



RADIO'S CIVIC AMBITION

AMERICAN BROADCASTING AND DEMOCRACY IN THE 1930s

DAVID GOODMAN

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Library and Archive Abbreviations

CRBM—Columbia University Library, Rare Book and Manuscript Library

LOC—Library of Congress

NYPL—New York Public Library

NACP—National Archives College Park

OHS—Ohio Historical Society

RAC—Rockefeller Archive Center

UCSC—Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago library

WHS—Wisconsin Historical Society

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About the Companion Website

www.oup.com/us/radioscivicambition

Oxford has created a password-protected website to accompany *Radio's Civic Ambition*. It contains some additional text and illustrations, and web links to online material and sound files that will enhance a reading of the text. The relevant web materials are sign-posted in the text with this symbol: 

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Preface

The generation that came of age in the late 1920s was the first to live a whole life amidst the new soundscape of the broadcast era. It experienced the shock of discovering, as one contemporary observer marveled, “the difference it makes to the earth and its inhabitants when anything uttered anywhere is audible everywhere at will.”¹ Radio was indeed a revolutionary device. It altered conversational patterns, provided a new social and symbolic center to the home and a new kind of background noise. It rapidly became one of the most important institutions of American life. Talk and music, so often previously scarce and even precious resources, came flooding out of the box in endless supply. Radio told stories, provided current news, and regularly brought professionally performed music into lives that had seldom known it before. [Figure 0.1.] Homes were filled with cheerful and persuasive voices. We who have lived through the remarkably rapid revolutions of the digital era can identify with some of the euphoria that greeted radio, the sense of extraordinary new possibilities, and greatly expanded horizons. But there were also worries. Radio’s unceasing chatter prompted new concerns about the quality of listening—would people listen distractedly rather than attentively and critically? The new abundance of home entertainment also provoked anxieties about radio’s effects on public and civic life—would radio make Americans more passive, less inclined to go out, less likely to think independently, to develop and voice opinions of their own? The anxieties no less than the hopes and wonders are a part of radio history, because they also shaped what radio became.

The dominant memory of American radio in its golden age—reinforced in the nostalgia for old-time radio as well as in passing references in the work of countless social and cultural historians—is that it functioned primarily as entertainment, and as something that brought the nation together as never before.² What is remembered and mythologized in old-time radio nostalgia is the national community created by the shared and simultaneous experience of listening to the fireside chats or Jack Benny.³ Radio has entered the textbooks as an instrument of cheap and distracting mass entertainment that fortuitously

1. Anne O’Hare McCormick, “The Radio: A Great Unknown Force,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1932: SM1.

2. The “golden age” can be roughly defined as the period after networking and before television—i.e., early 1930s to mid-1940s.

3. See, e.g., Gerald Nachman, *Raised on Radio* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Leonard Maltin, *The Great American Broadcast: A Celebration of Radio’s Golden Age* (New York: Dutton, 1997).



Figure 0.1. Photographers were fascinated by the way that radio had become an intimate part of family life. John Frost and daughter listening to radio in their home, Tehama County, California, 1940. Photographer: Russell Lee. FSA-OWI Collection, Library of Congress, LC-DIG-fsa-8b00054 D.

arrived just in time for the Depression, when the nation most needed cheap and cheerful entertainment.⁴

As so often in history, this view is not wrong; it is just that through sheer repetition, it begins to prevent other important perspectives from being noticed. A series of oppositions runs through the history of radio—between entertainment and education, commercial and civic roles, passive and active listening, compliant and resistant audiences. Each of these oppositions was, however, also debated extensively in the 1930s. Radio history needs to pay close attention to the meanings and debates of the time, to be reflective about *their* categories of understanding. The danger is not simply the presentism of imposing our categories—to pick examples from opposite ends of the histori-

4. Good summaries of this view include Tom Lewis, “‘A Godlike Presence’: The Impact of Radio on the 1920s and 1930s,” *OAH Magazine of History* 6, no. 4 (Spring 1992); Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933 to 1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

ography, entertainment, or active audiences—on the past. In using our terms rather than beginning by reflecting on theirs, we can obscure the extent to which our ideas about the social and civic role of media derive from—advance or not from—those of the 1930s. It is also only by attending to the extensive debates of the time about broadcasting and its effects that we will understand the many ways in which radio divided as well as united Americans. So this is an embedded cultural history, which aims to show how crucial understanding the terms of contemporary debate is to a cultural history of radio. Such contemporary debate is to be found not just in formal public argument, where programmatic and often predictable statements were traded, but also along the way, dramatized in action and story.

This book is then about the ways in which American radio in its golden age attempted to do more than entertain. It is, however, neither a comprehensive history of the many attempts to use radio for education, nor of the important ways in which the educational radio lobby shaped early debates about radio regulation.⁵ It is, rather, about the endemic creative tension between American radio's entertainment and its educational and civic purposes. American radio, I argue, had—distinctively—a civic legitimation and a commercial function, which meant that it was always attempting to change ideas and behavior, striving to create active and informed listeners, as well as to entertain. This book analyses some of the ways in which American radio carried out its civic functions in the years before World War II; it seeks to identify and interpret rather than denounce the tensions and contradictions within American broadcasting, to acknowledge their productive as well as disabling aspects.

While historians have been very interested in how the United States acquired a predominantly commercial broadcasting system in the 1920s and 1930s, there has been less work that has explored the characteristic tensions and capacities of that system. Other nations had monopoly national, public service broadcasters, or dual systems in which public service broadcasters operated alongside commercial broadcasters. But in the United States, it was the commercial broadcasters that had to acknowledge and work with the high expectations of the era about what radio might do for national life, even as they operated as businesses seeking profit. The resulting system looks in comparative terms like a curious hybrid—overwhelmingly commercial, but straining to be seen to perform the tasks of national and public service broadcasting. The effects of this structural situation have thus far been little explored in U.S. radio history.

Radio was important in most Western nations in the 1930s, but nowhere more so than in the United States.⁶ Census figures show that purchase of radio sets through the nation was rapid but uneven from the 1930s. The graph of national trends shows a very steep upward curve. By 1937, more than half the radio sets in the world were in the United

5. On the latter topic, see Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); see also Eugene E. Leach, “Tuning Out Education: The Cooperation Doctrine in Radio, 1922–38,” which originally appeared in *Current* in January, February, and March 1983. Available: <http://www.current.org/coop/index.shtml>. [Jan. 27, 2010].

