

A History of

Broadcasting in the United States

Douglas Gomery



Blackwell Publishing

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Preface

Why a History of Broadcasting in the USA?

I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can't stop eating peanuts.

Orson Welles, radio star and TV fan

No one needs convincing of the fact that, since the 1920s, radio and television have been the most influential of modern media. It is impossible to think of the final two-thirds of the twentieth century without them. Radio and television have entertained, informed, set trends; some would even argue that they have defined a new United States. To understand the twentieth century is to understand the history of radio and television broadcasting.

This book is not a distillation of all aspects of radio and television of the past. Indeed, some might say that what I am attempting is impossible. There is no broadcast history, only broadcast histories. It is too much, too big. I agree. We as historians are still too close to contemporary events to gain the proper perspective. But surely there is a set of myths that are taken to be history. For instance: Didn't David Sarnoff invent radio? Didn't Amos 'n' Andy first induce millions to tune in? Wasn't FDR the most popular presence on radio with his fireside chats? Didn't Edward R. Murrow report World War II virtually single-handed? And so on.

These myths are too often taken to be facts. My first assumption is that radio was a cultural industry like Hollywood, which I have studied for a quarter century. We have to begin with a set of assumptions, proceed to historical questions, and then seek to address them using the best available primary evidence in order to formulate clear, logical, and systematic answers. This book offers a series of what I deem to be the key questions, then provides a concise set of answers in the form of arguments.

But a historian can not research and write a history of everything. Thus I began with what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson call a "research program." I take on three

types of fundamental question for my research program. First, like Hollywood, broadcasting is a business, but not a very big one. We study it for two other reasons: its social import and because of its cultural power, as metaphorically described by Orson Welles above.¹

This leads me to the three basic questions that I address in my history:

- 1 How has broadcasting been organized as a business over time? A simple answer is by network, but I offer an institutional history. I assume that NBC, CBS, and the now multiple others are organized to make maximum profits for their owners.
- What impact has broadcasting made socially, culturally, and politically? Here I choose to focus first on advertising as commercial culture, then on its implications for gender, race, and class, then on political issues, and finally on fandom. I assume that broadcasting has held up the cultural norms of the times and that over the long haul government has stayed out of all but a few areas.
- 3 How has programming been organized as an art form? Here I assume the artifacts created are complex and powerful. They are so moving and pleasurable that many think they are additive.

Inevitably, if one seeks to answer these questions, one needs primary data. Here the task becomes daunting, but not for the usual reasons. A history of business in ancient Rome reveals few artifacts. Yet precisely the opposite problem exists for broadcast history. There are too many data. No single human could ever examine them all. The process would never end. So the historian must carefully consider how the primary information helps us answer the questions raised, and recognize that she or he will never examine all the data. A first phase of broadcast history has been undertaken; here I hope to initiate a second by starting again from the beginning.

How? By doing what I have done in all my research – seeking to question and then trying to think through a counterfactual argument. Sometimes this simply verifies what we already know; but if I have learned anything researching and writing this book, it is that histories of broadcasting are filled with myths.

Why? Because broadcasting almost since its inception has been good at selling. It is advertising based. Thus the networks and other interested parties also sell their version of history. This entails creating legends that – if repeated often enough – become "facts." For public relations reasons, every major institution, star, and personality has a "story" that often proves false on closer inspection.

Consider just one example. CBS reporter Edward R. Murrow was a great newsman – a star. By what criteria? By those laid down by the CBS public relations department. For decades Murrow was declared to be a pioneer and a man of integrity. But then CBS fired him. Why? I intend to demystify the star-controlled TV myth. We see and hear stars, but rarely look at their construction. That invisibility of creation is the way the system works and wants to work. It creates pleasure, not understanding, and the star is at its center.

In the early 1950s the threat of Communism created an air of paranoia in the United States. Exploiting those fears was Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. Murrow,

however, decided to challenge McCarthy and expose him for the fearmonger he was, as dramatized in George Clooney's 2005 feature film *Good Night, and Good Luck*. Murrow was a hero – as we have come to expect a star to be.

