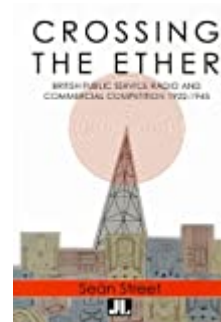


Sean Street. *Crossing the Ether: British Public Service Radio and Commercial Competition 1922-1945.* Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2006. 296 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86196-668-4.



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Published on Jhistory (May, 2008)

Beyond the BBC

In discussions of early American radio, the British Broadcasting Corporation has long served as the reliable counter-example. According to standard media histories, the early American industry exemplified the overtly commercial approach to radio, with the airwaves dominated by advertising while the British industry was controlled by a government-sanctioned monopoly that sought to educate and uplift listeners without the taint of commercialism.

Sean Street, a professor of radio and director of a broadcast history center at Bournemouth University, complicates this accepted narrative with a wonderfully researched book that documents the wealth of commercial radio programming available in the United Kingdom before World War II. The BBC explicitly avoided such fare, though stations in a number of European countries broadcast English-language advertisements specifically for the benefit of British listeners. Street argues that this commercial competition, though initially dismissed by the BBC, eventually lead to significant changes within the corporation, including the adoption of sophisticated audience measurement techniques, innovations

in recording technology, and, perhaps most importantly, a greater diversity in program content. Two decades after World War II, the BBC responded to competition from offshore pirate radio stations by loosening its monopoly and allowing independent radio stations. Streets covers this later period in the final chapter of the book, arguing that the reorganization of the British radio industry in the 1970s should be viewed within a larger context. A complete history of British radio, according to Street, is not simply a history of the BBC but must include the commercial competition that spurred changes and innovations throughout the twentieth century.

The primary period of interest for this book is the decade of the 1930s. Though there were commercial programs aimed at British listeners before this time (including a 1925 program sponsored by Selfridge's department store transmitted from the Eiffel Tower), the creation of the International Broadcasting Company (IBC) in 1931 was a significant moment for British commercial radio. The IBC was the brainchild of Leonard Plugge, an entrepreneur and central figure in Street's history. Plugge bought airtime from various European radio sta-

tions whose signal could be heard in Britain, then found advertisers willing to purchase this time. A small industry developed around such activities, and the American J. Walter Thompson advertising agency worked with the IBC and others to help British companies circumvent the BBC's prohibition on radio advertising. These European ventures were aided immensely by the BBC's Sunday programming, or rather, lack thereof. The BBC was silent for much of the day, offering only serious religious talks and solemn music when it was on the air. The freewheeling commercial broadcasters filled the void and found positive response for programs of popular music.

These commercial stations reached their peak in the second half of the 1930s, a few years after commercialization had taken over the American radio industry. British companies interested in sponsoring radio programs used American methods and guidance, particularly when it came to audience measurement techniques. Advertisers needed a reliable estimate as to the size of the audience, a situation that the BBC did not face. Consequently, the commercial broadcasters picked up social scientific approaches to audience measurement before the BBC. Similarly, the production requirements of these European stations encouraged them to experiment with the latest innovations in recording technology. Performers would be recorded in London, with the resulting discs shipped across the channel to be transmitted back to British listeners.

While these commercial stations, particularly the two most famous, Radio Normandy and Radio Luxemburg, have been noted in previous histories, no one has presented such a complete picture. Complete is indeed the correct word as it appears that Street has availed himself of every conceivable resource, including the archives of the BBC and the J. Walter Thompson agency, prior scholarship, written recollections of listeners, and a number of personal interviews. Following the main body of the book (211 pages), there are a number of appendices that provide additional information on the European commercial stations, French radio history, listeners' recollections, and changes within the BBC. The CD that accompanies the book is a valuable resource, with twelve tracks that provide a glimpse of 1930s radio. Of particular interest is a 1938 presentation from the J. Walter Thompson agency that explains which type of program is most ac-

ceptable for which listener at which time of day. Street has indeed done a service for the study of British radio with the presentation of so much material (though the volume of details and lengthy footnotes could be intimidating to a casual reader or non-specialist).

References to the American radio industry are numerous throughout the book, not surprising given that British advertisers and radio programmers were keenly aware of events on the other side of the Atlantic. But, while Street is busy muddying the conventional version of British radio history, he inadvertently supports the conventional version of American radio history; namely, that AT&T "invented" the concept of commercial broadcasting. We get, for example, a discussion as to the date of the "first" commercial on American radio (pp. 77-78) that aired on station WEA. The argument that AT&T invented this concept can be attributed to the first generation of radio historians who favored corporations and big business, though as Cliff Doerkson illustrated in *American Babel* (2005), there were other stations that offered airtime to other businesses prior to WEA.

Regarding the inspirational role of commercialism within British radio, Street could perhaps have done more to interrogate this particular claim. Street, for example, often cites Susan Smulyan's work *Selling Radio* (1994), on the growth of advertising in American radio, though this particular work is as much a harsh critique of the system as it is a historical narrative.

For Street, the forces of commercialism brought innovation and diversity to British radio, providing enjoyable fare for the working classes as opposed to the highbrow, restrictive paternalism of the BBC. While there indeed may be support for some of Street's particular claims, the book at times comes across as a one-sided defense of the commercial system. Having a government-sanctioned monopoly provide all of a nation's radio programming may not be the most effective system for a democracy, though it is hard to imagine that a system in which the sponsor is the final word would really be preferable.

Putting aside the book's minor weaknesses, Street has authored an informative and enlightening history of a previously overlooked topic. Those scholars interested in media history, advertising, or popular culture will no doubt find something of interest within.

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Citation: Noah Arceneaux. Review of Street, Sean, *Crossing the Ether: British Public Service Radio and Commercial Competition 1922-1945*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

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