6. See Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000): 12, for comparative figures.

States—one for every 4.2 persons—and in the nation's expanding cities, there was a radio in over 90% of homes. Younger Americans came to regard radio as a necessity, and as a focal point of social interaction.⁷ The diffusion of radio sets allowed for the virtual assembly of a mass audience—at least 10 times President Roosevelt addressed radio audiences estimated at 40 million, and entertainment programs reached audiences in excess of 30 million.⁸ But broken down by region, race, and class, important differences emerge. The 1940 census found the percentage of radio-equipped dwellings ranged all the way from 39.9% in Mississippi to 96.2% in Massachusetts. It also found that while 86.8% of white households in the United States had a radio, only 43.3% of nonwhite households did.⁹ The South in general was significantly less tuned in to radio than the rest of the nation, and Southern blacks were the least likely of any group to have a radio before 1950.¹⁰ Meanwhile the wealthy had less time to listen but gave themselves more opportunities to do so—an increasing number of American households had two radio sets, and there was by the mid-1930s a small but rapidly growing minority of Americans who also had a radio in their cars.¹¹

Focusing on national aggregates rather than these uneven rates of adoption, radio seemed to many Americans at the time a profoundly democratic technology. It was certainly not only the wealthy who could own a radio and enjoy the stream of free entertainment and information that came from it. Annoyed at President Roosevelt's second inaugural evocation of the one-third of a nation "ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," the *Chicago Tribune* editorialized that, on the contrary, mass radio ownership was evidence that modern industrial capitalism fostered democratic equality: "Possession of a radio . . . does give a fair indication of the extent to which the common man shares in the fruits of industrial civilization."¹² Not all were as sanguine as the *Tribune*, however, about the democratic potential of radio's industrialization of entertainment and its centralized mass distribution of information. Alerted by populist warnings about the dangers of centralization and monopoly, many other Americans worried about networked radio's transformation of social and civic life. Nobody knew for certain just what the impact of radio would be, but something so widely diffused and so much in use could plausibly be expected to have large and enduring effects.

A 1938 *New Yorker* cartoon depicted a scientist in his lab full of monkeys explaining proudly to a visitor, "As you can see, the one I injected now takes a normal, healthy interest in everyday affairs."¹³ The monkey in question sits in an armchair, reading a newspaper.

7. F. Holter, "Radio among the Unemployed," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 23, no. 1 (1939): 166–67.

8. William C. Ackerman, "The Dimensions of American Broadcasting," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1945): 7.

9. Ackerman, "The Dimensions of American Broadcasting": 3; "43.3% Have Radios among Non-Whites," *Broadcasting* 23, no. 21 (Nov. 23, 1942): 14.

10. Steve Craig, "How America Adopted Radio: Demographic Differences in Set Ownership Reported in the 1930–1950 U.S. Censuses," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48, no. 2 (Jun. 2004): 179–96.

11. "Study Shows Rapid Rise of Radio," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1935: 14; E. A. Suchman, "Radio Listening and Automobiles," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 23, no. 1 (1939): 148–67.

12. "Life in America," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 28, 1937: 10.

13. George Price cartoon, *New Yorker*, June 4, 1938: 14.

A large radio set is blaring, and the contented-looking monkey appears to be reaching over to turn up the volume. The cartoon puts the mass-mediated forms of that “normal, healthy interest in everyday affairs” under some comic suspicion, neatly posing the question of how one could claim to have an active interest in public affairs while sitting comfortably cocooned at home. The image makes sense only against the background of concern that still surrounded radio’s civic role. Was an engagement with public life mediated through a one-way radio in some ways counterfeit or civically negligent?

A few months later in 1938, émigré German philosopher Theodor Adorno was in New York conducting research on American radio. Something puzzled him. Reading through files of letters written by listeners to radio stations, he found them surprisingly “full of reference to the writer’s personality.” Why, he wondered, would listeners feel that it was useful or appropriate to write so personally to a large commercial organization? Adorno found it rationally inexplicable that an individual would write in such a manner “when he knows that he cannot expect any real personal interest” in return. And yet “not only obviously neurotic persons but also some who are apparently quite sensible talk about themselves, their age, their profession and their outlooks.” For Adorno, the most extraordinary thing was that “they seem to justify their suggestions by considering their particular viewpoints as expressions of their particular personalities.” What could have provoked such apparently inappropriate writings? Perhaps, Adorno speculated, the letter writers could find no other way to deal with their feelings of being “lost and neglected” by radio and its “ubiquity-standardization”? Perhaps they felt ashamed of their letters? Perhaps the listener, although “aware of the futility of his attempt to pit his personality against the power of a radio network,” was trying “to compensate by emphasizing his uniqueness”?¹⁴ The insistent explication by listeners of the relationship between their “particular viewpoints” and their “particular personalities” might itself be a form of resistance, Adorno speculated, to radio’s standardizing and homogenizing pull.

Adorno was in many ways an astute observer of American radio and American life.¹⁵ Although he had arrived in the United States only in 1938, he had already identified a genuinely intriguing and interesting phenomenon. In thinking, however, of the problem primarily as an issue of psychological adjustment to late capitalism, and in terms of audience surrender or resistance to the “ubiquity-standardization” of radio, Adorno had failed to notice other and contrary dynamics. Much recent media audience scholarship has been dedicated to reversing his thought, to emphasizing audience agency rather than broadcaster hegemony.¹⁶ But this cultural, communications, and media studies scholarship shares a fundamental assumption with Adorno’s pessimistic critique—an understanding that acceptance of media messages was a form of passive conformity, that rejection or active appropriation of them for one’s own ends was individual assertion, that in short, active audiences were resistant and passive ones compliant.

14. Theodor Adorno, “Radio Physiognomies” [1939], in Robert Hullot-Kentor (ed.), *Theodor Adorno: Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009): 106–8.

15. For the most recent assessment of Adorno’s American years, see David Jeneman, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

16. See, e.g., Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn (eds.), *The Audience Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003).

I want to disrupt this now conventional mapping, and to argue instead that in the 1930s, broadcasting in the United States was officially intended to incite and create an active audience, so that the active audience was actually the compliant one. The impulse to make active audiences came from a distinctively American intersection of regulatory expectations, political pressures, and commercial imperatives, and was one of the key responses to the endemic underlying tension between commercial and public service imperatives in American broadcasting. What Adorno did not perceive in 1938, then, was the extent to which American radio was constructed around a dual civic and commercial paradigm of active listening and individual response. His letter writers were obedient to the call of an institution that sought, not silent uniformity, but individual testimony about active and differentiated listening. The individualized identity of listeners was, in other words, to be socially produced. Americans understood that radio in other nations was deployed to create conformity, but they knew that in the United States it was supposed to be a machine for producing individuals and individualism. A Newark high school teacher designing a curriculum in radio appreciation suggested that students research radio in other countries: “Are programs regulated to secure greater cultural values? To produce rigid uniformity?”¹⁷ The implicit message to American pupils was that, in contrast, American radio stimulated diversity and individualism. It was a theme widely echoed in public discussion of radio in the United States in the 1930s.

