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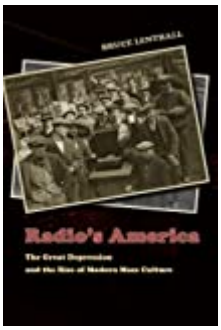

Bruce Lenthall. *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. x + 261 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-47191-4; $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-47192-1.

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A Well-Researched Rerun

For a great many academics, and for much of the public as well, the history of American culture over the past two centuries can be neatly summarized into a narrative of standardization and homogenization. According to this oft-told tale, a nation of independent, self-reliant producers has been transformed into a nation of passive consumers who gobble up mass-produced entertainment spectacles and news programs that are created by distant media conglomerates with little or no relation to local communities.

Bruce Lenthall, an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania, would agree to a certain degree with the previous (if intentionally exaggerated) statement, situating the grand moment of transformation in the 1930s. It was within this decade, according to Lenthall, that the impersonal relations of the industrialized marketplace subsumed the romanticized *gemeinschaft* of the American past. Radio, as the first electronic form of mass media, represented this cultural transition and was simultaneously the vehicle that brought the elements of this mass culture directly into Americanâs living rooms. The fact that radio went from something of an expensive novelty in the 1920s to a truly mainstream media device during this decade is central to Lenthallâs justification for examining this tumultuous period. Lenthall is not advocating an Adorno-like version of cultural hegemony, however, as he continuously argues in this well-researched, wide-reaching synthesis of radio history that audience members found their own ways to incorporate the medium into their daily lives to help them make sense of the rapid changes brought about by the twentieth century: âListeners were not simply manipulated by their mass culture, but found limited possibilities to negotiate with itâ (p. 55).

But, if the âgrand homogenizationâ narrative is not new, the narrative of the active audience is almost equally familiar. Lizbeth Cohenâs famed *Making a New Deal* (1990) presented a similar argument almost twenty years ago regarding the radio ownership among working-class immigrants in Chicago. Kathy Newmanâs *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935-1947* (2004) articulated an even more strenuous, and

provocative, version of this argument–that the growth of commercialized radio during radioâs first decades empowered listeners to become consumer advocates in later years.

The âactive audienceâ is indeed not a new thesis, and Lenthallâs work is an attempt to meld this theoretical concept into the historiography of early radio. For scholars of a contemporary media phenomenon, direct firsthand ethnographic observation is available and living audience members can (whether accurately or not) explain to the academic the howâs and whyâs of their media usage. Surveying audience behavior several decades after the fact, by comparison, is admittedly an arduous task, and Lenthall mines letters from radio listeners for evidence of his argument. Various letters written to the program *Vox Pop* inform much of the analysis in chapter 2 (one of the most central sections in the whole book), though one cannot help but wonder if Lenthall has not overstated his claims. Do letters in support of program, or in protest of an advertisement, really speak to universal truths about the American response to the growth of mass culture?

This critique is not to dismiss the work, but too much of the argument falls back on asserting a claim rather than illustrating its truth. Statements about audience members ânegotiatingâ mass culture, or using the medium to âpersonalizeâ its influence are repeated throughout the text as Lenthall presents a greatest-hits approach to 1930s radio history. No one can fault him for not doing his homework, and for those not already familiar with the existing literature on the era, the work will no doubt point the way for much further reading. The book discusses, among other topics, the criticisms of commercial radio from the cultural elites, FDRâs use of radio for political purposes, Father Charles Coughlinâs fascist rants, Dr. John Brinkleyâs medical quackery, the esteemed radio productions of Norman Corwin and Arch Oboler, and the origins of media research from the dueling figures of Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno.

By contrast, we get much less information regarding the institutional history of the medium during this period, the governmentâs philosophy of regulation, or details regarding radio programming itself (save for the high-brow material of Oboler, Corwin, etc.) In an endnote (p. 216), Lenthall faults previous scholars for devoting too much emphasis to these subjects, as if the meanings that radio brought to the audience could be interpreted or assumed from these standard approaches to radio history. This work, by contrast, seeks to understand âwhat radio actually meant to those who experienced the mediumâ (p. 216), though as previously noted, evidence to this effect is more a matter of speculation than empiricism.

The endnotes to the book (the work is sadly lacking a proper bibliography) are a fairly comprehensive survey of American cultural and media history. Lenthall has also made use of several archives in his quest for new material, including the files of the FCC, the Library of American Broadcasting, the NBC Papers held by the Historical Society of Wisconsin, and the RCA Papers at the Hagley Museum in Wilmington, Delaware. But, like a remarkably polished cover band that knows every Top 40 pop song, or a chef who has access to every conceivable ingredient, Lenthall knows his material inside and out but fails to synthesize the raw ingredients into something that is truly new or refreshing.

The hyperbolic prose on the back of the book claims that it is written for a broad audience, and those who are not familiar with radio or media history in general will no doubt find something of interest. The work, or least specific chapters, may also be relevant for graduate students. Serious radio scholars or historians of this period in American history will find themselves wishing for more.

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