

Radio's Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States, by Hugh Richard Slotten. The History of Communication Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 325 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$50.00 cloth.

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The ascendancy of commercial radio dominates the history of broadcasting in the United States. Particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, a distinct and protracted bias on the part of federal agencies — especially the Federal Communications Commission — largely determined that outcome. However, while this story line is essentially accurate, it is not complete. Hugh Richard Slotten contends that the direction of radio in this country began to be shaped by alignments of interests that predated voice transmission, yet continue to persist.

Before World War I, the government, commercial concerns, and postsecondary institutions — the same interests that prevail today — began to shape the long-term development of broadcast radio. The Navy Department controlled the broadcast spectrum during the Great War, then well beyond it. The Marconi Company's battles to restrict access to the airwaves initially represented emerging commercial interests. Colleges and universities received experimental licenses from the Department of Commerce for homemade voice transmitters constructed by faculty and students from the physics and electrical engineering departments. Those stations literally created educational and public service radio. According to Slotten, their story has largely been ignored.

The government initially categorized stations owned by postsecondary educational institutions with other single-purpose broadcasters — mainly religious — as "propaganda" stations. As they developed, the collegiate stations became more professional and began to define specific, but varying, missions. Some, particularly those from land-grant universities, found that agriculturally related programming drew and held audiences. Crop price reports proved to be a consistent favorite. Others believed that educational programs, including courses, lectures, and recitals broadcast directly from classrooms, best served their audiences. Stations that programmed music usually avoided popular tunes and leaned toward classical formats. The question of whether they should broadcast football and basketball games provoked intense debate.

The financial straits of the Great Depression led to the closing of many college radio stations. At the same time, however, others, particularly in the Midwest, grew and prospered, even in the face of government policies that continued to favor commercial broadcasters.

Many college stations, particularly in the South, sold their licenses to commercial interests or transformed themselves by selling advertising. About 30 college-owned stations survived these hazards, and — in relative terms — many of them prospered. Some received state support for broadcasting programs into public schools. Some federal agencies, notably the Works Progress Administration (WPA), provided considerable support — largely in the form of job subsidies — that helped keep stations on the air.

Public affairs programming proved to be a vexing and persistent problem for the collegiate stations. To station managers and university officials, public affairs programming was definitely educational in nature, part of the creation of an informed citizenry. To some constituencies, however, it could sound like propaganda, usually from the political left. Because of their state funding, some schools minimized this type of programming, hoping to avoid controversy. Others, such as the University of Wisconsin's station, WHA, boldly and aggressively promoted public service programming. As Slotten notes, "While commercial stations treated listeners as consumers, noncommercial university stations increasingly treated listeners as citizens" (214).

Slotten concludes with an epilogue that ties the history of the collegiate stations to the legislative history of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. He describes how radio came close to not being a factor at all because of much greater interest in television at the time. He neatly ties in the stubborn resistance of universities, especially the land-grant ones, through the decades between the world wars to the government's allocation of a narrow part of the FM band to a larger number of stations in the 1960s.

Radio's Hidden Voice is an important contribution to the histories of both radio and higher education. Slotten mined little-used or previously unused manuscript collections in the archives of numerous American universities. His treatment of the 1920s and 1930s, in particular, could easily be expanded into an additional useful book.

Midwestern readers and educators should find this book particularly interesting. During both prosperous and penurious times, large midwestern universities, in particular the land-grant institutions, proved the most innovative and the most committed to their audience. The University of Wisconsin's WHA was easily the leader in resources and quality of programming. Station WOI at Iowa State College turned noncommercial radio to the support of its state's agricultural interests, while the State University of Iowa's WSUI pioneered the broadcasting of collegiate courses. Slotten rightly remembers the former institution's Andrew Woofries and the latter's Carl Menzer as broadcasting pioneers.