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Alexander Russo. *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. xi + 278 pp. $84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4517-6; $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4532-9.

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Cracks in the Network Facade

In *Points on the Dial*, Alexander Russo, an assistant professor at the Catholic University of America, challenges some of the assumptions embedded within the standard narrative of radio's evolution in this well-researched and persuasively argued book. Russo argues that the postwar changes were a culmination of ongoing trends rather than a response to the sudden emergence of television. The work interrogates some common notions about commercial network radio in the following order: that networks had true "national" coverage, that networks had final authority over programming, that recorded programs were not common before the 1940s, and that single sponsorship was the dominant form of advertising.

The fallacy of "national" programming is revealed through the networks' self-serving definition of what constituted the "nation." Many regions had little radio penetration well into the 1930s, and if a network reached the densely populated Northeast, Chicago, plus a handful of western affiliates, this was deemed sufficiently national. Complicating this system were advertisers who chose to broadcast only over certain stations, a system known as split-network. The practice of segmenting consumers into discreet groups, who could be targeted selectively, is typically linked with later stages in America's consumer culture, though Russo observes that radio advertisers have always relied upon this technique.[1]

Affiliated stations that chose to forego sustaining programs further muddled the nature of national coverage. This term designated programs that lacked sponsorship, though were offered by the networks to fulfill government obligations or to insure a full night's line-up. Rather than pay the fees necessary to rebroadcast sustaining programs, local stations often found it more profitable to insert their own programs. Showcasing an exemplar of a local broadcaster who thwarted the networks, Russo devotes one chapter to John Shepard III, the founder of the Yankee Network, a regional network that covered New England. Shepard's family owned department stores in Boston and Providence, which respectively launched the radio stations WNAC and WEAN in the early 1920s. By linking these stations and others, the Yankee Network allowed advertisers to reach listeners in several states with local programming as well as material from the NBC, CBS, and Mutual networks. In this chapter, Russo offers numerous examples of how regional networks did not always conform to desires of network programmers.

Though this discussion is the most sustained analysis of Shepard to appear in any radio history thus far, this particular figure is perhaps worthy of even more attention than given here. Shepard's station WNAC, for example, experimented with one of the first attempts at relaying the signal from another station; this broadcast occurred in 1923, using the signal from WEAF in New York. WEAF's group of affiliated stations was the direct predecessor to the NBC network, though Russo fails to note this event, and also does not mention that WNAC and WEAN had been sharing programming since the early 1920s. While neither of these specific events contradict anything that Russo has written, the omissions highlight the scant attention given to events prior to 1927. The early years of the decade have been chronicled before, as has the history of network radio, though given recent research and Russo's own perspective on the complicated nature of commercial radio, it would have been useful to read his thoughts on the earliest commercial practices of the American radio industry. How and why did the United States end up with this particular commercial network-affiliate model in the first place, and when did specific advertising practices develop?

A chapter on the use of electrical recordings, known as transcriptions, makes clear just how prominent they were for local, independent stations. NBC and CBS were strongly opposed to this technology, arguing that "live-

ness" was an essential quality of broadcasting. The government endorsed a similar view, even forbidding the use of transcriptions for the so-called Class B stations in the late 1920s. Russo makes a perceptive analogy between the resistance to recorded programs and the innovation of sound film by Hollywood studios. The expense of using phone lines to link distant stations meant that only the most powerful ones, typically those from the commercial networks, could afford live programming. Similarly, the addition of sound to cinema increased the costs of production and exhibition, which shut out independent operators. Putting programs onto transcriptions also offered advertisers a distribution method distinct from that of the networks and was thus a threat to their dominance. The account of "Chandu the Magician," a radio serial from the early 1930s, illustrates this point. The discs of the Chandu program did not contain integrated advertisements, and could be used to promote different products in different regions. The low cost of distributing material on discs, along with their flexible and reusable nature, proved so appealing that NBC was eventually forced to create its own transcription unit, despite the network's vocal condemnation of this technology.

