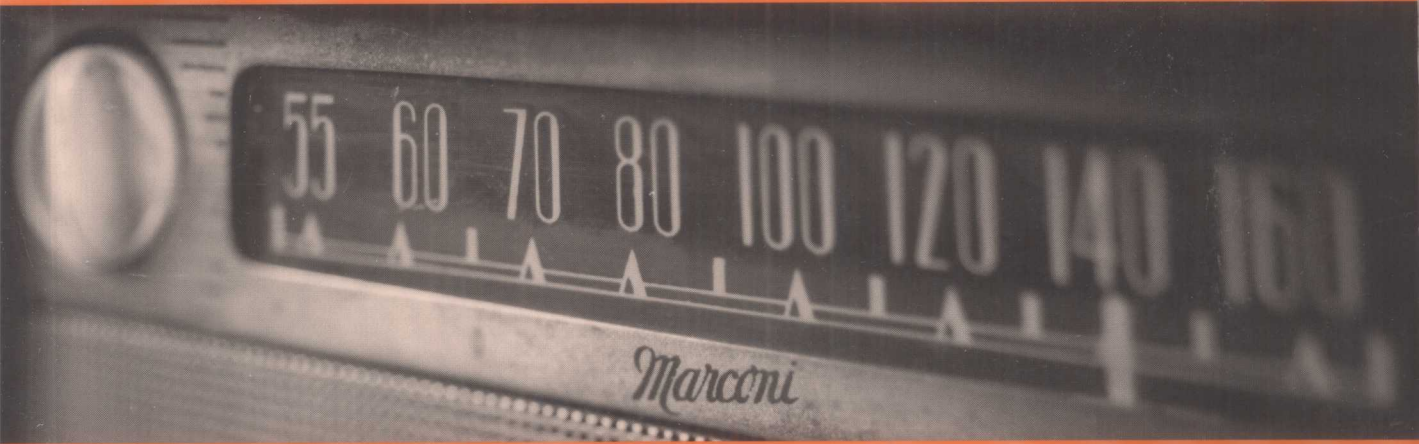


Michele Hilmes



ONLY CONNECT

A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States

2ND EDITION

SECOND EDITION

Only Connect

**A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF BROADCASTING
IN THE UNITED STATES**

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Preface

Only Connect traces the history of U.S. broadcasting in its cultural context. Each chapter opens with an overview of the social tensions of a particular historical period, looks at the media environment surrounding broadcasting, and proceeds to examine not only industrial and regulatory developments but also the rich texture of programming innovations, the audiences they created, and the debates they provoked. Some chapters depart from this structure, or change the sequence of the sections slightly, where it seems to be called for by the unique characteristics of the period under discussion.

For the second edition, I have attempted to take the lessons of the last 10 years toward a more integrated global view of American broadcasting history, making connections where I can to the experience of other nations, and in the final chapters drawing the reader's focus as much as possible to the increasingly flexible borders and boundaries that mark our twenty-first-century media experience. I have included the work of recent historians and analysts, and have attempted to chart the enormous explosion of new possibilities, policies, and uses sparked by the proliferation since 2000 of digital technology. I have also tried to incorporate the sensibility of a post-9/11 world, very different from the 1999–2000 boom years in which the first edition was written.

Uniquely, this book employs a Connection, or case study approach. Each Connection, and there are two or three in each chapter, goes into a particular issue, event, program, or influential figure in depth, as an illustration of the larger picture the chapter has sketched out. Most Connections are based on the work of one or two historians whose research has broken important ground in the field, and I encourage readers to consult their publications directly for deeper insights than this broad overview can accommodate. The purpose of the Connection structure is not only to illustrate key developments in broadcasting history in all their fascinating detail, but to point to significant works in this vital field and to encourage readers to think about history as a lively area of scholarship and debate, not as inert facts in a static past.

Only Connect seeks to place broadcasting in a detailed web of social, political, and cultural connections that inform and illuminate what takes place in the studio, on the screen, and in the living rooms of the nation. In doing so, it highlights the tensions and contradictions that run through broadcasting's history, bringing out social struggles, utopian and dystopian visions of media power, attempts to restrict what can be said and heard over the air, and disputes ever opening up the airwaves to a more democratic and increasingly global system of voices and images. This history views broadcasting as a central and crucial arena in which American culture has been defined and debated, and through which both our largest and smallest concerns are played out. Though this volume's focus on American broadcasting reflects the highly nationalized context within which broadcasting debuted and was brought under control around the world in the twentieth century, it traces the course of broadening and reaching out that characterizes the larger story of broadcast and electronic media as they move into their second century.

I argue that media are not just a part of our history; they *are* our history. Across the media our social and cultural memories and experiences are performed, constructed, preserved, retrieved, and mobilized to make meaning. To “kill your television” is essentially to discount and destroy your contact with life as it is lived in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—a deeply antisocial act. Instead, we should engage with our media and work toward understanding their functions and uses.

