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Reviews of *Radio's Hidden Voice:
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Richard Slotten and *The NBC
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M. Benjamin

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Since Erik Barnouw published his three-part history of broadcasting a number of books have re-examined the early days of radio in the United States. Susan Douglas' *Inventing American Broadcasting: 1899-1922* (1987) looks at the earliest days of the technology that led to the 'invention' of radio, up to the point where the medium was poised to launch in any number of ways. Michele Hilmes picks up where Douglas left off in her book *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (1997), examining the formation of broadcast networks, stars, audiences and programming. From these important macro-investigations emerged another generation of radio scholars, intent on examining the micro-historical moments in radio—authors like Tona J. Hangen, Derek Vaillant and Kristen Haring, who

Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March 2010): pg. 147-149. [DOI](#). This article is © Taylor & Francis (Routledge) and permission has been granted for this version to appear in e-Publications@Marquette. Taylor & Francis (Routledge) does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Taylor & Francis (Routledge).

investigate radio's intersection with religion, progressivism, and amateur operators, respectively.

Hugh Slotten and Louise Benjamin's new books add to this impressive pool of historical inquiries by offering in-depth examinations of specific moments and themes in radio's past. Slotten used extensive archival research at universities across the United States to write *Radio's Hidden Voice*, which 'examines the origins of alternative constructions of radio based especially on a commitment to providing noncommercial service with diverse forms of programming not merely meant to entertain but also to educate, inform, enlighten and uplift local citizens' (p. 2). To this end, Slotten examines a number of university radio stations from their inception in the early 1920s through the many changes that affected them over the next few decades: the formation of the FRC, and later FCC, the Depression, World War II, shifting political attitudes and the commercialisation of the airwaves.

The title of Slotten's book speaks for itself in naming the scope and purpose of his study. The 'hidden voice' here is heard in the educational and public service radio stations that thrived in the United States, before and alongside commercial broadcasting, primarily in the 1920s through the 1940s. Slotten brings back to life the vivid and complicated debates over what course broadcasting would follow in the United States, emphasising the increasingly powerful commercial interests that triumphed over the calls for educational and/or uplifting programming.

Slotten divides the book up into seven chapters, separately parsing out the rise (and, later, 'shift' to public broadcasting) of educational radio in the US. Though each chapter is concerned with a specific sub-topic within the overall theme of university radio stations and programming content, the approach succeeds in providing a cohesive historical narrative. The first two chapters examine the pre-radio years into the 1920s—the decade in which radio communication emerged as a viable medium—at which point the small number of frequencies available were increasingly contested, by universities, interested individuals, community groups, businesses and all levels of the government. At issue between these factions were competing ideas of what radio should or would become in the coming years, and

how each group could best exploit the airwaves to serve its own agenda. Chapters Three and Four examine the changes brought about by the passage of the Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934. Chapters Five and Six explore the desire for broadcasting reforms during the 1930s, specifically concerning the creation of an alternative system by which educational and public service stations might continue to flourish alongside the commercial networks. Chapter Seven looks closely at the trajectory of one program, the *University of Chicago Round Table*, to discuss the pressures and realities of public interest broadcasting on a commercial station.

As noted above, Slotten performed substantial archival research in order to construct *Radio's Hidden Voice*. He manages to situate the book within much of the existing radio scholarship, with repeated references and allusions to earlier books by Susan Douglas, Michele Hilmes and Robert W. McChesney. The book addresses a gap in radio studies concerning the number of stations and people working to bring educational and uplifting programming to radio in its early days. In this regard, *Radio's Hidden Voice* begins to answer ongoing questions about the parallel development of educational radio alongside and within the thriving U.S. broadcasting industry in the 1920s and 1930s.

While Slotten's inquiry focuses on a number of university stations, Benjamin's study of the NBC Advisory Council examines a different but coexisting small piece of early radio as a window into much larger regulatory decisions: the earliest days of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the emergence of network broadcasting. Out of this business conglomeration came the idea to create the Advisory Council, which was formed in 1926 and formally disbanded in 1945.

Benjamin writes that the council's dual purpose was 'to advise NBC in its early years on programming and to deflect allegations of monopoly and censorship in the network's formation' (p. 120). Accordingly, the council was created in order to oversee issues that Owen Young at NBC and David Sarnoff at RCA assumed would arise in the newly emerging marriage of big business and radio broadcasting. Made up of prominent jurists, teachers and businessmen, the carefully politically and religiously balanced committee reviewed programming

and regulatory issues and offered NBC its collective opinions on these matters.

After introducing the Advisory Council and the events that led up to its formation, Benjamin divides the remaining chapters into issues that the Council addressed. In Chapter Three, 'Sustaining Program Development', she details the creation of the radio programs *The National Farm and Home Hour* and *Music Appreciation Hour*, both of which enjoyed large audiences in the 1920s through the 1940s. These were both considered sustaining programs, which as Benjamin writes, 'were those shows developed and aired by the networks or stations themselves and for which the broadcaster received no revenue' (p. 9). At issue with sustaining programming were concerns about the content of the programs, the audience, and money, as the network absorbed the cost of these types of programs.

Since the very purpose of the Advisory Council was to help 'NBC plan programs in the public interest', it was asked to weigh in on a number of controversial programming issues. In Chapters Four, Five and Six, Benjamin describes a number of issues brought to the council, regarding the broadcasting of religious programs, birth control information and political advertisements and speeches. She subtly makes the case that the Council's decisions continue to inform the way that these contentious issues are dealt with today. She wraps up the Council's work in Chapter Seven, discussing a few additional issues that it addressed. However, by the early 1940s, much of the work the Council was asked to do in its early days had been accomplished, and thus, as Benjamin writes, Owen Young formally disbanded the group in 1945, which had by this point 'outlived its usefulness' (p. 112).

The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, like Slotten's book, is another informative addition to the growing field of radio studies. Though she takes a narrower focus, Benjamin explores another crucial moment in radio history that, long after its demise, continues to have a marked influence on broadcasting. In this relatively slim volume, Benjamin covers the key issues of her subject; hopefully her work will provide the foundation for further contextualisation of NBC's role in radio broadcasting, including a more thorough investigation of the important distinctions between sustaining

and sponsored programs, and particularly, the division between the NBC Red and Blue networks.

Each of these well-researched books makes a substantial contribution to the existing historical scholarship on American radio and should be appreciated by specialists in the discipline as well as for anyone interested in this period of American history.