

# H-Net Reviews

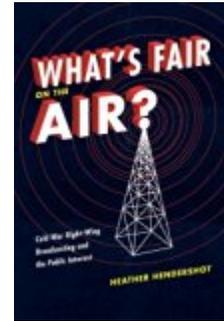
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Heather Hendershot.** *What's Fair on the Air? Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 272 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-32678-8; \$91.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-32677-1.

Reviewed by Daniel Platt (Brown University)

Published on Jhistory (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek



“I’m not just an entertainer,” the songwriter-turned-television-demagogue Lonesome Rhodes crowed in the 1957 film *A Face in the Crowd*: “I’m an influence, a wielder of opinion, a force—a force!” Alas, Rhodes’s celebrity proves transient and his grand ambitions a touch too grand, and this begs a question: what status is due to history’s underachieved zealots? In *What’s Fair on the Air?* Heather Hendershot examines the careers of four such mid-century figures whose extremist conservative harangues on radio and television anticipated the New Right that would rise after their own stars had faded. Seeking to shed light on the relationship between media and political change, Hendershot, a professor in the Department of Media Studies at Queens College, argues that these broadcasters—H. L. Hunt, Dan Smoot, Carl McIntire, and Billy James Hargis—not only tilled “the ground ... for the eventual triumph of [Ronald] Reagan” but also “were the embarrassing nuts who had to be left behind for a more legitimate and effective conservative movement to emerge” (pp. 7, 206).

In part, the book is a study in the evolving art of political persuasion. The first chapter, for example, profiles Hunt, a quirky Texas oil tycoon whose postwar conservative radio and television shows would serve as the model against which William F. Buckley Jr. would develop *Firing Line* in the 1960s. Drawing on newspaper accounts, business records, and episode transcripts, Hendershot details how Hunt experimented with style and format to disseminate his vehement anti-Communist politics while benefiting from the free airtime accorded to public-interest programming. *Facts Forum*, which Hunt produced and distributed to hundreds of radio and television stations in the early 1950s, featured retired Fed-

eral Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent Smoot rehearsing the Left and Right takes on such issues as foreign aid, intervention in Korea, and appropriate punishments for American dissidents. While Smoot tried to maintain the appearance of balance, his flimsy case for liberal opinions left little to the imagination. *Answers for Americans*, another Hunt program from the 1950s, staged a weekly debate between two liberals and Buckley, giving the young conservative his first taste of television and a primer in the shortcomings of contemporary right-wing tactics. Among Hunt’s flaws were his limited interest in movement building, his unwillingness to bankroll conservative candidates, “his eccentric understanding of public affairs, his yahoo bigotry, and his appallingly bad manners,” emblematic of the repellant and unmarketable “right-wing lunatic fringe” (p. 28). Through these failings, Hunt demonstrated the inadequacy of extremism, provoking a turn toward the civil and refined style of the coming generation of conservative leaders, like Buckley, who would in some ways eclipse and in other ways complete the battle against liberalism that Hunt and his compatriots began.

In addition to illuminating the rise of more modern right-wing mouthpieces, *What’s Fair on the Air?* explores the relationship between secular and religious conservatisms and the history of broadcast regulation. Chapters on the Christian fundamentalists McIntire and Hargis, for example, make the case that, like Hunt, such extremists served as opposing reference points for neo-evangelicals like Billy Graham who fashioned more respectable public images. The “assumptions and tactics” that these zealots shared with such broadcasters as Hunt and Smoot reveal that “if secular and religious conser-

vatives have had an on-again, off-again love affair since Reagan's election, the cold war secular and religious conservatives had a more stable—if largely unconsummated—relationship” (p. 12). Hargis is also central to Hendershot's discussion of the Federal Communications Commission's Fairness Doctrine, which was used to revoke the fundamentalist's broadcasting license in 1973 but which Hendershot believes was ultimately a poor device for enriching public discourse.

*What's Fair on the Air?* is a lively and well-researched contribution to the literature on U.S. political culture. Its chief achievement is the recovery of the Cold War media mavens who, in all their eccentricity, gave sanction to the nascent New Right backlash and, like lighthouses, helped emerging conservative leaders avoid the shoals of American extremism. Yet it is as a model of sound interdisciplinary scholarship, however, that the book's more enduring significance may lie. Several excellent studies

notwithstanding, historians of post-1945 America have been slow to address the impact of radio and, particularly, television on the political process, despite ample signs of its influence on, for example, the business of campaigning. From image management and interviewing to debate preparation and the complicated (and expensive) tactics of political advertising, television has had a dramatic effect on how modern campaigns are organized, what kinds of people run, and how much money they have to raise. Sorting through this history will require looking at new sources—both transcripts and actual audiovisual materials—and making sense of the complex business practices and regulatory regimes that structured twentieth-century television. In *What's Fair on the Air?* Hendershot has provided much of this information and has demonstrated, in punchy, energetic prose, how to incorporate such diverse histories into a judicious and highly readable narrative.

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

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

**Citation:** Daniel Platt. Review of Hendershot, Heather, *What's Fair on the Air? Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37672>



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