

# H-Net Reviews

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**Cynthia B. Meyers.** *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio.* Kent: Kent State University Press, 2013. Illustrations. ix + 391 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-5370-8; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-5371-5.



**Reviewed by** Anya Luscombe (University College Roosevelt)

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That advertising played an important role in the development of commercial US radio has long been known; the reason why the advertising industry became deeply involved in programming and the extent to which these advertising agencies both battled and cooperated with advertisers (sponsors) has been much lesser known. In *A Word from Our Sponsor*, Cynthia B. Meyers, a professor of media studies at the College of Mount St. Vincent, sets out to fill that gap and to revise how we view media industry history, especially ... the advertising industry's role in that history (p. 3). Meyers further aims to register all the complex and multifarious ways in which [advertising practitioners] represent themselves to one another and to their clients, and respond to technological, social and cultural changes (p. 4). These goals are certainly achieved in this book, particularly by drawing on extensive archive material, such as the J. Walter Thompson (JWT) papers at Duke University; partial records of other agencies, including Batten Barton Durstine & Osborn (BBDO), Benton & Bowles, Young & Rubicam, and N. W. Ayer; and correspondence among NBC and agency executives.

Meyer adopts a chronological structure in *A Word from Our Sponsor*. Chapter 1 briefly surveys the pre-broadcasting advertising industry and the rise of com-

mercial broadcasting from the 1920s to the late 1940s and analyzes key debates within the industry, including whether to adopt the Hard Sell (also known as "reason-why" advertising) or the Soft Sell, in addition to defining these fundamental techniques. Chapter 2 offers a good overview of the available literature on the development of commercial broadcasting in the United States in the 1920s, as radio became a cultural necessity, and explains the rise of networks to appeal to advertisers and the model of paying affiliates, which were successful to the extent that by the end of the 1920s, advertising industry revenues reached a record \$3.4 billion (pp. 42, 55). Chapter 3 articulates the reasons and the ways in which advertising agencies started supplying programs. Minutes from JWT staff meetings reveal the disquiet felt by many admen about how best to deal with the challenges of this new aural, evanescent medium. Chapter 4 uses archival records, particularly those of NBC, which, Meyer says, are the most easily available, to illustrate the frequent turf wars among the agencies, sponsors, and broadcasters over who should be in control of program content and scheduling.

Chapters 5 to 8 use case studies of agencies to examine different approaches to selling. The Hard Sell was employed by Blackett-Sample-Hummert, which special-

ized in soap operas. Young & Rubicam, which preferred to be involved in radio comedy shows (with stars like Jack Benny and Fed Allen) and which promoted commercials in which the sponsor's or product name were interwoven into the program text, preferred the Soft Sell. Institutional advertising to enhance corporate image was pursued by BBDO and Benton & Bowles. Finally, Meyers explores the strategy of associating celebrities with their clients' products, such as happened in JWT's musical variety show *Kraft Music Hall*, hosted by Bing Crosby. Chapter 8 also lays bare the tension between Hollywood and Madison Avenue. As Meyers notes, "condemned sometimes as 'showmen' in New York, admen were condemned as 'not showmen' in Hollywood" (p. 215). The case of *Kraft Music Hall* also exemplifies the lack of credit advertising agencies' writers received for their instrumental role in a program's success. Despite crafting the script each week, "creating and sharpening Bing Crosby's radio performances," JWT writer Carroll Carroll never received on-air credit; "because he was an advertising agency employee, he was precluded from making a public claim of authorship" (p. 224).

Chapter 9 also involves a case study of response from the advertising and commercial radio industries to the war, focusing on William B. Lewis who took a leave of absence from CBS to head the Radio Division of the Office of War Information to streamline propaganda on radio. Lewis created the Network Allocation Plan to get national networks to "integrate propaganda into existing entertainment" believing it was the best way to reach audiences and build morale (p. 239). As Meyer argues, World War II enabled the advertising and commercial radio industries to reach larger audiences and contribute to the war effort, American culture, and business. Chap-

ter 10 charts the peak and sudden decline of network radio by looking at the sharp criticism of sponsor control of radio programs, including the influence of the 1946 novel (and its ensuing 1947 film) *The Hucksters*. Other factors Meyers addresses include the erosion of network radio's dominance, the emergence of spot buying and syndicated programming, and the increasing popularity of television. Eventually, advertising agencies left program production and moved instead into buying interstitial minutes of airtime for their clients and producing TV commercials.

In the last three pages of the conclusion, Meyers considers the evolving relationship between advertising and new media. While it is understandable that the author hopes that readers make use of the historical perspectives presented in her work to understand changes affecting today's media, dedicating a mere three pages to such an aim seems unsatisfactory, and perhaps unnecessary. Other minor flaws in this otherwise excellent rendition of the fascinating interplay between the advertising and US radio industries detract slightly from the reading experience. The section titled the "Culture of the Advertising Industry" in chapter 1 feels rather repetitive and out of place there and would arguably be much better incorporated into the introduction. Indeed, information in many of the chapters feels repetitive. The well-chosen illustrations (which would have been even more delightful if they had been in color) and Meyers's analysis of them is a strength of this in-depth work, as are the quotes Meyers selected from the archival material. Her passion for the subject and the lively writing style make this a work that will be enjoyed by anyone interested in advertising, radio, media, American culture, or twentieth-century history.

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