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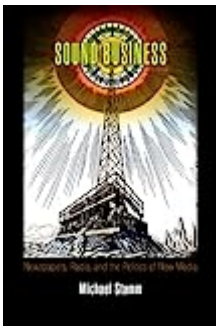

Michael Stamm. *Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. viii + 256 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4311-6.

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Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media

As someone with an interest in broadcast journalism, I was very pleased to read Michael Stammâs new book. The bookâs description is correct in stating that the role newspapers played in radioâs growth and development has long been neglected by researchers, and Stamm has done some excellent work in rectifying this omission. He tells a story that begins in the 1920s, yet could apply to our own day: an older technology (in this case, newspapers) and a newer one (radio), each wanting to maintain influence and power, each fearing the new one will ultimately steal away their fans. Yet each comes to realize that the other can benefit them in some ways.

Stamm begins with the first American newspaper to own a radio station–the *Detroit News* in 1920–and then traces how a number of other newspapers came to embrace radio, too, although few relationships were as successful as that of the *News*, which continued to own its station for nearly seventy years. In the 1920s, newspaper owners presented themselves as the best people to operate a radio station: they could offer a stable business, a proven record of community service, and the ability to provide a high standard of programming. But just as we see today with discussions about media consolidation, there were some who questioned whether it was a good idea to have many newspaper owners also running radio stations; the potential for them to become overly influential and shape public opinion was a very real concern. Stamm tells how the owners lobbied and went to great lengths to persuade the government to give them more stations, and how strong opposing voices emerged, led by attorney Morris Ernst, an early member of the American Civil Liberties Union and a proponent of government regulation that would prevent monopolies of ownership in broadcasting. While media scholars like Michele Hilmes and Robert McChesney have also analyzed this period, by focusing on the smaller independent stations versus large broadcasting companies like the Radio Corporation of America and Westinghouse, Stamm introduces some new players–newspaper owners–and elaborates on their efforts to carve out a niche of their own in radio.

There are many other stories to tell, and Stamm tells them in a very readable manner. He discusses the pe-

riod of cooperation between newspapers and the radio networks in the early 1930s, and also looks at how the relationship frayed and led to the Press-Radio War. He delves into the role of politics, noting that many newspaper publishers were Republicans who disliked President Roosevelt and opposed the New Deal. This further complicated the relationship between newspapers and broadcasting, since the publishers believed Roosevelt preferred communicating by radio. And given Rooseveltâs perception that newspapers were hostile to him, it is not surprising that some members of his administration were vocal in their opposition to newspapers owning radio stations. It is also not surprising that many newspaper editorial pages became even more anti-Roosevelt as a result. By 1934, there was also a new agency in the mix, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC, which succeeded the Federal Radio Commission). Newspaper owners and broadcasters watched warily to see whose side the FCC would take in pending decisions.

Stamm does an excellent job discussing the various conflicts and debates over FCC policies, as well as shedding more light on the influential role played by FCC chairman James Lawrence Fly, a man who opposed monopolies of ownership and who believed radio should remain objective and unbiased in the information it presented. But some newspaper publishers felt Fly had a bias of his own–a prejudice against the newspapers. Not willing to accept what they felt was Flyâs bad attitude, some of them actively confronted him, in print and in person. Meanwhile, Chairman Fly held hearings about what he believed to be âthe threats posed by newspaper ownership of radioâ (p. 119) and he even summoned respected academics and business executives to get their viewpoints. The debate at times devolved into soap opera, but at other times, it raised very serious questions about the meaning of freedom of speech and freedom of the press in this new media age, whether broadcasting should be subjected to government oversight to make sure it was sufficiently objective, and whether newspaper publishers were capable of running a radio station that delivered information fairly.

