Standard radio historiography paints a bleak picture of public media in the United States. Following a chaotic period of innovation, with groups of all varieties starting radio stations in the 1920s, the US established regulations for the new medium, and in doing so, enshrined a commercial system of broadcasting. Following the Communications Act of 1934, it was clear that most radio stations would be privately owned entities that sold advertising to make a profit. A number of advocacy groups, mostly connected to schools, had been pushing for educational, noncommercial uses of the new medium, even seeking to have some airwave frequencies reserved exclusively for such use. The Act of 1934 contained no such provisions. This constitutive moment in US media history is typically contrasted with the British story, where the BBC was formed as a state-sanctioned, noncommercial monopoly to provide radio programming.

The early attempts at noncommercial US radio are well documented in Robert McChesney’s *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy* (1993) and Hugh Slotten’s *Radio’s Hidden Voice* (2009). Both works support the perspective, even if inadvertently, that noncommercial radio in the US was absent or anemic following the brief period of hope at the birth of broadcasting. Years later, the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 was a landmark regulation for noncommercial media outlets, and a number of books explore the history of National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System, two entities that were a direct result of the act. Josh Shepperd, an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, counters the perspective that the middle decades of the twentieth century were a period of inactivity for public media and reveals that advocacy groups were toiling away the whole time, often funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The arguments and policies they developed eventually won success with the 1967 act.

Following an introductory chapter, three chapters present the timeline in a chronological
manner, though the narrative can be a bit difficult to follow, partially because of a jumble of organizations known by acronyms: to cite a few, NCER (National Committee for Education by Radio), NACRE (National Council on Education by Radio), ACUBS (Association of Universities and College Broadcasting Stations), which was then NAEB (National Association of Educational Broadcasters). An overarching theme is the continued lack of funding. Struggling stations often formed exchanges to share their resources. One attempt in the mid-1930s at sharing programming had a comical failing; stations would transmit material to one another, record their own program, and then relay that to the next link in the chain. When the stations realized that their call letters were being accidentally rebroadcast over different stations, this particular attempt came to a swift end (p. 79.)

Along with establishing the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Communications Act of 1934 solidified the concept of “public interest” as the central principle for regulating broadcast media. According to the ostensible logic of spectrum scarcity, awarding a license to someone for a particular airwave frequency means that no one else in the immediate area can operate on that same frequency. In exchange for the exclusive use this public resource, radio stations are mandated to use said airwaves in the “public interest.” The concept can be interpreted in a number of ways, and government regulators opted to use technical, engineering benchmarks for their judgments. Stations that could provide hours of regularly scheduled content, using the most current equipment, were judged more worthy. The lucrative commercial stations had the necessary resources for this kind of operation, and meager university stations, or those operated by labor unions or churches, were at a disadvantage.

The implications of this regulatory logic have been well established by prior scholars, including McChesney, Slotten, and others, and Shepperd repeatedly stresses how noncommercial stations sought to justify their own ability to achieve the “public interest.” The commercial stations, meanwhile, claimed that their own, non-offensive entertainment shows designed around advertisements, were actually the best way to serve the public. As an example, Shepperd cites an internal NBC document from 1938 that claimed that an “American and his wife in the average American home welcome the chatty, familiar presentation of advertising in connection with some programs” (p. 76).

University stations were central to the non-commercial movement, with Ohio State and the University of Wisconsin noteworthy exemplars. According to Shepperd, the desire to provide education to as many people as possible was a driving force of public media; in this regard, the use of radio was just the latest tool for university extension programs. As part of their ongoing argument to prove their value, these noncommercial stations pioneered new forms of radio research. This part of the story will be familiar to anyone currently in academia, with the increasing pressure on assessment measures. For these radio practitioners to make their case, they sought to measure how many people were listening, what they were listening to, and perhaps most importantly, whether there was any effect from radio listening.

This desire to demonstrate the effects of radio is exemplified by the Princeton Radio Research Project, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the focus of chapter 4. A seminal group of researchers, including Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodore Adorno, helped to establish methodologies which became the industry standards, while also inspiring the academic study of mass communication. The story of the Radio Research Project, and its internal disputes, has been told numerous times before, though the topic is relevant to Shepperd’s book, and he contextualizes it within his larger narrative. Chapter 5 documents key regulatory changes that public media advocates were able to secure over the years. Before the 1967 le-
islation, perhaps the most significant such victory was a 1945 decision by the FCC to reserve a portion of the FM band for educational stations (p. 151).

This book has been percolating for several years, growing out of Shepperd’s 2016 dissertation from the University of Wisconsin. He is also a leading figure in the Radio Preservation Task Force, an initiative of the Library of Congress’s National Recording Preservation Board to coordinate the academic study of radio history. Given the years he has been working on this project and his extensive professional connections, it is not surprising that he has a vast knowledge of radio scholarship. He relates his arguments wherever possible to those of other scholars. The positive aspect of this deep engagement is that Shadow of the New Deal is a comprehensive road map of the literature, an ideal introduction for scholars new to the study of radio. A potential drawback, however, is that so much information could overwhelm a novice. Exactly how many other books is a reader supposed to know to fully understand the arguments presented here?

The book has an obvious appeal to media historians; indeed, it will no doubt become the standard reference work on this phase in radio history, though it offers fruitful information for scholars of other areas well. Commercial media outlets continue to dominate our speakers, screens, and phones, and journalists still struggle to find ways to make their work profitable. Current debates about mass media and its presumed effects focus on dying newspapers, invasive forms of social media, and optimum ways to deliver content to users. It is instructive to see how media reformers from decades ago grappled with similar conceptual issues when radio was the emerging media of the day.

For graduate seminars, Shadow of the New Deal would pair nicely with either of the aforementioned books by McChesney or Slotten. Also relevant is New Deal Radio (2022), by David Good-
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