
Hugh Richard Slotten. *Radio's Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 325 pp. ISBN 978-0-25203447-3, \$50.00 (cloth).

History is written by the winners. Advocates of a radio and television system driven by profits won the struggle over the shape of broadcasting in America, and, not surprisingly, chroniclers of broadcasting have generally portrayed commercial broadcasting as right, good, and inevitable.

Today that verdict of history is in doubt. Commercial radio seems anything but triumphant. Except for Rush Limbaugh's daily harangues, the most listened to programs on radio are public radio programs. NPR's *Morning Edition* attracts a larger audience in the morning than any other morning radio or television program, including *The Today Show* and *Good Morning America*.

The verdict is in doubt, too, because leaders in all media fear for the future of advertising-supported content. The Internet allows advertisers to deliver their messages directly to the most likely potential customers based on their purchasing histories. No longer do advertisers need to subsidize content to lure audiences to their messages.

Increasingly, media leaders are seeing virtues in not-for-profit structures once considered un-American. University-based, foundation-supported investigative journalism centers are emerging at the state level. Several independent not-for-profits perform similar functions nationally. Some propose to restructure the *New York Times* as a not-for-profit.

The advertising model for media no longer seems inevitable. In fact, it no longer seems viable. Today, a revisionist take on broadcast history seems more relevant than traditional mainstream interpretations. And none more so than Richard Slotten's *Radio's Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States*.

A senior lecturer at the University of Otago, New Zealand, Slotten combed the archives of the pioneering AM stations at American land-grant universities in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, and found surprisingly coherent philosophies of public service. The focus on AM university stations is significant because these stations could potentially serve broad audiences. Educational stations that emerged subsequently on FM were far more constricted in their visions because they operated on a band that had few listeners. The pioneer AM stations provide the philosophical foundation for public service media because they could make a difference in the lives of people and communities, and Slotten makes clear they sought to do so.

He links land grant university radio stations with the extension mission, informal, not-for-credit continuing education. AM educational stations represented the values and expertise of higher education using the conventions of broadcasting rather than the conventions of the classroom. Listeners heard an informal flow of practical advice, “quality” entertainment and culture, and discussion of issues and ideas.

Radio's Hidden Voice may surprise listeners to contemporary public radio with the generalization that university stations did not engage in journalism, the hallmark of public radio today. They did no original reporting and most stayed clear of political controversy in all of their programs. They might welcome an academic or two to provide history and context to current issues, but they did not bring in political figures or provide anything close to a public forum.

The book reports that WSUI, the University of Iowa station, stayed clear of “any issue of a controversial nature to which listeners might object.” The University of Illinois Board of Trustees declared three areas off limits for discussion on WILL, “partisan political issues,” “sectarian religious questions,” and “questions involving equality or relationship of races.” While perhaps stated less explicitly, all university broadcasters embraced this attitude to one degree or another.

Slotten's attempt to portray the University of Wisconsin's WHA as an exception actually proves the rule. He reports that WHA introduced “political education” in the 1930s, providing airtime for politicians and policy advocates to make their cases. This important initiative should not be confused with independent journalism, however. While WILL and WSUI eschewed controversy to maintain positive relationships with state government, WHA took a more proactive approach to the same end. Which politician would not want free use of airtime, even if the price is granting the same privilege to his opponents?

Slotten, correctly, refrains from criticizing these stations for their lack of journalistic independence. University AM stations depended totally on state governments for financial support, and were understandably careful to offend neither legislators nor governors. Today's public radio, by contrast, enjoys a far more diverse array of funding sources that allows it to blend journalistic approaches with the academic values they inherited from their origins in university public service.

The current decline of advertising support provides an opportunity for many media to revive the public service goals *Radio's Hidden Voice* describes, but only if the profit motive diminishes along with the advertising revenue. Public service means rising above the short-term demands of the economic market and that, in turn, requires

some type of subsidy. Governments and foundations have traditionally provided such subsidies and should do so in the future, particularly for start-up organizations. But subsidies alone are not enough. To operate independently, public service media need additional streams of income from more market-centered sources such as audience contributions and limited advertising. Whatever system replaces advertising-driven media must combine market mechanisms with subsidies to minimize the corrupting potential of each.

No one can predict the shape of the media in the twenty-first century, but not-for-profit public service will almost certainly play a more important role than in the twentieth century. Slotten's early history of that concept is now more pertinent to the future than it would have been just a few years ago.

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