Among the other issues in *Sound Business* is the question of who should be allowed to own a station. For example, Stamm discusses one case involving liberals versus conservatives: The *New York Daily News*, then perceived as a right-wing newspaper (owned by the News Syndicate Company, a subsidiary of the very conservative *Chicago Tribune*) wanted to acquire one of the new FM licenses in 1946. Many New York liberals were dismayed and wanted the FCC to deny the *Daily News* a license, on the grounds that the paper had a reputation for yellow journalism, scandal-mongering, and anti-Semitism. Stamm also tells the story of another controversy- the license renewal of Baltimoreâs WBAL, owned by newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, another very influential but polarizing figure. Here too, some citizens wanted to deny Hearst his station on the grounds that he was not operating the station in the public interest and Baltimore would be better served by a local owner.

Stamm concludes his book by examining some of the issues that arose when television arrived. Despite current trends that have led to even more media consolidation than James Lawrence Fly could have imagined back in 1941, Stamm ends on a hopeful note. While recognizing that Internet journalism has become important in our modern world, he notes that it still has not found a way to pay for itself, and thus cannot sustain the kind of in-depth investigative journalism that the newspapers can. Therefore, he is convinced that newspapers will continue to play an important role in broadcasting, and also holds on to the possibility that âa more reformist FCC and an engaged citizenryâ may lead to a more, rather than a less, diverse media (p. 194). Whether we agree with his conclusions, Stamm does a commendable job of showing that this conversation is by no means new; it has been ongoing since the early days of radio, when utopian predictions by proponents stated that radio would conquer the world and make all other media obsolete. As it turned out, newspapers may be changing their delivery model, and some are in financial trouble, but they are far from obsolete.

But while this book has a lot to recommend it, there are also some puzzling aspects. At the risk of seeming like a nitpicker, I found several small historical errors, which are worth noting since Stamm has written a book that may also be used as a historical reference work. For one thing, he incorrectly calls the *Detroit News* station in 1920 and 1921, âWWJâ (p. 29). In 1920, the station was known as 8MK, and it was called WBL during much of 1921; it did not use the WWJ call letters until March 1922. Also small but worth noting is the authorâs incorrect assertion that the call letters of Buffalo radio station WKBW stood for âWell Known Bible Witnessâ (p. 43). However, this was actually a promotional slogan, created by the stationâs owner some time after the call letters had been received. Back in radioâs early days, the Department of Commerce handed out call letters in alphabetical order, unless owners specifically requested certain call letters, such as the initials of their name or their

business. The author is correct to note, for example, that WTMJ was a requested call which stood for *The Milwaukee Journal* (p. 32). But WKBW was not requested. It was part of an alphabetical block that included WKBY and WKBZ. It was a very common practice in early radio for owners to take the call letters sequentially assigned by the government and then apply a clever slogan–which is what seemed to occur with WKBW.

Finally, although the author discusses the Press-Radio War of the 1930s in detail, he does not mention an earlier skirmish, which occurred in 1922-23, when the Associated Press (AP) banned its member newspapers from doing anything that would help radio. A few newspapers seem to have defied the APâs edict, and the Hearst newspapers, which had their own competitive wire service, cooperated fully, providing news for Boston radio station WGI and other stations as early as February 1922. I realize the author could not include everything (his forty-five pages of endnotes demonstrate how impressive his research was), and his focus was primarily on newspapers that owned stations. But in radioâs formative decade, many newspapers that could not buy a station affiliated with one. It seems a missed opportunity not to discuss the love/hate relationship these newspapers had with the new mass medium: on the one hand, radio was their competitor, yet it also gave their reporters (and their newspaper) excellent publicity and turned certain print journalists into radio stars. I also wish the book had some historical photographs of some of the heroes and villains in the story. While I enjoyed the inclusion of historical cartoons, pictures of William Randolph Hearst, Morris Ernst, or James Lawrence Fly might have enhanced an already interesting story for students. That said, the author should be applauded for his love of media history and for his thorough exploration of the intersection of print and broadcast journalism. *Sound Business* is a worthwhile addition to any introductory course in broadcasting, journalism, or mass communication.

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