This book both describes and admires the cultural ambition of golden age American radio. It offers in that sense an optimistic analysis, a glimpse of what one mass medium once was and hence could be again. But it is also—and inevitably—ultimately a story of failure. While the first part of the book explores the high hopes that surrounded radio, the second examines some of the ways in which the characteristic nagging structural conflicts within American radio—civic yet commercial, supplying what the people wanted yet uplifting and improving them, appealing to people as they were yet attempting to make them better and more tolerant citizens—eventually enmired its ambitions.

The book has three—related—revisionist arguments. First, that American radio in the 1930s was dominated by a civic paradigm, central to which was the ideal of an active, responsive, opinionated, and individualized audience. Second, that the civic paradigm was a product of state intervention, of the federal regulation of broadcasting through the Federal Communications Commission. Third, that as a direct consequence of this domination by civic values that were also cosmopolitan and pluralist, radio spoke to a class-divided audience. The focus on class here does not reflect a belief that ethnic, race, or gender divides have been any less prevalent or less important in U.S. radio history; my specific argument is, however, that what I identify as the civic paradigm in the United States called forth class-defined more than it did ethnic-, race-, or gender-based resistance.

The chapters of the book explore aspects of this culturally ambitious but ultimately divisive civic paradigm. Chapter 1, “The American System,” argues that the American system was never completely free from government influence and control, and that FCC

17. Max J. Herzberg, “Tentative Units in Radio Program Appreciation,” *English Journal* 24, no. 7. (September 1935): 548.

regulation—despite its weakness, inconsistency, and party political maneuvering—had demonstrable and arguably beneficial effects on broadcasting practice. After 1934, politically alert broadcasters continued to fear government competition in broadcasting, or the imposition of a more demanding regulatory regime, and networks were concerned about trust-busting attention to their commercial dominance. We know this because there was as a consequence far more high cultural, educational, and civic programming on American radio than commercial broadcasters left to themselves would have provided. Chapter 2, “The Civic Paradigm,” elaborates the first and second of the three arguments about the civic paradigm—establishing that there was such a dominant cluster of ideas, and that it centered upon the figure of the active, critical, but empathetic listener. Chapter 3, “The Promise of Broadcast Classical Music,” explores the question of why there was so much classical music on 1930s American radio. Radio’s engagement with the ideas of 1930s music educators led to an emphasis on the added effort that would be necessary to turn music listening into genuine music appreciation. Local performers, amateurs talking about their musical hobby, broadcast music lessons, composition competitions, and play-along programs all evidenced and emphasized links to an active musical culture and demonstrated why broadcast classical music was so important a part of civic paradigm radio. Chapter 4, “Democratic Radio,” analyzes the important radio forum programs, which imagined, and to some extent helped to create, an audience that was rational, discursive, open to persuasion, critical, wedded to the process of truth seeking rather than to any particular beliefs—and above all willing to change its mind.

The second half of the book is about social and cultural divisions that were accentuated by the civic paradigm. It describes how the civic ideal of radio ended by alienating those Americans in whom the pluralist virtues of tolerance, openness, and empathy aroused suspicion rather than trust. Chapter 5, “Class, Cosmopolitanism, and Division,” argues that while radio was a nationalizing and cosmopolitan force that brought Americans together in unprecedented national and international simultaneity, it was also for those very reasons the site of a sustained culture war. Chapter 6, “Radio and the Intelligent Listener: The *War of the Worlds* Panic,” sets the famous 1938 broadcast in the context of pervasive contemporary concern about propaganda and the intelligence of the population. A key component of the civic ideal was the imperative that listeners take responsibility for their own listening and the formation of their own opinions and beliefs. Anxiety about propaganda on the radio in the late 1930s created a cultural and intellectual climate in which the credulity and intelligence of the American population was under intense scrutiny. The civic paradigm proved divisive in practice, as the panicked listeners to the Martian broadcast were repeatedly and aggressively blamed for their failure as citizens to listen correctly. Chapter 7, “Populism, War, and the American System,” examines populist challenges to the American system of broadcasting from the late 1930s, and argues that the civic paradigm compact was beginning to fray in the conditions of WWII, as quite different demands were made of broadcasters by government. A postlude looks at some immediately postwar evaluations of American radio, such as the FCC’s “Blue Book” and the discussions of radio by the Commission on the Freedom of the Press, chaired by University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins.

One of the important things about recent work in U.S. radio history has been the very productive interaction between communications, media, and American studies work

and that produced by historians. Out of this stimulating nexus has come a body of recent work that goes well beyond narrating what happened in radio history, and takes on the burden of demonstrating rather than assuming radio's broader social and cultural importance. I have increasingly come to believe that the need now is indeed for a radio history in which the radio sits somewhere in the middle distance—showing how radio was incorporated into and in turn transformed aspects of American life.

I came to this project with an interest in comparative history, and as an Australian who teaches and researches U.S. history from outside American borders. I have tried throughout, perhaps more than has been usual in the recent wave of scholarship, to venture some arguments about the distinctiveness of American broadcasting. As always, because of the great influence of American media practices in the rest of the world, isolating an American model for analysis can be extremely difficult—there is no static comparative laboratory for comparative historical work, just a dynamic world in which ideas, particularly American ideas, are constantly translated into other contexts. Much more comparative investigation remains for someone else—or rather many someone elses—but I have tried here at least to suggest some themes that future comparative and transnational work in radio history might take up. Finally, I should note that—like most of the U.S. radio history written in recent decades—this book is better informed about the inner workings of NBC than about the other networks, because major NBC archival collections have long been available to researchers at the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Library of Congress, and there has been no comparable access to archival material about the CBS or (until recently) Mutual networks.¹⁸

