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## Review of Kristen Haring's *Ham Radio's Technical Culture*

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## Ham Radio's Technical Culture

**Author:** Kristen Haring

**Publisher:** Cambridge, MA: [MIT Press](#), 2006

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Review by Amanda R. Keeler

A small but growing number of scholars in the past several years have turned their attention to the history of radio. Building on seminal work by scholars like Eric Barnouw, Susan Douglas, and Michele Hilmes, several books have emerged that explore the social and cultural history of radio in the United States from a number of different foci. In her new monograph, *Ham Radio's Technical Culture*, Kristen Haring provides a new analysis into an often over-looked area of radio history, ham radio, from its origins in the 1910s through its continued popularity into the present.

How exactly did amateur radio take on the name "ham radio"? Though the answer to this detail remains elusive even to the author, this does not stop Haring from crafting an insightful exploration into the "technical hobby" of ham radio. At the heart of her investigation are questions pertaining to the status of the amateur operator, the evolution of the hobby, and its related technology, over time, and types of people who populated the amateur airwaves.

As with most historical work on a fleeting medium like radio, much of what transpired, either through voice transmissions or through Morse code communication, lived only in the moment it was released into the ether. Instead of speculating on what may or may not have passed between individuals in contact with one another, Haring uses the traces of what has been left behind: amateur radio club newsletters, technical handbooks, hobby magazines, photographs, and confirmation postcards. Through each of these elements, Haring is able to re-construct the goings-on of ham radio enthusiasts over the course of much of the twentieth century. Haring uses these written records in a number of ways to illustrate that ham radio went far beyond the airwaves and left an indelible mark on the world around it, preserved in these discursive traces.

Haring's historical analysis is divided up into seven chapters. In Chapter 1 she situates her work on ham radio, which she deems a "technology study," alongside scholars like Lisa Gitelman and Carolyn Marvin, whose works explore the emergence of media technologies and the "identity crisis," to use Gitelman's terminology, the twisting and unpredictable space when and where a new technology is introduced and absorbed into a cultural environment. Haring's technology study is more broad in *Ham Radio*, looking at the technology not only in its infancy but as it transformed over time, though seemingly always in "crisis" within the larger historical context.

Chapter 2, "The Culture of Ham Radio," focuses on just that, the particulars of the technology as it emerged. Here Haring discusses the codes of behavior that ham operators created amongst themselves, one of mutual respect, obedience to the law, and internal rule policing. Here she also concentrates on one of her main arguments, concerning the "masculinization" of ham radio. By this she means not only that men outnumbered women as amateur radio operators -- a ratio of 19 men to 1 woman, by her numbers -- but also the environment created by amateur operators, and the ways the discourse in

newspapers, advertisements and club newsletters constructed a male ham operator.

The dilemma, "to build or to buy," takes up much of Chapter 3. This was the fierce battle over the basic tenets and philosophy of the ham radio enthusiast. As Haring discusses, the very nature of the amateur radio existence depended largely on the explicit do-it-yourself mentality. In later years, when the internal hardware became more complicated, with the introduction of transistors, and affordable radio kits emerged for sale, much of what defined ham radio had to be reconsidered by enthusiasts and businesses alike.

Chapter 4 explores the links between the hobby-oriented amateur operator and the electrical professional who gained employment from technical skills gleaned from his technical hobby. Here Haring examines the redefinition that hams negotiated as technological discourses took over the public's imagination in the "electronic age," particularly in regards to the space program.

In "Ham Radio Embattled," the fifth chapter of Haring's book, she describes the precarious relationship amateur operators had within the context of Cold War America. Within the technological, social, cultural, and economic changes that occurred in the mid-twentieth century in the United States, ham radio needed to find a way to re-define what it was, and what it was not. Within this redefinition, Haring writes, hams were forced to pre-emptively promote how amateur radio benefited local communication efforts in an effort to allow ham radio broadcasts throughout the Cold War.

Taking its cue from Lynn Spigel's influential *Make Room For TV*, in which Spigel explores the ways in which Americans accepted television into their hearts and homes in its first decade, in Chapter 6 Haring explores the space and place of the radio shack in the physical and emotional space of the family home. Much of what emerges from this chapter, as in Chapter 2, is more discourse on the war between the sexes, specifically, the female space of the family home, in disarray and threatened by the male space of ham radio equipment.

In the final chapter, Chapter 7, Haring closes the book with a discussion of the changing technologies that power electronics, from the move from vacuum tubes to integrated circuits, to the introduction and subsequent popularity of Citizen's Band Radio Service (CB), and the ramifications that these technologies had on the continued popularity of ham radio. Though it would seem that much of what attracted people to ham radio throughout the twentieth century has been displaced by the Internet and other, newer, more accessible forms of communication, as Haring describes it, the Internet, in fact, is the forum that continues to keep the ham radio tradition alive.

What this book succeeds in doing is providing an insightful historical exploration into the emergence and continued viability of ham radio over the course of the past eight decades. This book is at its best when it is delving into the particulars of the Ham radio culture, particularly its exploration of the "masculinization" of the discourse surrounding the technology. As well, the depth and breadth of the resources she explores helps paint a full picture of the fervor many felt towards amateur radio. As a side note, I found the confirmation postcards, which hams used to send to one another as a physical, lasting note of conversations via radio waves, to be the most fascinating artifact of this entire phenomenon. As a radio historian, I am always pleased to see the physical remainders of a once vivid technology that

most people have long forgotten.

Kristen Haring's *Ham Radio's Technical Culture* has begun the exploration into ham radio, an area of radio that will hopefully continue to yield informative scholarly work in the coming years.

**Amanda R. Keeler:**

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