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Ari Y. Kelman. *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio in the United States.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 304 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25573-9.

Reviewed by Noah Arceneaux

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Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker (Salve Regina University)

Yiddish Radio, Narrowly Defined

At the outset of any new project, a researcher must make the methodological choice between depth or breadth. Does one focus intently upon a particular phenomenon, defined as narrowly as possible, or does one cast the net over a wide terrain, seeking to show how this particular subject operates within some broader context?

Building from a 2003 dissertation on the history of Yiddish radio, Ari Kelman made the choice (deliberate or not) to go for depth. To achieve this goal, he mined a variety of resources, including newspaper and trade journal articles (in both Yiddish and English), personal memoirs, recordings, government documents, and fan letters. Kelman seeks not only to document what was aired on Yiddish-language radio programs, but more importantly, how these programs functioned within the American Jewish experience. To this end, Kelman argues that Yiddish programs helped American Jews define the boundaries of their community, even within a commercialized communications medium that was said to have a homogenizing effect. The mingling of English and Yiddish on such programs (which became more common as the years passed), did play a role in assimilating eastern European Jews, but not as deliberately as government regulators may have hoped.

The first Yiddish-language programs developed in the mid-1920s and became common in the following decade (along with programs in a variety of non-English languages). Saturdays were the low point of the week, as observant Jews refrained from using electricity (and thus the radio). Sundays, by contrast, were the high point, since many English-language programs on other stations were of a Christian nature or otherwise devoted to serious matters.

Nearly all of the programs were devoted to music, including translations of popular English-language tunes. Also popular were advice programs, foreshadowing such modern fare as *Oprah* or *Dr. Phil*, while a series of âRabbi-judgeâ shows foreshadowed the current proliferation of courtroom-reality shows. Yiddish programming was most common in the Northeast and Chicago, with New York City the unquestionable center of the

phenomenon. New York station WEVD is referenced so often that it could have been justifiably named in the bookâs subtitle.

While many listeners enjoyed Yiddish programming, those responsible for bringing the material to the airwaves did not hold it in high regard. Some writers even refrained from using their real names lest they taint their reputations. Performers likewise viewed these programs as mere stepping stones towards bigger opportunities, or as promotions for stage performances. Even WEVD, the protagonist of this narrative, relegated this programming to its heavily commercialized daytime hours, airing more polished English-language shows in the evening.

During the early years of radio, excessive advertising was disdained by regulators, though small stations relied on the sponsorship of local businesses to stay afloat. This situation produced a conundrum for Yiddish programs: was an advertisement from a local kosher butcher simply a commercial or a valuable service to the community? Where regulators may have heard excessive commercialism, supporters of the community heard important cultural messages.

The amount of Yiddish heard over American airwaves declined during World War II, as did all non-English language programming. A handful of programs survived into the 1970s, though the phenomenon that Kelman documents (or at least the aspect of the phenomenon that he is most passionate about) peaked in the 1930s.

Unfortunately, the decision to go for depth instead of breadth diminishes the quality of the work, as we do not gain enough contextual information to fully understand the phenomenon of Yiddish radio. More information could have been included, for example, about the status of Jews in America during these decades, or about larger changes within the radio industry (beyond the acknowledgement that the rise of television encouraged stations to play more records).

But beyond the lack of contextual information (a charge that could admittedly be leveled against almost any historical work), a more significant weakness is the failure to fully explore relevant academic scholarship. To provide the general history of radio, for example, Kelman relied upon a handful of key works, ignoring a great many books and articles that explore closely related phenomena, including the animosity towards foreign-language programming, government efforts to control such broadcasts during World War II, and listenersâ ambivalent reactions to the growth of radio advertising.

And, while no previous scholar has studied Yiddish radio in such detail, previous scholars have indeed studied the use of mass media by minority populations in the United States. Scholars have studied, among other topics, the relationship between African Americans and radio, the growth of Spanish-language programming, and the role of radio stations on Native American reservations. Stepping outside the confines of radio history, other scholars have studied diasporic communities around the globe and their use of media.

This critique is not to suggest that Kelman should have looked at all of this related scholarship, but surely at least some of it is relevant, given that these works explore the same theoretical issues. Is the history of Yiddish radio so unique that it shares nothing in common with these other related phenomena? And if it does indeed differ, how so and in what ways?

As it stands, Kelman has produced what is likely to be the definitive work on Yiddish radio, though the fact that it fails to incorporate or respond to so much existing literature limits its value to those who are not already interested in radio and/or Jewish history.