18. The Library of Congress also has the WOR collection, which will eventually shed further light on the Mutual network.

Part 1

Ambition

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1

The American System

PROLOGUE: THE SETTLEMENT OF 1934

In late 1934, the future of the American system of broadcasting was being decided. In the endgame of a complicated series of legislative and activist skirmishes between radio reformers and the broadcasting industry, Senators Robert Wagner of New York and Henry Hatfield of West Virginia had proposed an amendment to the legislation setting up the new Federal Communications Commission that would have set aside 25% of all radio facilities for the use of “educational, religious, agricultural, labor, co-operative and similar non-profit-making associations.”¹ The proposal gained strong support from non-profit broadcasters, who had been contesting the commercial dominance of the public resource of the airwaves for a decade or more, and who had several times before advocated set-aside proposals.² Indeed, for many radio reformers, a reservation of a portion of radio’s frequencies or hours for nonprofit uses was itself a modest compromise, a step back from the more thoroughgoing demands emanating from what critic James Rorty had described in 1931 as the “increasingly articulate movement for public ownership and operation of essential public services.”³

By 1934, on all sides, the battle over U.S. broadcasting was understood to be entering a critical and probably decisive phase. One reformer warned that in no realm of social life was “private control more menacing to the common interests of mankind.”⁴ Father John Harney, from the Paulist Fathers’ station WLWL in New York, unhappy with the way the

1. This complex story is well told in McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, ch. 8; in Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting 1920–1934* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), ch. 5; and Barnouw, *The Golden Web*: 22–28.

2. Senator Simeon Fess had unsuccessfully introduced a bill in 1931 to reserve 15% of radio channels for nonprofit, educational broadcasting. On the history of set-aside proposals, see McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy*; and Louise M. Benjamin, *Freedom of the Air and the Public Interest: First Amendment Rights in Broadcasting to 1935* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), ch. 12.

3. James Rorty, “The Impending Radio War,” *Harpers Magazine* 163 (November 1931): 714–15.

4. Gross W. Alexander of the Pacific-Western Broadcasting Federation in, *Hearings Before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House of Representatives, 73rd Congress, 2nd session, on HR 8301*: 281–91.

Federal Radio Commission had forced his station to cede some of its broadcasting hours to commercial stations, had successfully mobilized a coalition of Catholic and other protesters. They wanted legislation to protect noncommercial broadcasting from a Federal Radio Commission whose decisions seemed to them permanently tilted in favor of the commercial broadcasters.⁵ Harney optimistically told a House committee that reserving a quarter of radio frequencies for “human welfare agencies, education, religion, labor organizations, agricultural, cooperative, fraternal organizations,” rather than “handing them over to purely commercial interests for exploitation,” was a principle that none could dare oppose.⁶

The broadcasting industry argued that such an extensive set-aside would destroy American radio, necessarily taking licenses away from established broadcasters. The National Association of Broadcasters pointed out that under the 1927 Radio Act, its members were already legally required to broadcast in the “public interest, convenience, or necessity,” and it characterized set-asides as benefits for special interests that should be resisted on behalf of the “public as a whole”—in whose name they claimed to speak.⁷ Harney memorably put the opposing case, objecting to any casting of the coalition of education, labor, and religious groups as “special interests”: “I say it is not a special interest, unless you want to say that those who are working for human welfare are pursuing special interests and that the gentlemen who are working for their own pockets are not.”⁸ At issue here was a fundamental and recurring question in the history of American broadcasting—could the diversity of American society be adequately represented in comprehensive, something-for-everyone radio programming, or only by giving all who wanted it access to a broadcasting outlet that would make self-representation possible?

The Wagner-Hatfield amendment was defeated in the Senate, but Section 307(c) of the 1934 Communications Act did stipulate that the newly created FCC must hold hearings on the desirability of frequency set-asides for nonprofit broadcasters. The FCC duly held the inquiry in October and November 1934, amassing nearly 14,000 pages of testimony in the process. In these hearings, the broadcasting industry argued that it was cooperating productively with educators and had been providing the nation with a steady diet of public service programming. Extensive testimony detailed network achievements in religion and public affairs, and in the broadcasting of classical music, always a touchstone for those who held high hopes for radio’s culturally transforming and improving capacity. CBS president William Paley reported proudly, as part of his defense of the status quo, that jazz programs were less in demand than previously, and that there was

5. Hugh Sloten, *Radio’s Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), ch. 4.

6. *Hearings Before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House of Representatives, 73rd Congress, 2nd session, on HR 8301: 147–53.*

7. “Supplementary Statement by the National Association of Broadcasters Regarding the Amendment to HR8301,” *Hearings Before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House of Representatives, 73rd Congress, 2nd session, on HR 8301: 116–17.*

8. *Hearings Before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House of Representatives, Seventy-Third Congress, 2nd session, on HR 8301: 161.*

increasing audience interest in symphonic music and opera.⁹ [Figure 1.1.] The networks, understanding the strength of the political challenge they faced, went to considerable trouble and expense to document all the ways in which they already were national and public service broadcasters.

The educators and radio reformers for their part were very restrained in the hearings, offering little contestation of the continued commercial dominance of American radio. Most did not even raise the question of the creation of an American national public broadcaster on the model of the BBC. Two state university presidents privately expressed interest in a scheme that would give states, perhaps through their universities, responsibility for some portion of the broadcast day.¹⁰ Floyd Reeves of the Tennessee Valley Authority said publicly that he thought the U.S. government should “own and operate a national chain of radio stations,” but he was quickly corrected by the TVA chair who confirmed (after prompting from the White House) that the TVA did not favor “government



Figure 1.1. Dapper CBS president William S. Paley in 1939. Harris and Ewing collection, Library of Congress: LC-H22-D- 5684.

9. “W. S. Paley, Against ‘Forced’ Programs,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1934: 26.