Only Connect is an interventionist history, seeking to generate questions as much as to provide answers. To write in this way is not to imply that previous histories have nothing to teach us: They do. They taught me, and I have drawn heavily from many of them in researching this book. Throughout, the work of Christopher Sterling and John Kitross, in *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 3rd edition (Erlbaum 2002), has provided a basic reference point and remains one of the most comprehensive sources for U.S. broadcasting history, particularly in the areas of policy and industry structure. I owe them a great debt in this book. Similarly, Erik Barnouw’s masterful three-volume history has inspired generations of students to pursue the study of the fascinating *mélange* that is broadcasting in this country; all of us draw on his work and particularly admire the progressive vision he brings to the role media can, and should, play in a democratic system (*A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Oxford 1966, 1968, 1970). I am also appreciative of Michael Emery and Edwin Emery’s sweeping *The Press and America*, 8th edition (Simon & Schuster 1996) for a cultural interpretation of the history of print media. Other historians without whose reference works the field would be much impoverished include John Dunning (*On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*, Oxford 1998), Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh (*The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows 1946–Present*, Ballantine Books 1982), Alex McNeil (*Total Television*, Penguin Books 1996), Harry Castleman and Walter J. Podrazik (*The TV Schedule Book*, McGraw-Hill 1984), and Harrison B. Summers (editor, *A Thirty Year History of Programs Carried on National Radio Networks in the United States, 1926–1956*, Arno 1971). For general background reading on U.S. history, nothing is more useful than Howard Zinn’s *The Twentieth Century: A People’s History* (Harper 1988). There are also many scholars whose works I have featured in the Connection sections of this book, or included in the text, who have done important and groundbreaking work in the field of media studies. I’d like to thank them all, and hope that they in turn will find this book of use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The people who helped me in the writing, revision, and publication of this volume are numerous and have not only inspired and guided my work but have saved me from some really embarrassing errors. Special thanks go to Jennifer Wang and Jason Mittell, my first readers, who provided more helpful suggestions than I can enumerate and caught more mistakes than I will ever fully admit to! Douglas Battema supplied a thoroughgoing critique and, crucially, a depth of background on the history of sports in the media, which this writer badly needed. Caryn Murphy aided crucially in the revision of the text for the second edition. Thanks also to my readers through Wadsworth, whose reviews guided my revisions. They are Douglas Battema, University of Wisconsin at Madison; Susan L. Brinson, Auburn University; Steven Classen, California State University at Los Angeles; Susan Douglas, University of Michigan; William E. Loges, University of Southern California; Anna McCarthy, New York University; Edward Morris, Columbia College at Chicago; Lisa Parks, University of California at Santa Barbara; Michael K. Saenz, University of Iowa; Thomas Schatz, University of Texas at Austin; Reed W. Smith, Georgia Southern University; and Thomas Volek, University of Kansas. Karen Austin, my former editor at Wadsworth, helped to bring this project to fruition through her enthusiasm and support; without her it wouldn’t have happened. I owe Holly

Allen and her editorial team at Wadsworth Thomson many thanks for their shepherding of the book through its launch and revision into a second edition. I appreciate the careful work of production editor Kalpalathika Rajan. Copy editor Christianne Thillen made this edition a much more elegantly worded text.

I also wish to thank all those who have adopted this volume over the last five years. Your comments—and, often, corrections and reminders—have inspired and motivated me to rethink and revise. This edition is markedly better for your interventions. Please keep sending them in! I am most pleased to think of this book as a collaborative effort, a joint effort of not just the one historian writing these words but of all the teachers, colleagues, students, friends, family, and readers whose interactions with this work make it a meaningful text.

Overall, I dedicate this book to my colleagues and students, past and present, at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Without the scholarly environment that they have created—with its truly impressive array of ideas, theories, research, publication, discussion and, yes, argument—my own intellectual life would be greatly diminished. I believe the last 12 years working at Madison have taught me more than any other academic experience of my life, and I'm grateful to be part of this lively, provocative, and productive group. As our former graduate students go out to universities and occupations around the world, I am proud to be able to cite their work and contributions in my own scholarship and to know that they are influencing generations of students in turn. I am particularly grateful to the College of Letters and Science at the University, and to my colleagues in the Communication Arts Department, for granting me the sabbatical leave that made it possible to write this volume. And I could never have taken it on—as with so much in my life—without the support and lively encouragement of my husband Bruce and daughter Amanda. They are my inspirations. I offer this second edition to the memory of my mother, Rosemary Lanahan Hilmes, who passed away in the spring of 2005.

We cannot truly understand the workings of broadcasting, our most pervasive medium, if our histories focus only on the stories of the few at the top and ignore the many oppositions and uprisings of subordinate groups as they have struggled for a stronger position in our imperfect democracy, through our imperfect media. Though I have only glancingly alluded to it, I hope my strong commitment to a more perfect and egalitarian political system, with democracy as its base and a vital and diverse media to support it, has come through clearly in this work. *Only Connect* seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the United States has developed, struggled, argued, and connected through its broadcast media in particular. First radio, then television, now supplemented by the Internet, have both united and divided us as a nation and as citizens of the world. Yet I believe the overall progression (not without serious remissions) from a controlled paucity of authoritarian voices to a more diverse, open, and inclusive system is the good news of the twentieth century. It didn't happen without work, debate, and conflict, and many signs at the beginning of the twenty-first century point to a renewed danger of concentration of control and closing off of democratic possibilities. However, as I note in the concluding chapter, it is heartening to see the amazing creativity and inventiveness not only in technology but in conceptualizations and use that ordinary people, given the chance, can make of even the most adverse systems. History teaches us this lesson again and again. I can only hope that this volume might contribute to the reimagining of the future through the revision of our stories of the past.