The chapter on spot advertising is perhaps the strongest in the book and ties together the initial strands of Russo's argument. The term "spot" referred to free-standing advertisements that were not tied to a specific programming and also to programs on transcription discs that could be dropped into the desired geographic "spot." Both of these practices frustrated national advertisers on the networks, who preferred a relatively restrained, soft-sell approach to advertising. According to the logic of the networks, a brief, carnival-barking spot advertisement that appeared immediately before or after a network program would dispel any feeling of goodwill that the national advertiser sought to instill in the audience.

The networks were unable to entirely remove spot ads, however, due to the mandated existence of station identification gaps. At the top of every hour, the government required each local station to announce its call letters. One reason for this practice was the use of split-networks; engineers needed a few moments to rewire the circuits so that the upcoming network program would only be carried on the designated stations. Contrary to their intended use, many local stations sold advertisements in this time. And, based on the peculiar compensation system between networks and affiliates, a local station could make almost as much in these twenty seconds as it would in the surrounding hour. As a defensive tactic against the spread of spot advertisements, networks instituted the colorfully named cow-catcher and hitch-hiker ads. The first term describes additional ads that appeared just before a network program, while the second refers to ads appended to the tail end. Both new forms were designed to insure that the listener would associate only the "correct sponsor" with the program. Russo links this fascinating explication of radio practices with ideas about consumers' assumed dislike of advertisements. This delicate negotiation between advertising and program content makes one think of the current confusion over the appropriate advertising ratio for online television shows. How much will consumers stand for before they shut their browsers and head elsewhere?

While the socially constructed nature of American radio has been well established, Russo also wants to emphasize the fragmented, geo-spatial nature of the industry. Rather than an imagined community that united the entire nation, a more accurate perception would be to view radio production as an overlapping set of national, regional, and local concerns. Another specific idea that Russo seeks to challenge is the oft-cited fact that Pat Weaver of NBC invented the practice of having multiple sponsors underwrite a single television show in 1954. Given that local radio stations had been using multiple spot ads within their own programs, Weaver's idea appears to be more of an adaptation than an invention.

Points on the Dial also engages with one of the more common themes in historical scholarship of the past few decades, the homogenization thesis. According to this argument, a series of related factors have led to a standardization and homogenization of American culture in the years since the Civil War. These factors typically include industrialization, urbanization, the growth of bureaucracy, and continual innovations in communications and transportation technologies. The fact that Russo challenges the hegemony of commercial network radio, another factor often identified as a homogenizing influence upon American culture, is a refreshing and provocative argument. Indeed, the work raises many questions regarding the supposed homogenizing influence of radio. Does the fact that the networks had less power than previously assumed really change much about our understanding of commercial media in the United States? Isn't it possible that even though local stations originated much of their programming, the types of radio programs were still thoroughly standardized? Does it matter, for example, if a mid-morning program on home economics was delivered in a Boston or a Texas accent? While questions such as these are largely a matter of opinion, and thus cannot be answered by appeals to evidence, Russo's work offers fresh fodder for discussions in seminar rooms across academia in years to come.

Though this book focuses resolutely on transformations within the American radio industry, Russo's arguments will resonate with students and scholars interested in other forms of media as well. Television networks are currently struggling to accommodate the possibilities and challenges presented by the Internet, and Amanda Lotz has identified the current period as the "post-network" era of television.[2] Given the constant and bewildering changes within the twenty-first-century television industry, a scholarly work that highlights the fragmented, complicated nature of commercial radio networks from decades ago offers a useful frame for comparison. Current debates about the merits of recorded versus "live" programming, allegedly immune to the time-shifting effects of the DVR, along with the debate over appropriate advertising techniques, recall similar debates from years ago. For this and other reasons, anyone interested in media history, current changes in the media industries, or the growth of American consumer culture will no doubt find something of value in this work.

Notes

[1]. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

[2]. Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

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