10. Orrin Dunlap, “Congress Wants It,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1934: XII; Henry K. Norton to William Hard, October 1, 1934, folder 28, box 26, NBC records, WHS.

administration of radio programs.”¹¹ Overall, NBC’s H. K. Norton heard “very little in the way of serious attack upon the business as now conducted.”¹² He noted with evident relief that at the hearings “the question of government control did not arise; nor was there any suggestion of stations to be operated on a commercial but non-profit basis.”¹³

The FCC recommended to Congress in January 1935 that no set-asides be made. “Flexibility” was to be preferred; educational organizations would be better off cooperating with commercial broadcasters, using existing facilities with their “costly and efficient equipment” rather than seeking their own stations. “Cooperation in good faith” was to be required from the broadcasters, and this cooperation should be “under the direction, and the supervision of the Commission.”¹⁴ To promote and study this cooperation, the FCC set up the Federal Radio Education Committee (FREC), to be chaired by John Studebaker, the U.S. commissioner of education.¹⁵

The story of the public contest over radio in 1934 has most often previously been told as the end of something, as the final act of the “battle for control of U.S. broadcasting.”¹⁶ Barnouw called the hearings and report the “formal interment” of the reform cause.¹⁷ McChesney argued that the FCC’s January 1935 report marked “the death of the movement for broadcast reform”, and that before long the “previous fifteen years of struggle and debate over the control and structure of U.S. broadcasting had been erased from history” and from memory.¹⁸

It is certainly true that after 1934 few informed observers in the United States seriously countenanced the creation of an American BBC. The setting aside of frequencies on the now crowded AM band was henceforth politically inconceivable (although in 1940, and again in 1945, the FCC did set aside frequencies on the FM band for noncommercial educational stations).¹⁹ But it is also true that for at least a decade after 1934, commercial broadcasters remained anxious about the terms of their tenure of the airwaves. The industry journal *Broadcasting* warned at the start of 1936 that “alertness rather than smugness” had to be the watchword, and that those broadcasters who wanted to make of radio “a mere adjunct of show business, with all its ballyhoo and blatancy,” could prove fatal to all.²⁰

11. “Tennessee Valley Authority Urges Federal Chain,” *Education by Radio* 4, no. 12 (October 25, 1934): 45; Eugene E. Leach, *Tuning Out Education: The Cooperation Doctrine in Radio, 1922–38*, <http://www.current.org/coop/coop5.html>; McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*: 217–20.

12. Henry K. Norton to R. C. Patterson Jr., October 4, 1934, folder 28, box 26, NBC records, WHS.

13. H. K. Norton to William Hard, October 1, 1934, folder 28, box 26, NBC records, WHS.

14. FCC press release, December 18, 1935, folder 24, box 68, NBC records, WHS.

15. “Joint Committee to Lay Plans for Educational Cooperation,” *Broadcasting* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1936): 22.

16. Accounts that end with Wagner-Hatfield include most prominently McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*; Smulyan, *Selling Radio*; and Benjamin, *Freedom of the Air*.

17. Barnouw, *The Golden Web*: 26.

18. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*: 226, 224, 242.

19. Smulyan, *Selling Radio*: 130.

20. “1936 and Public Service,” *Broadcasting* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1936): 32.

The end of one story is, however, always the beginning of another, and in this case it is a much less explored one. In focusing on the leadership of the organized broadcast reform movement, on the either/or question of public or private ownership, and in looking for decisive legislative outcomes, historians have been too quick to announce the total victory of the commercial broadcasters and the complete evaporation of the way of thinking that saw the free market and the public interest in radio as in permanent tension. If we shift our attention from political economic questions of public or private ownership to cultural and social questions about radio's civic role, the Faustian aspect of the 1934 settlement becomes clearer.

The American radio system in the second half of the 1930s was profoundly shaped by broadcaster anxiety about possible reform. Little about the system makes sense if we attempt to understand broadcasting simply as a business like any other. The networks in particular were working hard to placate influential critics who continued to worry that a merely commercial broadcasting system would neglect high culture, education, and civic life. They had to be seen to cooperate with entities such as the FREC, set up to "eliminate controversy and misunderstanding" between educators and broadcasters and to "promote actual cooperative arrangements." FREC's budget came half from broadcasters through the NAB and half from the large foundations.²¹ Behind the scenes, there was anxious negotiation—NBC's Frank Russell reported that the industry representatives had made it very clear that they would not subscribe their share of the budget "until we definitely know that the instructions to the Committee are satisfactory to us." The requested adjustments included striking out provisions that required the committee to inquire into "ways and means of preserving the air as a public forum," and into other national systems of broadcasting. This reaffirmed that the battle of 1934 had been won by the broadcasters, and that structural reform was off the table. The FCC in its report to Congress had, Russell happily reported, "thoroughly and completely upheld the American System of broadcasting."²² But there was still a great deal for the broadcasters to worry about in the ongoing public discussion of radio's civic responsibilities.

FREC's official position was that the solution to the radio problem was cooperation, but that more research was needed into just how cooperation would work. Research was sponsored in areas such as the training of teachers in the educational uses of radio. An experimental script and idea exchange was established, which by late 1939 had distributed 250,000 copies of educational radio scripts to stations around the country.²³ On the foundation side, Rockefeller's General Education Board gave money for an evaluation of educational radio programs at Ohio State University and a study of the *Wisconsin School of the Air*, as well as for a major radio research project at Princeton University.²⁴ Carnegie

21. "Joint Committee to Lay Plans for Educational Cooperation," *Broadcasting* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1936): 22.

22. Frank Russell to R. C. Patterson Jr., September 21, 1935, folder 42, box 91, NBC records, WHS.

23. "Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Federal Radio Education Committee September 29, 1939," folder 24, box 68, NBC records, WHS.

24. Paul Seattler, *The Evolution of American Educational Technology* (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 2005): 238–43.

funded a study of radio listening groups.²⁵ The foundations had by early 1939 pledged a total of \$355,000, making them major players in the drama of reconciliation between education and commercial radio.²⁶ Meanwhile the broadcasters themselves were to fund further FREC research on topics such as publicizing educational radio programs and listener ideas of what was educational.

FREC's activities soon faded from public view, leading Barnouw to conclude that the reformers had been "skillfully shunted into busy-work." But, he astutely observed, that was not the whole story: "In winning their victory, networks and stations had made promises that were hostages."²⁷ In December 1938, Levering Tyson, a veteran radio reformer known as an advocate of cooperation with the networks, wrote to Neville Miller of the NAB, reemphasizing the importance of industry cooperation with radio reform moderates: "Really responsible educators and top-flight men in the profession," he said, were in agreement that cooperation, rather than separate public or educational stations, was the solution. But the industry had to take self-regulation more seriously, Tyson warned, really "establish standards and maintain them," or

one of these days all of us are going to wake up and find that a loony Congress has taken over broadcasting... and I don't mean maybe. A great many people, intelligent members of different branches of society, who do not believe in government control and who know of and applaud the obvious public services radio has performed (such as flood relief), who admire the fine things which we get on air (like the Philharmonic and Toscanini programs)... nevertheless, are disgusted with the average and less than average programs and practices of broadcasters; they openly state they would prefer a government system to what we have now.