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MAKING HISTORY

The title of this book, *Only Connect*, comes from *Howards End*, a novel written by British author E. M. Forster in 1910. You may have seen the film produced in 1992 by Merchant Ivory and released to much critical success in the United States. It's about the intersecting lives of three families in Edwardian England—the romantic, liberal Schlegels; the wealthy, conservative Wilcoxes; and the poor, struggling Basts—who meet by chance and who, through a series of accidents and misunderstandings, find their lives forever altered.

Forster opens the book with the phrase “Only connect . . .” above the first paragraph, and the process of making connections—between actions and their outcomes, between rich and poor, between the past and the present—creates all manner of problems for the characters.

In the book's climactic scene, Margaret Schlegel tries to make Henry Wilcox see that his behavior affects the lives of others. He doesn't see the connection between his own adulterous affair with Mrs. Bast, which ruined her life and her husband's, and his condemnation of Margaret's sister Helen's out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

“Not any more of this!” she cried. “You shall see the connection if it kills you, Henry! You have had a mistress—I forgave you. My sister has a lover—you drive her from the house. Do you see the connection? Stupid, hypocritical, cruel—oh, contemptible!—a man who insults his wife when she's alive and cants with her memory when she's dead. A man who ruins a woman for his pleasure, and casts her off to ruin other men. . . . These men are you. You can't recognize them, because you cannot connect. . . . Only say to yourself: ‘What Helen has done, I've done.’” (Forster 1973, 305)

Henry Wilcox here stands for the inequities and blind spots of a whole way of life in early twentieth-century England, a time during which change took place so rapidly that people's values, beliefs, and perceptions could barely keep up. It takes a while longer for Henry and the other characters to realize the results of these failed connections, but by the end of the book Margaret and Henry are married, Helen has had her baby in defiance of Victorian morals, and the future seems brighter. Some connections have been made, and Forster holds out the promise of barriers lifted and contradictions at least temporarily resolved.

Why begin a book about the history of broadcasting with a quote from an author who wrote before radio, and most certainly before television, were even invented? For one

thing, Forster's novel is about the tragedies that occur when connections fail, or are mishandled. Sometimes it's communication that fails—the telegram arrives too late, a dying woman's will is ignored, or two conversations overlap in a way that confuses them both. Other times it's a social or perceptual connection that's missed—the failure to understand how one family's affluence and good fortune is gained at the expense of a whole class of others or how an unconsidered effort to fix things can have tragic results. The novel is also a meditation on the changes that twentieth-century culture and “progress” are making on traditional ways of life, how a shift in one direction can cut off another, and how each “improvement” comes along with possibilities for ruin.

This ambiguity at the heart of progress—the push-pull tension that says as one thing is gained, another might very well be lost—forms the core of Forster's vision in *Howards End* and also informs the history of broadcasting in our century. With each new marvel of communication—promising so much progress and improvement in quality of life—came worry about the negative effects of the new connections. For each utopian hope, there was a corresponding dystopian fear, and many of them, as we shall see, revolved around the barriers that new forms of communication and connection both knocked down and, in other places, built up.

History, too, is about making connections. This first chapter will not plunge immediately into a chronology of broadcasting-related events, but will spend some time considering exactly what role I, as the author of this book, and you, as its reader, play in the construction and use of this thing called “history.” You may have picked up this book because it is part of a course on the history of broadcasting, or because you are interested in reading an overview of radio and television's impact on twentieth-century culture, or because you have an interest, personal or professional, in the media and like to keep up with books in this field. The subject of this book most likely seemed transparent: a tracing of the various circumstances, conditions, and actions that led to the development of broadcasting and its uses in the United States, with all the major players and programs highlighted and the most important issues discussed. The word *cultural* in the title might have alerted you to the likelihood that radio and TV programs and their audiences would be emphasized over the more traditional emphasis on industry and policy found in many books on the subject.

However, even a moment's reflection will reveal that the enormously complex and varied set of events that might be said to comprise broadcasting's past—even if we limit it to the United States and to primarily this single century and to only the national networks that are our common experience—cannot possibly be included within the pages of one book. This is particularly true if we consider the ways that radio and television have intersected with people's lives as an important part of the history of broadcasting. For example, suppose we consider that TV's history is not just a history of the networks, or of the FCC (Federal Communications Commission), or of media magnates like Rupert Murdoch or David Sarnoff, but equally of the many people, you and me included, who have used the medium, carried its information and meanings into our lives, figured in the marketing and programming plans of decision makers, and understood ourselves and our world through its representations. Then television would have a billion histories—as many histories as there are viewers to experience it. Where could we possibly begin such a history? How could we draw lines around it sufficient to contain it within the covers of a single book?