

H-Net Reviews

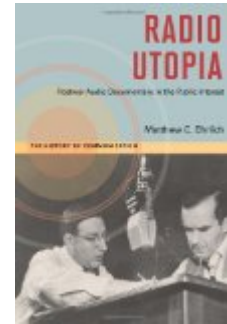
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew C. Ehrlich. *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 240 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03611-8.

Reviewed by Nicole Maurantonio (University of Richmond)

Published on Jhistory (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker



Paradise Lost?: Audio Documentary and Postwar Promise

“Golden age” nostalgia, we are taught, is the enemy of the historian, resulting in the romanticization of the past and those who lived within it. It tends to produce a flat, uncomplicated reading of history, providing little insight into the conditions under which change occurred. Matthew C. Ehrlich warns us against falling victim to such an interpretation in the early pages of *Radio Utopia*, during which Ehrlich draws attention to the potential irony of his own title. Rather than subscribe to the interpretation of this oft-neglected genre of radio (audio documentary), as simply a “golden age of invention, independence, and hope done in by greed and reactionaryism”—what Ehrlich references as the “utopia lost” perspective—or view postwar audio documentary as a “utopia that never was” (p. 6), Ehrlich grants each argument its due, acknowledging the corporate interests being served by the genre as well as the “earnest” characters who believed in the medium’s genuinely unique potential to mobilize the populace, largely through education.

In the book’s introduction, titled “Utopian Dreams,” Ehrlich establishes the academic stakes involved in this work, which he locates at the intersection of the fields of journalism studies, radio studies, and documentary studies. Most broadly, Ehrlich tries to answer the question of how radio adapted to a postwar world in which the specter of television was looming on the horizon. How was audio journalism to cope? Under what constraints did this particular genre develop? What characteristics did the genre assume?

To engage with these questions, Ehrlich positions *Radio Utopia* in conversation with the seminal essays of David Paul Nord and the late James W. Carey regarding the merits of what Carey referred to as “historical consciousness” versus the more institutional history that Nord supported.[1] However, although Ehrlich argues that “both perspectives illuminate postwar audio documentary” (p. 5), the parameters of Ehrlich’s work are located predominantly within the realm of institutions and the individuals guiding their course. This is not a story of community formation on a national scale, as radio historians Susan J. Douglas and Michele Hilmes have emphasized with somewhat different foci.[2] *Radio Utopia* is a look from the top down, through the eyes of the central figures in Ehrlich’s story such as Edward R. Murrow, Fred Friendly, Norman Corwin, and Robert Lewis Shayon. This largely top-down approach emanates from Ehrlich’s triangulation of source materials, which includes the collected papers of the pivotal actors in this story, original audio recordings, scripts, notes, the archives at CBS, NBC (housed at Wisconsin Historical Society), the Paley Center for Media in Beverly Hills and New York City, online resources, the trade press, and private collections.

This impressive source base provides Ehrlich with the opportunity to give readers a sense of not only who these men were but also what postwar audiences might have been listening to when they tuned into one of these audio documentaries. Ehrlich’s skill at communicating aural content is made especially clear in chapter 2, titled “One World,” in which Ehrlich maps Corwin’s project

One World Flight (1947) onto Corwin's unflinching optimism and commitment to "Wallace-style liberalism" (p. 26). Like his counterparts, Corwin possessed a sincere faith in radio's reformist potential. The final series of thirteen half-hour programs traced Corwin's journey around the world from France to Poland to Egypt, digesting more than one hundred hours of recordings in an effort to distill a sense of global unity and hope. While perhaps Corwin did not find the world precisely as he had anticipated during his travels, he did not return to the United States thoroughly demoralized either, as Ehrlich shows. Met with mixed reviews and the bad fortune of having to compete with the ever-popular Bob Hope, *One World Flight* nonetheless contributed to the carving out of a new genre—"the actuality-based long-form audio program that years later would find a home on American public radio" (p. 43)

Herein lies the broader significance of *One World Flight* and other similarly crafted programs—their status as a veritable testing ground for production formats and narratives. Ehrlich cannot speak to the particular influence or impact of audio documentary given the limitations inherent in his sources. Yet, Ehrlich effectively shows how programs like Corwin's *One World Flight*, Shayon's *The Eagle's Brood* (1947), which receives more sustained attention in chapter 3, and Friendly's *Hear It Now (1950-51)* in chapter 6 figured into a history that crystallizes the broader shift from "drama" to "document." This is no small point but is nonetheless one that can be otherwise easy to lose track of amidst Ehrlich's discussion of the various documentaries not only on CBS but on its competitor networks, NBC and ABC, as well. The audio documentary presaged shifts in the media landscape that would define the period from the 1950s through the twenty-first century.

Lest the picture painted by *Radio Utopia* become overly rosy, Ehrlich reminds us that many of those "craftsmen" at the helm—those men who worked to construct the "utopia" so envisioned, ultimately found themselves targeted by red-baiting publications, their names besmirched, and, in some cases, their careers ruined. It

is easy to get caught up in the optimism of the period, as even the titles of several of Ehrlich's chapters remind: "New and Sparkling Ideas" and "Home Is What You Make It." By the time we reach "The Quick and the Dead," the title of NBC's primer on atomic energy leading Americans to recognize the two paths before them ("the quick" or "the dead"), we begin to anticipate where this story ends. By 1951, there is a sense, Ehrlich argues, that "the idealistic docudramas" were indeed out of step with the changing times—that they "had trafficked in fantasy that was outmoded if not naïve" (p. 158).

While adding a significant dimension to the existing literature on radio, documentary, and journalism, *Radio Utopia* begs for greater context—an answer to the question of what the American landscape truly looked like leading up to the shifts Ehrlich documents. Ehrlich makes a number of gestures that emphasize his attempts to ward off critiques of determinism, which is laudable. There is nothing inevitable about the story we are told. However, *Radio Utopia's* narrow focus leaves the reader wondering about what was going on outside the world of audio documentary. There are unmistakable overtures toward politics and policy, but often these connections are made without much attention to their dynamic nature. For readers familiar with the history against which this narrative is set, this point may be less salient. For readers less well acquainted with the historical underpinnings of this story, there may be lingering questions regarding the relationship between audio documentary and the postwar landscape.

Notes

[1]. See James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," *Journalism History* 1, no. 1 (1974): 2-5, 27; and David Paul Nord, "A Plea for Journalism History," *Journalism History* 15, no. 1 (1988): 8-15.

[2]. See Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (New York: Times Books, 1999); and Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Nicole Maurantonio. Review of Ehrlich, Matthew C., *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34224>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.