With the "jittery feeling abroad today," Tyson concluded, "you cannot tell what a crazy Congress might do."²⁸ Responsive to fears such as these, network executives were in many cases quite prepared to authorize significant investment in high cultural, civic, and educational programming, just as they were more than happy to open their microphones to elected leaders. In particular, they were eager to cooperate with the federal government, lest New Deal reform activism should spill over into a plan for a national public broadcaster; the presidents of both NBC and CBS telegraphed President Roosevelt just after his inaugural address, for example, to offer him access to their networks whenever he

25. Frank Ernest Hill, *Radio's Listening Groups: The United States and Great Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).

26. National Association of Broadcasters, "The FREC? What Does It Mean to the Broadcaster?," folder 24, box 68, NBC records, WHS; William J. Buxton, "The Political Economy of Communications Research," in Robert E. Babe (ed.), *Information and Communication in Economics* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1994): 168, sees the Rockefeller Foundation acting as "a de facto agent of the state."

27. Barnouw, *The Golden Web*: 26–27.

28. Levering Tyson to Neville Miller, December 9, 1938, folder 66, box 62, NBC records, WHS. Tyson had been director of the Carnegie-funded National Advisory Council on Radio in Education, which worked for cooperation between education and the commercial broadcasters, but was becoming disillusioned with the commercial broadcasters—see Slotten, *Radio's Hidden Voice*: 177.

wished.²⁹ Inasmuch as this was a pragmatic strategy designed to blunt the criticisms of reformers seeking a larger reshaping of American broadcasting, it succeeded. But it was a strategy openly acknowledged only behind the scenes. In public, American radio trumpeted a different story—that only in the United States was radio free.

FREEDOM ON THE AIR

Herbert Hoover, as U.S. secretary of commerce, told a congressional committee in 1924 that radio was “a public concern...to be considered primarily from the standpoint of public trust.” Hoover said that radio was too important to be carried on merely as a business “for private gain, for private advertisement, or for the entertainment of the curious.”³⁰ Historians of American radio usually quote these words in elegiac voice, lamenting what might have been. Within 10 years, the industry orthodoxy in the United States—and arguably the dominant public opinion—was that freedom of the air could be maintained only by a commercial system, free from government interference or propaganda. “I have seen no inclination on the part of our government or lawmakers to interfere with freedom of expression on the radio,” observed RCA president David Sarnoff in 1935. “This is not true in many other countries.”³¹ [Figure 1.2.] The role of government, in the golden age of American radio, was to be understood only negatively, as censorship, and conversely radio’s freedom was understood to rest upon government restraint or inaction.

That was in comparative terms a striking outcome. Indeed, in “many other countries,” Hoover’s 1925 view remained the orthodoxy—that radio was simply too important to be



Figure 1.2. RCA president and NBC chairman of the board David Sarnoff in 1939. Harris and Ewing collection, Library of Congress, LC-H22-D- 5686.

29. President’s Personal File 75, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY.

30. In Marvin R. Bensman, *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation in the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000): 99.

31. Orrin E. Dunlap Jr., “Sarnoff Scans the Radio World,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1935: SM 5.

left to the market and the profit-making imperative. The Canadian Radio League, set up by nationalist young men, argued that radio was so vital that “no other agency than the State should ultimately be responsible for its operation and control.”³² Graham Spry, of the League, argued that to permit commercial interests in broadcasting “is tantamount to abandoning the rash but noble hope for democratic government.”³³ The boldness of the attempt south of the border to establish exactly the opposite as the common sense of the matter is thrown into sharp relief in this comparative perspective.

The tale of the U.S. radio industry’s continuing attempts to legitimate itself after 1934 can in one sense easily be told. There were still some Americans who obstinately and publicly persisted in seeing the economic power of the big broadcasters as inimical to freedom of speech on radio and to the proper educational, cultural, and civic use of the medium. That view—now cast as radical—gained little time on the air.³⁴ It did, however, retain its power to haunt the industry, to shape its sense of what it had to do to defend the status quo of American broadcasting. Persuading Americans that the growing economic might and cultural influence of commercial radio was not just a good thing, but a distinctively American good thing, would clearly be to their advantage.

In the later 1930s, a sustained and sophisticated public relations campaign was aimed at building nationalist pride in the retention of a predominantly commercial broadcasting sector. To that end, the U.S. radio industry in the 1930s talked insistently and often of the “American system” of broadcasting, cloaking the status quo in a patriotic haze. The term *American system* had a long history in U.S. nationalism, from advocates of tariff protection in the early 19th century to conservative opponents of the New Deal in the twentieth.³⁵ When NBC’s Franklin Dunham spent an evening with progressive academics from Columbia University in 1936, debating radio and education, he came away with the strong impression that “those who were opposed to the present system of broadcasting are also fundamentally opposed to the present system of American government.”³⁶ Within the network, Dunham was at the liberal end, but even he by 1936 had come to see the question of support for American commercial broadcasting as a matter of national loyalty.

The “American system” of broadcasting was most commonly described by its advocates as “free.” “There is no radio freedom in all the world like that of the United States,” NBC vice president John Royal reported happily, after returning from a 1938 European tour.³⁷ [Companion website link 1.1.] America’s free radio, RCA president David Sarnoff

32. Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada’s Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1990): 43.

33. Quoted in Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting 1922–1932* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992): 228.

34. See, e.g., Ruth Brindze, *The Truth About Radio—Not to Be Broadcast* (New York: Vanguard, 1937); Nathan Godfried, *WCFL, Chicago’s Voice of Labor, 1926–78* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); National Advisory Council on Radio in Education, Committee on Civic Education by Radio, and American Political Science Association, *Four Years of Network Broadcasting: A Report* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937).

35. See, e.g., *Facts—The New Deal versus American System* (Chicago: Republican National Committee, 1936).

36. Franklin Dunham to John Royal, March 3, 1936, folder 6, box 92, NBC records, WHS.

37. Orrin Dunlap, “An American Showman’s View,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1938.

explained, paid its own way through commercial advertising and broadcast the “best programs produced anywhere,” thus supplementing existing freedoms of religion and speech and press with the new freedom of radio.³⁸ The idea of freedom has had extraordinary currency and centrality in American society—Foner argues that “no idea is more fundamental to Americans’ sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation.”³⁹ It is thus little surprise that American radio was widely understood as peculiarly free. But what was meant by free radio? There were two main themes to the discussion through the 1930s. The first was the absence of government control. Industry spokesmen constantly stressed government censorship as the most potent enemy of radio freedom.⁴⁰ They worked hard to establish as common sense the view that the main threat to free radio came from government—either from the possibility of government entering the broadcasting field as a competitor or from the heavy hand of official censorship and regulation. Edward M. Kirby, then director of public relations for Nashville station WSM, wrote a credo for the American listener in 1940: “No person decrees to what I shall listen; no government taxes me. In America radio is free.”⁴¹ [Figure 1.3.] Freedom was understood here as something wrested from government, to be defended by individual listeners. The second important theme was a claim about the democratic consequences of the commercial basis of American broadcasting—that the necessary responsiveness of commercial radio to audience preferences was a source and a sign of democratic freedom.⁴² “Democratic control of programs,” explained radio advertising expert Herman Hettinger, “implies control by the listening majority.”⁴³

