



Douglas B Craig. *Fireside Politics: Radio and Culture in the United States, 1920-1940*. Reconfiguring American Political History. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. 362 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-6439-1.

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Published on H-Pol (August, 2001)

## Commercialism, Democracy, and the Elusive Dream of Radio Citizenship

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Douglas B. Craig's *Fireside Politics* is the most complete study so far of the interactions between broadcasting and the U.S. political system during the "golden age" of radio, 1920-40. The author, a specialist in modern American history at the Australian National University, focuses on the formative years before (and after) radio developed from a hobby into a regulated oligopoly, and Franklin D. Roosevelt became the first political star of the radio age. Craig has written previously on U.S. politics in this period. See his *After Wilson: The Struggle for the Democratic Party, 1920-34* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

*Fireside Politics* brings new insight and original research to what is, to some extent, familiar territory. Robert McChesney and Susan Smulyan, among others, have documented how commercialization shaped the medium and its regulation in 1927 and 1934, frustrating American reformers who hoped for some European form of "public" broadcasting. Craig does not disagree with the paradigm of commercialization, but suggests that the "American system" of regulation tied the future of broadcasting to the political system in unexpected and influential ways.

Craig is interested particularly in how interactions between the institutions of radio and the polity shaped American political processes, discourse, and culture. He reviews the euphoric democratic assumptions about radio in the early 1920s, especially the enduring utopian notion that new communications technologies somehow will uplift citizens and lead them to participate in an ideal republic. This grandiose vision of "radio exceptionalism," Craig argues, permeated the debates over regulation among broadcasters, reformers, and political leaders. But by 1940, twenty years into the radio age, Craig found increasing skepticism about the political contributions of

radio and growing concerns about propaganda, advertising, and demagoguery.

In terms of evidence, Craig bases his arguments on both a review of the voluminous existing literature and extensive original research into government documents, presidential papers, Republican and Democratic party records, and materials from radio network archives, especially NBC. The first third of *Fireside Politics*, six chapters, consists of a synthesis and discussion that integrates recent literature with new insights from Craig's archival research. This overview of radio history, which covers 1895 to 1940, makes a worthy monograph in itself, as well as an introduction to the thematic chapters that follow.

The middle part of the book examines the interactions between commercialized network radio and presidential campaigns from 1924 to 1940. His chapters approach the political process from the standpoint of broadcasters, the "sellers" of advertising and access to audiences; the "buyers," the national parties and candidates; the influence of radio on the process of campaigning; and attempts to assess the uncertain impact of political broadcasting on the listening audience. Rather than stimulating new citizen participation, Craig argues, network radio served to reinforce the dominance of the two major political parties, incumbent officeholders, and those leaders who took radio seriously enough to adapt to its financial and technical demands. The NBC and CBS networks, although nominally nonpartisan, found dealing with established parties and incumbents to be advantageous in the evolving regulatory environment. Craig cites memoranda from NBC executives who worried about the network's pre-1933 alliances with Herbert Hoover to such an extent that they sent unctuous notes to FDR and hired his closest advisors, Eleanor Roosevelt and Louise Howe, as commentators.

Radio time for the famous "fireside chats" was limited not by the networks but by FDR, who was rightly concerned about overexposure. The first chats, in 1933, drew

hundreds of folders of written responses, but, as Craig notes, FDR received only six folders of letters following his broadcast to the nation at the outbreak of World War II. The novelty of hearing the President in one's living room faded over time. By the late 1930s, Craig argues, whatever political impact network radio may have had on audiences had been diluted by the triumph of entertainment programming and by listeners who had grown distrustful of demagoguery and advertising. In his final chapter in this section, Craig cites the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and other 1940s researchers whose behaviorist approaches failed to support the widely held notion that radio was overwhelmingly persuasive as a political medium.

In the final third of the book, "Radio and Citizenship, 1920-1940," Craig suggests that rather than revitalizing democracy by educating citizens and increasing participation in the political system, network radio by the late 1930s served primarily to reinforce the dominant political, commercial, and cultural order. Instead of content that reflected America's rich cultural diversity, Craig argues, the networks created inoffensive middle-brow programming to draw the largest audiences for advertising. Educational radio had been an early casualty of commercialization, and network public affairs programming tended to avoid controversy. Women's programming was circumscribed by network assumptions about domestic roles. These are not new observations, and Craig does not attempt a systematic analysis of radio content. But he does use network memoranda and secondary sources to portray the networks as uninterested or exclusionary to the idea of broadening citizen participation by trying to appeal to rural listeners, labor, African-Americans or any other audiences which were commercially undesirable to sponsors. In the final text chapter, the author documents that network cultural programming was shaped by a broadcasting version of Hollywood's production code to present a sanitized version of American culture.

Craig argues persuasively that while network radio made powerful and long-lasting changes in the way political leaders communicated with citizens, it failed miserably as an instrument to create "radio citizenship"

and thereby increase participation in the political system. Instead of revitalizing democracy, radio was co-opted by broadcasters, regulators, and politicians to serve their own ends. Nevertheless, Craig notes, the utopian rhetoric of "radio exceptionalism" was transferred to the next new thing, television, in the 1940s and 1950s, along with the system of regulated commercialism.

The book's argument is more comprehensive than indicated here and contains thorough and provocative discussions of broadcasting economics, politics, and audience patterns. Nevertheless, *Fireside Politics* has its limitations, some of which Craig acknowledges. To keep the research manageable, Craig kept his focus on the national radio networks and, accordingly, national politics. The book does not attempt to examine local broadcasting and the political roles of individual stations. Nor, as indicated above, was there an attempt to analyze broadcast content or audience response systematically.

Also, the international perspective that Craig promises to bring to the "American system" is less satisfying than the richer U.S. material. The presentation of international regulatory alternatives in the first portion of the book is quite helpful, but later references to developments in Europe, Australia, and Canada seem incomplete. This is disappointing, because Craig's views are provocative. U.S. reformers long have regarded European-style public broadcasting systems, especially the BBC, as more progressive in supporting political education and participation. Yet, in Chapter Nine, Craig makes the surprising observation that the range of political views broadcast over commercialized U.S. networks in the 1930s was more diverse than that available on idealized public systems in Britain, Australia, and Canada. Those systems, Craig argues, were even more supportive of the political status quo than the commercialized system in the United States. This is an important point that deserves more development, but the author does not return to it.

Nevertheless, there is much to recommend here. *Fireside Politics* is a stimulating read and likely to become a leading reference in continuing discussions over communication history, technology, and democracy.

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**Citation:** Stephen Ponder. Review of Craig, Douglas B, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Culture in the United States, 1920-1940*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. August, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5364>

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