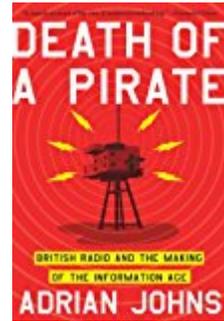**Adrian Johns**. *Death of a Pirate: British Radio and the Making of the Information Age.* New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. 336 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-34180-5.

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Commissioned by Heidi Tworek

In 2001, Adrian Johns, a history professor at the University of Chicago, was doing research in the British National Archives when he came across a trove of recently declassified files. The documents were originally created in the late 1960s as part of the trial of Oliver Smedley, founder of a British pirate radio station, who killed Reginald Calvert, a rival pirate broadcaster. The British government had reluctantly tolerated these broadcasters for a few years, many of whom operated from ships outside the country's official border. The pirates favored the new kind of pop music, typified by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, which warranted little airtime on the BBC. The 1966 murder ignited a frenzy of tabloid headlines and finally spurred a government crackdown. Concurrently, the BBC enacted significant reforms and established Radio One, a channel largely devoted to the pop music that was so prevalent on the pirate stations. A number of pirate radio DJs were even hired by the BBC, and one could easily argue that the pirate broadcasters lost the battle but won the war of public taste and respectability.

Inspired by this discovery, Johns decided to tell the full story of the Smedley-Calvert murder. This decision is certainly understandable, and indeed, many individuals currently reading this review might have been similarly inspired if they came across the same source material. The actual murder, though, as lurid as it may have been, doesn't offer enough substance by itself to sustain an entire book, so Johns weaves this single act of violence into a larger narrative. In this retelling of British radio history, the pirates of the 1960s not only revolutionized British broadcasting, but also inspired the modern hacker culture, with its belief that "information wants to be free."

Death of a Pirate can be divided into three sections. The opening chapters chronicle the first decades of British broadcasting, from the era of wireless amateurs through the tumult of the early 1920s, and then the formation of a state-sanctioned monopoly to provide radio programming. A major theme of this section is the debate as to the optimal way for a democracy to regulate the new mass medium of radio. Should free enterprise be allowed to reign, a situation which might lead to the rampant commercialism, and homogenized programming, of the United States? Or, should the strong hand of the state insure that only high-quality, beneficial programming prevail, with listeners funding the medium through mandatory license fees? Oliver Smedley, one of the main characters in this book, was a politician in the 1950s who believed that the British government should limit its involvement in many areas, including its rigid control of broadcasting.

In the second section of the book, Johns mines his recently discovered files to document the explosion of pirate radio in the 1960s. A handful of rogue broadcasters attempted to break the monotony of Scandinavian state broadcasting by transmitting from ships, and British pirates soon followed. By the mid-60s, several vessels were transmitting into England, interspersing numerous advertisements between their songs. Publishers were alarmed by the development, fearing that advertisers might divert promotional budgets away from print and direct their money instead to the rival medium.

Johns devotes particular attention to the station known as Radio City. Reginald Calvert, a music promoter, established the station on a sea fort that the British military had abandoned after World War II. The fort consisted of a few platforms supported by massive pillars, and was far enough off the coast that it was technically outside British territory. Smedley meanwhile had helped establish the station Radio Atlanta, which broadcast from a ship and was later renamed Radio Caroline South. The conflict between Smedley and Calvert was ostensibly about payment for a transmitter, but in Johns's detailed account, the impetus was really a proposed merger between Radio Caroline and Radio City that went sour. There are other historical studies of British pirate radio to be sure, though none offer this level of detail about the infamous Smedley-Calvert murder.

The third section of the book, by far the briefest, is the justification for the subtitle. Roy Bates, a rival of Reginald Calvert, took over another abandoned sea fort and in 1975, claimed it was a sovereign nation, the Principality of Sealand. In the early 2000s, Bates sought to make his self-proclaimed nation a free-market "data haven," a place where companies could house massive computer servers and traffic information without such pesky restraints as copyright. This development was directly related to the free-information ethos favored by many Web enthusiasts, though ultimately, a lack of funding prevented Sealand from achieving its goal.

Given that Johns specializes in the study of intellectual property, and has published an earlier book on the topic, it is not surprising that a critique of copyright law appears in his latest book.[1] One of the inspirations for the pirate broadcasters, in fact, was the restrictive role of music copyright. The scarcity of pop music on BBC airwaves in the early 1960s had less to do with the taste of programmers and more to do with the reality of music licensing at the time. According to licensing agreements, the BBC could play approximately twenty-eight hours of recorded music per week. Given that the BBC was operating three separate channels, this limitation would not allow many songs to be played. Instead, house bands performed cover versions of pop songs, while the pirates played the original versions (no doubt favored by the younger listeners).

This third section, which argues that the modern information age was created by the British pirate radio movement, is the most intriguing part but also the least developed. To say that the pirate radio movement foreshadowed the modern hacker ethos is an understandable and defensible point, but to argue that the pirate broadcasters *created* this particular mentality is an entirely different argument. The implication of Johns's argument is that such modern online phenomenon as the hacker collective Anonymous or the torrent-site Pirate Bay would not have existed without the British pirate radio movement, but this claim is not supported by the facts presented here. Johns does illustrate that the British pirates were motivated by legitimate political concerns, along with explicit commercialism and youthful rebellion, though his final argument falls flat.

The biggest issue with the book, at least for serious scholars, is the style and tone. Johns intended his book for a wide, non-academic audience, and this is certainly a laudable goal. As part of this effort, the book utilizes the large, well-spaced font of a popular book, and endnotes are minimized (perhaps too much so). In seeking to cover so many topics, from the state's role in broadcasting to copyright, to the details of the pirate stations, the writing necessarily employs broad brush strokes at times. In certain passages, Johns also paints the kind of vivid images more common in fiction than in carefully documented historical studies. Much of this information presumably comes from the eyewitness testimonies from the Smedley case, but many readers will no doubt wonder how the author can include this level of detail without more qualification. A significant amount of dialogue is quoted verbatim, for example.

But if Johns wants non-academics to appreciate this book, there are too many passages that are overflowing with extraneous details. When describing Radio City, to cite just one example, we are presented with the names of a great many individuals who worked at the station, many of whom we never encounter again. In trying to walk the fine line and cater to both academic and non-academic readers, the book thus opens itself to criticisms from both camps. Parts of it contain too much conjecture for historians, while other parts contain too much

dry information for average readers. The book could be valuable in a graduate seminar, especially if supplemented with other historical explorations of the period, and the work could also serve as useful entry point for readers unfamiliar with the larger topic of pirate radio. But in terms of serious scholarship, most of the issues and themes of *Death of a Pirate* are explored with more subtlety, nuance, and documentation in other works.[2]

Notes

[1]. Adrian Johns, *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[2]. Another book that establishes parallels between radio history and the current information age is Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). For a detailed discussion of the British government's position on radio during the twentieth century, see Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Sean Street focuses on European stations that targeted British listeners with commercial radio before World War II, though he does cover much of the same material as Johns, in *Crossing the Ether: British Public Service Radio and Commercial Competition, 1922-1945* (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing, 2006). The standard academic work on British pirate radio is Robert Chapman, *Selling the Sixties: The Pirates and Pop Music Radio* (London: Routledge, 1992). Two other books that offer considerable detail on the British pirate phenomenon are Mike Leonard, *From International Waters: 60 Years of Offshore Broadcasting* (Heswall, Liverpool: Forest Press, 1996); and Keith Skues, *Pop Went the Pirates II* (Horning, Norfolk: Lambs' Meadow, 2009).

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