On the other side, radio reformers disputed the idea that there existed anything as organized or rational as an American “system”—“there is actually no system in the ordinary sense of the term,” observed BBC director general John Reith in 1931.⁴⁴ Radio reformer Joy Elmer Morgan wrote that radio broadcasting in the United States was “the exact opposite of a system”; it was rather “one mad scramble of powerful commercial interests to gain control of this new means of reaching the human mind.” He stressed the continuing “chaos” of American radio—the same language used by British critics.⁴⁵ John Reith also went out of his way in 1937 to question simple American claims about radio and freedom. “A great deal is said about freedom of this and that,” he told a conference in London. “A great deal of nonsense too.” He argued that either government or commercial control could curtail a broadcaster’s freedom.⁴⁶

38. “Radio Self-Rule Urged by Sarnoff,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1938: 19.

39. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998): xii.

40. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*: 239–51.

41. Quoted in Paul F. Peter, “The American Listener in 1940,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 213, no. 1 (January 1941): 1.

42. Craig names this principle “listener sovereignty”: *Fireside Politics*: xvii.

43. Herman S. Hettinger, “Broadcasting in the United States,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 177 (January 1935): 11.

44. J. C. W. Reith, “Broadcasting in America,” *Nineteenth Century* 110 (August 1931), reprinted in E. C. Buehler (ed.), *American vs. British System of Radio Control* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1933): 282.

45. Joy Elmer Morgan, “The New American Plan for Radio,” in Bower Aly and Gerald D. Shively (eds.), *Debate Handbook: Radio Control* (Columbia, MO: Staples, 1933): 82.

46. “Sir John’s View of News,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1937: 146.

I'm GLAD AMERICAN Air IS FREE!



I BOUGHT a radio for Christmas.
It's a beauty, too, with an all-wave receiver.
These cold winter days I tune-in the world.
But I hear strange things.
Things I never hear in American radio.
Some of the programs are good, all right. They seem to know their music over there.
But foreign radio is so different, so tense. Surrounding each broadcast there seems to be an atmosphere of awful dread, of fierce control.
That sense of freedom to which we are accustomed just isn't there.
Much of the air is oratory, inflamed and destructive. Neighbors seem to be set against neighbors. They are selling hatred.
Maybe I don't understand the language, but the words, the tones, the manner of delivery can be understood by anyone with ears to listen.
That isn't our conception of radio's place in the world.
We don't do that here.
No one on the American air dares tell us to hate one another because of race or religion.
No one dares use the air to drive us apart. *In America radio brings us closer together.*
American radio enjoys freedom in which to contribute the greatest service to the American listener, to develop the art to its widest possibilities. Here its purpose is to entertain, to inform, to serve.
We are free to turn the dial until we find the message, the service, or the music to match the mood we feel. The only dictator we know in America is the dictate of our own desire.
I'm glad the American Air is free.
I'm glad particularly now, because American radio is free to bring us again the Christmas message: *Peace on Earth, Good-will toward Men.*
This is the American system of broadcasting.

A message in the interests of the American system of broadcasting by one proud to be a part thereof; by one privileged from time to time to have contributed to its progress, by one seeking new ways to broaden its service to the American listener.

W S M

The Air Castle of the South

50,000 WATTS

E. W. CRAIG, *Vice-President* • IN CHARGE OF RADIO
HARRY STONE, *General Manager*

OWNED AND OPERATED BY

THE NATIONAL LIFE AND ACCIDENT INSURANCE COMPANY, INC., NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Figure 1.3. The American system compared. Edward M. Kirby perhaps also had a hand in this eloquent 1937 WSM advertisement in the trade journal *Broadcasting*, with its striking claim that “The only dictator we know in America is the dictate of our desire.” WSM advertisement, “I’m Glad AMERICAN Air IS FREE,” *Broadcasting* 12, no. 12 (Dec. 15, 1937): 43. Reprinted by permission of Gaylord Entertainment Company.

Events in Europe seemed to provide more and more supporting evidence for the exceptionalist claim that nowhere else was radio so free. The historical coincidence of the resurgence of undemocratic forms of government in Europe and the entrenchment of commercial broadcasting in the United States encouraged many industry defenders to posit a connection—to argue that it was the commercial basis of American broadcasting

that accounted for its freedom. A Chicago radio manufacturer returned home from Europe in 1937 with a renewed sense of “how lucky we are in our American radio situation,” and observed that those Americans who were “forever grumbling and grouching about our commercial announcements would, I think, be willing to take twice as much if the alternative were to listen daily to the propaganda dished out” by the government broadcasters of Europe.⁴⁷ New England radio commentator Marion Hertha Clarke was voicing conventional wisdom when she claimed in early 1941 that the United States had the “last free radio system in the world.”⁴⁸ Those who complained about advertising on radio could increasingly be portrayed as naïve and even parochial in outlook.

The genius of industry arguments in defense of the “American system”—in this environment—thus lay in the assertion that it was the commercial organization of American radio that made it both free and democratic. The market in commercial radio broadcasting was the guarantee that the people rather than the government ruled the airwaves, that their preferences actively and continually shaped the content of broadcasts, thus ensuring freedom of speech on the air. NBC president Niles Trammell argued strikingly in 1946 that advertising was not only in the public interest, it was “the very expression of that interest.” Freedom and commercial competition were inseparable, he insisted: “There can be no freedom without competition and no competition without freedom.”⁴⁹

Freedom of the air and the commercial basis for broadcasting thus became twinned ideals, both in need of constant defense. Neville Miller, president of the National Association of Broadcasters, warned in 1938 that “invasion of our free, competitive system of American broadcasting from any quarter whatsoever will be met with all the determined resistance at my command, and I believe as well with the determined resistance of the people who own and use the thirty million radio sets operative throughout America.”⁵⁰ A commercial radio system became, in this increasingly persuasive way of thinking, an essential precondition of democracy and true liberty. The freedom that American broadcasters so insistently defended was first of all an economic freedom—the right of broadcasters to operate radio as a business, the right of listeners to choice and variety of programs—and then a political freedom, the right to hear broadcast speech uncensored or unintimidated by government. The insistent message of the industry was that these things were linked—that one could not exist without the other—even that they were ultimately indistinguishable. It was an argumentative strategy both breathtakingly bold and brilliantly executed. It worked as well as it did because the languages of freedom and resistance to tyrannical government resonated through American history, but also because the industry succeeded in depicting the choice as between only two clearly defined possibilities.

