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## Book Review of *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public*

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# Finding the Audience in Early American Radio

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What do boxing matches, the growth of network radio programming, tensions between quantitative and qualitative analyses of audiences, and the rise of the local radio DJ have in common? According to Elena Razlogova, they all show how early radio listeners' expectations shaped the way individuals navigated, consumed, and interacted with the burgeoning medium in the first decades of the 20th century (2). Such is the focus of the main chapters of *The Listener's Voice*, and indeed of the book as a whole. It thoughtfully examines "the moral economy that Americans imagined for themselves and for the nation," which Razlogova defines as "a set of uncoded but effective assumptions as to what was and was not legitimate in the relationship between the [radio] industry and its audiences" (4). Absent a set of principles to guide the rapidly evolving relationship between radio and its audiences, many listeners, she claims, adopted a "participatory ethic" (5). This ethic helped to define the medium in its earliest (and arguably most experimental) days as the relationship between radio producers and audiences shifted with regard to new industrial and technological developments. Razlogova's historical research effectively nuances simplistic understandings of audiences and their interactive listening practices, proving a key example of the type of scholarly work possible within radio studies.

Media and cultural studies scholars have long used creative methodologies and inferential evidence in an effort to piece together voices representative of, or at least standing in for, "the audience"—a vast, nearly unidentifiable contingent that cannot be easily personified. To wit, Razlogova locates the participatory nature of early radio listeners in the traces left behind in nine radio fan magazines, to which she turned in the hope of uncovering the voices and opinions of audience members throughout the United States. In addition, she visited seventeen archival collections where she read "thousands of fan letters," to account for "ordinary people's own writings to radio producers" (6-10). Together, her analysis of these materials recreate a sense of a vibrant time in radio's past in which the audience held significant sway over the radio networks, and the possibilities for radio's future seemed to hinge directly on listeners' wants and needs.

At the heart of this book is the acknowledgement of the often overlooked "reciprocity between speakers and listeners" on broadcast radio, which has tended to be imagined as a mostly one-way communications medium (10). In terms of the growing popularity of boxing matches, for example, radio listeners were able to participate aurally in social spaces previously restricted by race, class, or gender. These matches fell on one side of what Razlogova describes as a "distinctive" mode of listening—"emotional, public, noisy, and populist," designed a "shared" listening experience between listeners and participants (23). Moreover, radio audiences sought creative ways to "make sense" of the "impersonal system" of network broadcasting, specifically the airing of shows intended to draw large, national audiences, as opposed to local programming. Audiences accomplished this by being "active" and sharing forceful opinions about their taste preferences. In her analysis of fan letters to stations and producers, Razlogova shows how audience members guided, and sometimes even dictated, radio advertising and the narrative content of specific shows: "sponsors and ad agencies summarized fan mail...and forwarded it to radio writers to help them develop characters and storylines" (69).

Though this historical analysis highlights the power that listeners had and how they were able to communicate their tastes through network radio, Razlogova also points to the ways that individual listeners' voices were displaced by the growing use of quantitative audience studies. Central to Chapter Five, "Measuring

Culture," is research produced by Theodore Adorno as part of the Princeton Radio Research Project, where he suggested alternative, qualitative models for understanding radio audiences. Adorno questioned the utility of social science audience inquiries based on "ratings and marketing surveys," which, he suggested, failed to account for complicating factors such as audience intelligence, social structures, and political power (99- 107). And, as Razlogova shows, the industry opted to embrace the "electronic measurements" calculated by machines that simplistically recorded listeners' likes and dislikes (105). This changing model was perhaps symptomatic of the larger movement from "populist" radio to a "corporate" model, governed by scientific assessments rather than more grassroots listener response.

Network radio achieved dominance by the end of the 1920s and thrived throughout the 1930s. By the 1940s, Razlogova observes, local programming found new ways to thrive as audience tastes shifted. In Chapter Seven, "Vox Jox," she describes how local DJs began to experiment with music programming—in particular, rhythm and blues—to provide listeners with new, locally-inspired variety. Listeners again were moved to contact stations and have "a say in what music would go on the air," creating a particular relationship between local radio stations, listeners, and the figure of the DJ, which significantly returned radio to the "intimacy" of the pre- network days (133-34). Though this practice led to different ways of standardizing music on radio, according to Razlogova, it also helped radio re-define the ways that it was able to connect with its local audiences.

Razlogova's *The Listener's Voice* accomplishes several noteworthy goals. For one, it complicates the notion of network radio's indifference to its audience by bringing to life key historical moments in which varying degrees of audience-radio-producer interaction prevailed. Moreover, Razlogova effectively articulates how so-called "participatory culture" existed long before the Internet. In many ways, this book reminds readers of the interconnections between "old" new media and "new" new media, and how in-depth research into "old" new media illuminates strikingly similar moments of experimentation between technologies and their users. As Razlogova describes it, her analysis of radio's past "calls attention to the recurring cycles of popular participation and corporate control in modern media" (5). In

turn, this should remind readers interested in radio history, and in the history of media more broadly, of the oft-repeated cycles and shifts in the power dynamics between listeners and producers—dynamics that are particularly contingent on the fluctuating amount of programming choices. For cultural studies scholars, Razlogova's insightful new book illustrates the rich history of the interactivity between media and their users. Whether as in introduction to cultural radio history or as further reading in the field, Razlogova's book addresses new scholarly inquiries while also pointing towards the historical work that remains.

## About the Authors

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