

Across the Waves: How the United States and France Shaped the International Age of Radio. *By Derek W. Vaillant*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017. xii + 239 pp. Photographs, maps, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$95.00. ISBN: 978-0-252-08293-1.

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Reviewed by Rebecca Scales

Derek Vaillant's *Across the Waves* examines a series of little-known but significant endeavors on the part of French and American broadcasters to reach listeners across the Atlantic from the era of experimental short-wave broadcasting in the 1930s through the height of the Cold War. Building on a recent transnational turn in radio studies that emphasizes "international connectivity as central rather than peripheral to the rise of modern broadcasting," Vaillant demonstrates how radio mediated Franco-U.S. cultural and diplomatic relations across the twentieth century and, more importantly, how the evolution of national broadcasting systems in each country simultaneously shaped those of the other (p. 4). In a series of thematic and chronological chapters, Vaillant weaves together an impressive range of primary sources from France and the United States, including broadcasting network archives, programming guides, listener correspondence, radio scripts, and recordings. The result is a provocative and engaging book that challenges readers to rethink radio's impact and audiences outside the confines of the nation-state.

The first half of the book examines the emergence of what Vaillant terms the "contrasting national techno-aesthetics" born out of an array of U.S.-French radio encounters during the interwar decades (p. 10). While advertiser-supported commercial networks dominated by corporations took root in the United States, in France the state asserted a monopoly over the airwaves, permitting only a few commercial stations to transmit alongside a chain of local state-affiliated PTT (Postes, Télégraphes, et Téléphones) stations. The different financial and technological resources available to broadcasters in each country soon produced divergent expectations and standards for radio production. From France, where state broadcasting remained chronically underfunded and stations numbered in the dozens, radio professionals marveled at the hundreds of U.S. stations transmitting with high rates of power and superior equipment. Yet French critics also portrayed American audiences as "in thrall to industrial technology and cheap thrills" produced by U.S. market culture (p. 17). In contrast to the hot jazz, fast-talking announcers, and commercial jingles that filled the American airwaves, French stations transmitted music, talk, and dramatic programs crafted to showcase the gravitas and selective cultural tastes of

French elites. For French listeners, the “speed” of broadcast sound (including switching between studios, transitions, and announcers’ speech patterns) became a key feature distinguishing American broadcasting from the restrained pacing of their own stations. These divergent techno-aesthetics became significant when broadcasters began creating programs expressly for transatlantic audiences.

During the 1930s, the American networks NBC and CBS sent managers to Europe to produce international broadcasts for American audiences, while the Radio-Club France d’Amérique, a Paris-based company charged by the French Foreign Ministry with creating broadcasts for American audiences, established a relationship with NBC. American broadcasters, however, worried that U.S. listeners would react poorly to the officious tone of French state broadcasting. They complained regularly about the limited technical capacities of French studios and transmitters, which sometimes disrupted their own efforts to produce fast-paced and dramatic live reports from the Continent. American news reporters tasked with broadcasting from France also chafed against government-imposed censorship, forcing them to adopt work-arounds to complete their broadcasts. Yet by the Munich crisis of 1938, American radio networks had succeeded in establishing the human and technical systems necessary to provide listeners with live reporting in the form of the iconic international news roundup as World War II loomed.

With the start of the conflict, transatlantic shortwave broadcasting took on a new significance for French people living under the Nazi occupation. Where much historical attention has been devoted to the BBC’s French-language programs, Vaillant analyzes broadcasts created by NBC and the Voice of America (VOA), the latter managed by the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI). Although Vaillant acknowledges the difficulty of assessing Allied broadcasts’ impact on French morale, he demonstrates how the war gave U.S. government broadcasters a stronghold in Europe. OWI staff accompanied the Allied landings in North Africa, where they created propaganda to reinforce the impending liberation, later providing the technological infrastructure for France’s state broadcasting services to return to the airwaves.

The second half of the book examines what might be considered the golden age of transatlantic broadcasting, in the postwar decades. Keen to reinforce Franco-American ties amid rising Cold War tensions, France’s newly nationalized state broadcasting administration created the French Broadcasting System (FBS) in North America. Flush with Marshall Plan monies, the FBS avoided the technological pitfalls of earlier long-distance shortwave experiments by distributing “platter series” of prerecorded programs to U.S. partner stations. These high-quality and free

cultural programs were welcomed by many of the university and nonprofit stations that began broadcasting in the 1960s, when American corporate media executives abandoned radio for television. Vaillant provides a nuanced analysis of multiple programs in the last two chapters, drawing on scripts, recordings, and listeners' letters to consider how broadcasters presented France amid the challenges of postwar reconstruction and decolonization. Yet if the long-running *Bonjour Mesdames* reflected a "quintessentially conservative and ideological project of Marshall Plan-era statecraft," Vaillant illustrates how the show discreetly offered American women and unconventionally gendered men the promise of self-transformation in France (p. 103). In the wake of the 1968 student rebellions, scriptwriters for the French Foreign Ministry's transatlantic programs also produced historical biographies that subtly grappled with the legacies of wartime collaboration with the Nazis and the Algerian War by featuring personalities struggling to overcome persistent racism and sexism in French society.

Throughout the book, Vaillant elucidates the ways in which French and American technological infrastructures alternatively fueled national competition or rapprochement, as well as the complex and evolving web of state and commercial interests that supported transatlantic broadcasting. This deep historical contextualization allows Vaillant to connect what might otherwise appear as unconnected episodes of broadcasting history and, by doing so, to challenge traditional narratives of Americanization, which have long portrayed American mass media as the preeminent weapon of post-World War II cultural imperialism. For France, state broadcasting became an important form of soft power that worked alongside cultural institutions such as the Alliance Française to promote French language and culture overseas. Finally, Vaillant's book reminds us of the importance of sounds—and the technologies that produced them—in creating and challenging perceptions of national difference. As a result, *Across the Waves* will find a welcome audience among students and scholars of broadcasting history and sound studies, technology, internationalism, and cultural diplomacy.

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