Yet if we look at the business side, Murrow worked for a vast corporation then called the Columbia Broadcasting System, now CBS. Murrow could not be a hero without the approval of the corporation's owner, William Paley. As I probed the myth of Murrow and McCarthy, I found that many had taken on McCarthy before Murrow. Paley thus felt safe in having his hero-star-newsman do the same. It would add to Columbia's reputation. There were no defenders of McCarthy left. More than a few newspapermen, local TV newspersons, editorial cartoonists, and radio commentators had already attacked the senator; the *New York Times*, *New York Herald-Tribune*, *Washington Post*, and even *Time* magazine were openly hostile to McCarthy by the time of the CBS broadcast. Indeed, the very day of Murrow's report, Senator Ralph Flanders, Republican of Vermont, had ridiculed McCarthy's investigation as a sort of modern-day war dance, generating a lot of noise but little in the way of concrete proof. So Murrow was not going out on any limb, nor did he cause any change in the fall of McCarthy – except, perhaps, by piling on the criticism.

William Paley pushed his newsman-star to do more softball celebrity "person to person" interviews, citing changing times and claiming that people wanted entertainment from TV. Murrow sought to deal with serious subjects but was rebuffed. In 1958, he openly attacked CBS and eventually was eased out. He had done better with radio. While rarely venturing near battle, his reports from London during the Blitz were risky and helped FDR draw the nation into World War II. With radio, Murrow made newspeople into stars.²

Exploring the star system in broadcasting history is vital. However, broadcasters' PR views of stars of the past amount to little more than mythmaking. We need to reject these myths and look for causes that meet the test of logic. In the process of writing my history, I pursue limited causations. That is, historians posit explanations, but not scientific ones that seek to explain all situations. They explain how a TV program was influenced by outside events, but not how all TV programs were influenced by all outside events. Historians seek trends and generalizations. This means we need to define eras of continuously similar behavior, each with a beginning, apex, and closure. We need to generalize about these trends. So, for example, during the 1960s and 1970s, most TV spectators consumed shows on NBC, CBS, and ABC, but not all. There were some independent stations. But to examine every station is not the point. To learn answers to historical questions, we must be satisfied with concluding that "by and large" this was the case.

This leads us to the process of periodization – segmenting change over time into defined eras. For this book I chose the following periods. (1) The 1920s to the late 1940s, with the rise of the radio networks and their domination. (2) A period of transition through the 1950s, during which the same networks reinvented themselves as TV networks. During this period radio also reinvented itself, from a network-like schedule to one of continuous music and talk. (3) The 1960s and 1970s, during which three major networks – NBC, CBS, and ABC (formerly a part of NBC) – dominated TV viewing. Radio defined

and routinized the format of sounds associated with stations, as in the most frequently cited example, Top 40. (4) In the early 1980s a broadcasting media explosion occurred. Cable TV, home video, and satellite TV offered hundreds of choices, as did the expansion of FM radio to a lesser degree. Many would argue we are still in this phase of expansion, but to create closure to my historical analysis I stop at 1996. New rules came into play, new technologies were ubiquitous, and the very term broadcasting seemed to become obsolete. (5) Finally, a short epilogue surveys the new media world. However, this is speculative. Historians need temporal distance. For example, in 2000 Time Warner and AOL merged and everyone heralded a new era. Three years later the deal was bust. Who could know?

Prior Research

I shall not review the history of broadcasting literature to date as this book approaches broadcast history like no other. Most works limit themselves to a period or figure. A brave few have used 975 pages – as in Sterling and Kitross's *Stay Tuned*. I think I can analyze one industry in far fewer pages in the same manner that historians of the USA have done in single books about single centuries. I purposely avoid pretending to answer all questions about all aspects of broadcasting. For example, I do not think the mass public cares to know much about the basic technology of radio waves, but is more interested in what programming choices radio as a mass medium can offer. I avoid the encyclopedic approach that summarizes the existing literature. Such histories can only go so far. I try to answer the key questions, not those most easily answered from accessible prior writings. I do not offer a list of readings but instead recommend Sterling and Kitross's book, which, at three times the length of this one, does a fine job in its 100 pages of basic bibliography.³

Basic Assumptions for this Book

For this project I make five basic assumptions.