47. “Lucky U.S., Says Radio Man After Trip to Europe,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 22, 1937: W4.

48. “Clubwomen Are Told Public at Fault for Poor Radio Programs,” *Lowell Sun*, March 4, 1941: 4.

49. Niles Trammell, “Advertising in the Public Interest,” *National Association of Broadcasters—Information Bulletin—Convention* 14, no. 16 (November 25, 1946), box 5B, NAB collection, WHS.

50. Neville Miller, “The Place of Radio in American Life: A Free People Can Never Tolerate Government Control,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 4, no. 23 (September 1936): 715.

STARK ALTERNATIVES

The nationalist language of justification of the freedom of the American system rested upon a series of stark oppositions, between government control and individual liberty, old world and new. These binary oppositions dominated thinking and public discourse about broadcasting through the turbulent 1930s. As the decade progressed, it became more and more difficult to imagine desirable alternatives to the American system. The mounting evidence of the control of radio by the state in fascist and communist nations made government broadcasting less and less politically plausible an option in the United States, and industry spokesmen made much of the contrast. NAB president Neville Miller warned in August 1938 that if “an agency of government seeks to dictate what shall and what shall not be broadcast...that agency is abandoning the democratic pattern and is assuming the technique of the totalitarian state which determines what people shall hear, what they shall say, what they shall read and think.”⁵¹ The strategy of industry publicists was to make the choice about radio sharply defined and simple, to depict the broadcasting question as an all-or-nothing fight for freedom parallel to the broader struggle of the democracies against their dictator enemies. The American public had to be persuaded that it faced only two very stark alternatives. The sharply polarized politics of the era helped broadcasters suggest that there could be no compromise for radio, no midpoint between complete freedom and wholesale surrender to government control.

Ed Kirby, director of public relations at the National Association of Broadcasters, wrote to NBC president Lenox Lohr’s assistant in November 1938, rehearsing the argument that he thought the American broadcasting industry needed to be making in its own defense:

I do not believe the American public realizes the full significance of the commercial structure of radio in this country; it does not realize that if economic support for radio did not come from the advertisers, then an assessment would have to be made to pay the bill; and this is nothing short of a tax, and a tax is nothing short of government domination, political control and loss of the American radio freedom of expression.⁵²

The length of the sentence emphasized the series of slides from one point to another—the effect of the industry case was to render invisible any resting place between the market freedom of commercial broadcasting on the one hand, and totalitarian governmental control and loss of freedom of speech on the other. Commercial broadcasting was here aligned with the spirit of the American Revolution, as a defense of freedom against government tyranny. For defenders of the American system, publicly funded radio was inevitably “government-controlled,” politically partisan and intolerant, while for-profit commercial broadcasting delivered freedom for all. No distinction between public funding and government “control” could be admitted.

Actually the radio world of the 1930s was a good deal more variegated and complicated than that. Until the formation of National Public Radio in 1970, the United States

51. *Broadcasting* 15, no. 5 (September 1, 1938): 14.

52. Ed Kirby to Martha McGrew, November 26, 1938, folder 66, box 62, NBC records, WHS.

did not have a national public broadcaster, and we can describe its national broadcast system after the 1920s as predominantly commercial. There had been an important not-for-profit broadcasting sector in the 1920s, when educational institutions, labor unions, churches, and other welfare bodies had moved quickly to attempt to harness the wonderful capacities of broadcasting for their own purposes. But only a small proportion of these stations survived into the 1930s. A 1937 study found that, of 202 broadcasting licenses issued to educational institutions, only 38 remained at the beginning of 1937, and many of those were struggling to find adequate means of support.⁵³ Some of the survivors from this nonprofit sector grew stronger in the 1930s but served nevertheless as a reminder, with their distinctive public service missions, of the massive economic and political dominance of commercial broadcasting in the United States.

Before World War II, this way of organizing broadcasting was unusual but not unique. Some Latin American nations—Bolivia and Chile, for example—followed this predominantly commercial path, with U.S. encouragement.⁵⁴ It was true that almost all of Europe—every nation except Luxembourg—had some form of state involvement in broadcasting. The Netherlands was a partial exception; it had only nonprofit broadcasting, but no state funding for the several broadcasters, which represented Protestant, Catholic, and socialist constituencies, and then AVRO, the general or nonpartisan broadcaster.⁵⁵ In some countries, the national broadcaster held a monopoly of radio: the BBC in Britain was the most well known example in the United States, but Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union and Iceland also had state broadcasting monopolies. Fascist and communist regimes demonstrated the propaganda potential of the new medium in the hands of partisan state broadcasters. But in much of the world, as in the region, national governments took a more indirect role in broadcasting through the creation of a publicly funded national broadcaster—again, the BBC was the most prominent model—or through licensing a dominant or monopoly non-state broadcaster, as in Turkey, Norway, Estonia and Rumania.⁵⁶

The assertion that the commercial “American system” was the only form of broadcasting befitting a free people could thus be sustained only by a highly selective glance at the rest of the world. In nearby Canada, as well as in distant Australia, South Africa, and France, there were mixed systems, in which the national public broadcaster sat alongside commercial broadcasters. Mixed systems flourished in many nations, large and small—including Ireland, Norway, Poland, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay. American broadcasters invoked the state monopolies in the fascist and communist nations on the one hand, and went out of their way to discredit the BBC on the other, as the one high-status and potentially appealing state monopoly. About mixed systems they were silent, or even mendacious. The United States, CBS president William S. Paley proclaimed in

53. See S. E. Frost Jr., *Education's Own Stations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937): 4–5.

54. See James Schwoch, *The American Radio Industry and Its Latin American Activities 1900–1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

55. J. C. H. Blom and Emiel Lamberts (eds.), *History of the Low Countries* (Providence, RI: Berghahn, 1999): 430.

56. Armstrong Perry, “Radio Broadcasting in Europe,” *Education by Radio* (February 1932), reprinted in Buehler (ed.), *American vs. British System of Radio Control*: 115–30.