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Louise M. Benjamin. *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009. x + 156 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2919-9.

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The NBC Advisory Council and the Commercialization of Radio

The commercialization of the early radio industry has been one of the primary, if not in the fact the dominant, theme in the history of American broadcasting. Although not originally designed for a commercial purpose, radio eventually became a privately owned, advertiser-supported method for distributing entertainment into American homes. Scholars have examined how this process occurred and Louise M. Benjamin, a professor at Kansas State University, contributes to this body of work with this examination of the NBC Advisory Council. The council was an external review board comprised of accomplished individuals from different walks of life, including bankers, lawyers, and educators, as well as a representative from the American Federation of Labor and others chosen because they represented the Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic faiths. The stated aim of the council was not to promote commercial broadcasting overtly, but rather to ensure that NBC programs upheld beliefs that were generally accepted in society at the time, and that particular groups were not subject to discrimination. Created in 1926, the same year the network itself was established, the council was also designed to stifle criticism that NBC might monopolize the airwaves. The underlying motive was to create a public regulatory environment in which NBC might prosper, though the council members also believed that broadcasting could be a positive influence on American society. According to Benjamin, the council believed that radio was fundamentally different from previous media because it was broadcast directly into the home on a continual basis, and thus had to be managed differently. After the federal government mandated that all stations operate in the "public interest" as part of the Radio Act of 1927, the advisory council then became an even more valuable asset. NBC could tout the council's existence as tangible proof that the network indeed had the public's interest at heart. A variety of archives were mined for this project, including the papers of Owen Young, the head of General Electric and the Radio Corporation of America and one of the principle forces behind the council's creation.

To say that previous historians have neglected the advisory council would be an understatement. One of the few prior works to even mention the organization is Christopher Sterling and John Kittross's *Stay Tuned* (2002), which dismisses the council as window dressing for the public's benefit. Benjamin offers a different perspective, arguing that the council had significant influence on NBC policies. And, given that this particular network was the most powerful commercial force during the first decades of American broadcasting, Benjamin insinuates that its influence extended to the industry as a whole. In an epilogue, Benjamin further argues that ideas behind media regulations, such as the now-discarded fairness doctrine, and more current practices can also be traced back to the council.

The most obvious examples of the council's influence were suggestions that led to two sustaining programs: the *National Farm and Home Hour* and the *Music Appreciation Hour*. The term "sustaining" denoted programming that was not sponsored by an advertiser, and local NBC affiliates had the option of replacing such shows with their own sponsored programs. Because sustaining programs were of much higher quality than anything a local station might produce, however, they were carried throughout most of the country. This chapter is a useful corrective to radio histories that emphasize the more famous programs of the era, as Benjamin reminds readers that NBC actually offered more sustaining than sponsored programs. The *Farm and Home Hour* aired midday in most of the country, with a separate version created for the Pacific time zone. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contributed extensively to the program, which entertained and educated rural residents. The advisory council and USDA resisted any commercial spon-

sorship of this material, though NBC eventually deemed the audience too valuable to be ignored and some advertisements did appear. Benjamin's thorough discussion of the behind-the-scenes politics of the *Farm and Home Hour* complements Steve Craig's recent analysis of the same program in *Out of the Dark: A History of Radio and Rural America* (2009), which looks at rural radio programming more broadly.

The *Music Appreciation Hour* also aired during daytime hours and was designed to educate school children. Booklets and teaching guides were distributed in advance to help teachers incorporate the material into classroom discussions. This section of Benjamin's book is a useful complement to another recent work, Hugh Slotten's *Radio's Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States* (2009). Slotten does not address the *Music Appreciation Hour* but does outline a number of similar efforts that combined radio with classroom instruction.

Another chapter covers the council's policies for religious programming on NBC, limited to Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish points of view. The council advised that religion be expressed in only the most positive ways, and that no specific faith be maligned. Several pages are devoted to the influence of the infamous Father Charles Coughlin, a fiery Catholic priest who used the radio airwaves in the 1930s to rail against the injustices of both capitalism and communism. Coughlin's programs never aired on any NBC station though; because he generated so much controversy, especially for his attacks on Jews, the council felt compelled to discuss him during one of its annual meetings. A subsequent chapter covers the council's perspective on birth control, and NBC's decision not to broadcast the 1929 convention of the American Birth Control League. According to the council's logic, NBC was supposed to operate in the "public interest," but not enough of the public was actually interested in birth control for it to be of bona fide "public interest," an argument that is the very definition of circuitous logic.

The chapter on political broadcasts is reminiscent of Benjamin's earlier book, *Freedom of the Air and the Public Interest* (2001), which examined how the First Amendment was applied to radio during the 1920s and early 1930s. NBC believed that all political points of view warranted airtime, though the network found various justifications to avoid anything too politicized. A following chapter looks at other controversial issues of the era and how the council responded, including Mae West's notorious appearance on Edgar Bergen's show. During the 1940s, the council also issued guidelines for the network during wartime. By the middle of the decade, NBC no longer saw a need for the council, as the National Association of Broadcasters and the Federal Communications Commission had already adopted many of its ideas and policies. Having an external committee review policies was thus no longer deemed necessary.

Given the lack of attention to the advisory council, Benjamin's book adds to our understanding of early radio history, the establishment of the network system, and the interpretation of the requirement of "public interest" programming. The amount of research behind this text is impressive, though the level of detail in parts can be distracting. The mini-biographies of each council member, for example, which crop up throughout the text along with some re-creations of internal advisory council discussions, provide more information than is perhaps necessary for Benjamin's larger points. These shortcomings are minor, given the valuable new information that has been made available, though they may prevent readers not already enthralled by early radio history or the origins of media regulation from fully exploring this work.

Author's Note: Benjamin was a member of my dissertation committee.

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