegler, Fulton Lewis, Walter Winchell, and other notorious journalists of the Right who helped fan the flames of McCarthyism. Ghiglione does a service to bring O'Brien back to our attention to give us a broader understanding of how it operated in the New York press of the era.

It is easy to turn a story like this into a martyrdom and abuse history by presenting a morality tale instead of a balanced account. However it would not be fair to say that Ghiglione has done this, despite the very clear respect and admiration for Hollenbeck that inform both of these volumes. The research here is thorough and the story is narrated very skillfully. And, to be honest, in this case I do not mind if it does start to lean ever so slightly toward hagiography. Journalism, especially in this day and age, does not have enough saints and I for one am glad to see Hollenbeck get his due. The subtitle of the biography reviewed here is "An Honest Reporter in the Age of McCarthyism." I think Hollenbeck would have felt that was very strong praise indeed.

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Citation: Robert A. Rabe. Review of Ghiglione, Loren, *CBS's Don Hollenbeck: An Honest Reporter in the Age of McCarthyism* and Ghiglione, Loren, ed., *Radio's Revolution: Don Hollenbeck's CBS Views the Press*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

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