

H-Net Reviews

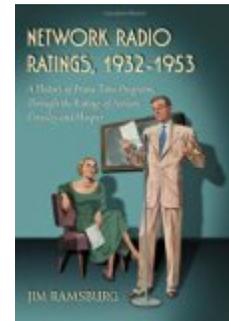
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jim Ramsburg. *Network Radio Ratings, 1932-1953: A History of Prime Time Programs through the Ratings of Nielsen, Crossley and Hooper.* Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2011. 378 pp. \$65.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-4558-5.

Reviewed by Noah Arceneaux (School of Media and Journalism Studies, San Diego State University)

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Network Radio Ratings, 1932-1953: A History of Prime Time Programs Through the Ratings of Nielsen, Crossley, and Hooper

This book, written by an author with fifty years of professional experience in radio and advertising, was inspired by a seemingly simple question: What was the most popular program from the golden age of radio? Unable to find the answer, Jim Ramsburg devoted an impressive amount of time and effort to produce this work. However, like an instructor who refuses to assign a favorable grade based on effort alone, this reviewer cannot recommend the title to serious scholars of radio history. Well-stocked university libraries may want to adopt the title for a reference section, and those book hounds who want a truly exhaustive library on old-time radio may be similarly interested, but the entirely descriptive nature of the work offers little value to most historians.

The book is arranged in a chronological order, with individual chapters devoted to radio seasons from 1932-33 to 1952-53, the period identified by Ramsburg as the end of the golden age. Each chapter spans approximately ten pages, with the oversized pages divided into three, newspaper-style columns. These columns contain brief articles, each with their own catchy heading, though there is no transition from one to the next, nor are there any overarching narratives to the chapters. The brief articles, some as short as two paragraphs, provide facts about popular programs from the given year, along with contextual information about industry developments.

Some of the nuggets of information are indeed interesting, such as the rationing of newsprint during World War II that limited newspaper circulation (p. 110). We also learn about the growth of the new recording formats, pioneered by CBS, and the slow growth of television in the 1940s. Too many of these facts, though, will only be of interest to die-hard trivia fiends; the Marx Brothers, for example, had to rename their radio show *Flywheel, Shuster, & Beagle* when an actually attorney named Beagle threatened to sue (p. 25). Major events within radio history warrant longer articles, spanning more than one column, including such instances as Mae West's infamous appearance on the *Chase & Sanborn Hour* or the *War of the Worlds* panic. These discussions are only summaries of what has been written before.

Ramsburg's goal is not to provide any new insights into the decades when radio was the dominant electronic medium, nor is he interested in synthesizing the many cultural histories of radio produced in the past few years. His goal rather is to present rankings of network radio shows, based on data produced initially by the companies of Crossley, Hooper, and Nielsen. In the preface, he explains how he combed the archives of the Nielsen Company, available through the holdings of the Wisconsin State Historical Society. These archives also contain records of the companies that provided ratings for the radio industry before A. C. Nielsen entered this field in the

early 1940s.

Following a brief chapter that covers the invention of the telegraph to the growth of commercial radio networks in eight pages (and mistakenly suggests that FDR was president in 1919), Ramsburg offers an equally abbreviated history of radio ratings. The first widespread systematic attempt to determine the size of the radio audience was developed by Archibald Crossley and relied on telephone surveys and listener self-reports. An improved telephone survey method from Claude E. Hooper then became the industry standard. These surveys, which produced the eponymous “Hooperatings,” were eventually replaced by an electronic monitoring system instituted by Arthur C. Nielsen’s company. Learning about the methods used to calculate the size of the audience is intriguing, though the subject is covered in far more detail in two books by Karen Buzzard.[1]

Based on an obviously staggering amount of raw data, Ramsburg has organized annual lists of the top fifty radio shows, and even separated them by days of the weeks for each year. A lengthy appendix after the year-by-year chapters further divides each year into monthly rankings. The information covers only the major broadcast networks, NBC, CBS, ABC, and Mutual, and thus offers a skewed perspective on how average listeners consumed radio; regional and local programming is entirely absent.

If you are looking for very specific information, such as the relative popularity of *Pick and Pat’s Modern Minstrels* or the most popular radio show on Tuesday nights in 1939, this book will provide it. The book’s index emphasizes specific programs and performers, though if you wanted to research a broader topic from this era, such as the growth of transcription recordings or the evolution of advertising strategies, you would have to scan the entire book to locate the disparate references.

The most glaring shortcoming, though, is the complete lack of citations. A concluding bibliography lists a fair number of titles, including the standard radio histories from Christopher Sterling, Susan Douglas,

Michele Hilmes, and Susan Smulyan.[2] A number of non-academic radio histories, biographies, and collectors’ guides are also included in the bibliography, though Ramsburg doesn’t cite the works within the text. There are occasional passing references to the *New York Times* or other popular publications, but serious historians will be frustrated by the decision to omit citations. Given the extreme level of detail about certain shows, one would assume that Ramsburg also mined *Variety* and other trade publications from the era, though the lack of adequate documentation makes this impossible to state with certainty.

Given that this book was not written for an academic audience, it would be unfair to criticize this work further. Ramsburg appears to have intended this work for the collector-hobbyist, the kind of person who frequents conventions, Web sites, and fan forums looking to piece together complete runs of old radio serials. The book could also be a useful addition to a reference library. (And, for those interested in the question that inspired this text, Ramsburg identifies comedy as old-time radio’s most popular genre, and Jack Benny as the number one performer. If Mr. Benny were alive today, he’d no doubt try to find a way to capitalize on this accolade.)

Notes

[1]. Karen Buzzard, *Chains of Gold: Marketing the Ratings and Rating the Markets* (Methuen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1990); *Tracking the Audience: The Ratings Industry from Analog to Digital* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[2]. Christopher Sterling and John Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990); Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

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