- (1) By historical analysis I assume analysis of the questions I have raised about change over time. I argue that broadcast history began as a mass medium on July 2, 1921 with an extraordinary event, and is still going on. This history stops as network TV ended and FM radio surpassed AM in listeners' preference in about 1982. I then venture to do what I call "contemporary history" up to 1996, opting to pick up permanent changes rather than select analysis that will quickly date. But even this is risky. For more recent events I offer an epilogue of questions rather than historical analysis, for which temporal perspective is needed. This is what makes writing the history of broadcasting in the USA so hard.
- (2) I assume that people in the USA use radio and television for programming and that readers are not interested in the history of the basic technology. I seek to answer historical questions about what we hear and see, how it was created by institutions,

and how these programs and institutional actions have caused social, political, and cultural change. There is a substantial prior literature on the history of broadcasting technology that is worth consulting,⁴ but for watchers and listeners it is the programs rather than the technology that is the draw. Thus I start with the assumption that a form of radio was developed and ready after World War I, then I touch on new technologies as they came into play. Of course, the biggest was television itself. As it was being developed, many simply called it "radio with pictures."

- (3) By the term broadcasting I mean broadcast radio (AM and FM), broadcast television (VHF and UHF), cable-delivered radio and television, and satellite-delivered radio and television. I refer to the mass media side of radio and television, not their use for other activities such as point to point communication. This is a history of broadcasting as mass media.
- (4) I restrict this historical analysis to the USA, the lower 48 until 1959, then Hawaii and Alaska. I recognize that international relations have always played a role, but discussing this would require a separate book. Nationalism defined broadcasting all over the world until satellites made globalization easier. I make one exception on occasion interaction with Mexico and Canada became important as broadcast signals spilled over US borders. So while Buffalo, New York has never been among the top 10 largest US cities, its market for radio and television has played a more significant role because the signals broadcast from Buffalo spilled over into Canada and could be heard and seen in Toronto.⁵

What I have consciously sought to do is to include the local. Because I assume the territory is the USA does not mean I assume regional networks and local stations were unimportant. Such historical analysis is tricky, however. With the invasion of national networks – NBC in 1926 and CBS in 1927 – station owners chose affiliation if possible. The most popular stars and shows gravitated to the national networks, and studies have focused on the network stars and shows at the expense of local fare. Although I can not present all local programming, I seek to give the reader a flavor of radio and television as local phenomena as well. Local case studies are important – yet to deny the popularity of networking from 1926 on is to confront and then refute capitalism, profit maximization, and that the big picture is money.

(5) Broadcasting has long been a big business and its social impact and representations are important. Yet most studies have been authored by scholars who often loathe broadcasting and proudly make the case for its negative influence on society and culture. I explicitly reject that assumption of negative externalities. Implicit in the conceptualization of radio and television is that they are "mere entertainment." In contrast, I want to make it clear that I consider them as aesthetic objects. Broadcasting is a human-made set of artifacts which are mostly for pleasure, and sometimes for information, just as writing, music or painting are. The usual omission is based upon an assumption that broadcasting is not complex and therefore unworthy of study as an art form. For most of the twentieth century cinema was also considered as just "pop culture"; now it is seriously studied in the academy and even fought over as to which unit of the university should teach and study its complex artifacts. In my view, broadcasting deserves the same redesignation.

Broadcasting is "art discourse" that is economically, socially, and culturally constructed by groups who have the power to define aesthetic value for their times. However, these cultural gatekeepers do not themselves define art so relativistically. Thus an art discourse at any given time will always have both an economic or power component, i.e., a sociological part, and a formal or artistic component, i.e., an aesthetic part. Arguably, then, the moment US network television was refigured discursively as art occurred with the serious discourses surrounding *Twin Peaks* in 1990–1. I assume broadcasting has always been an art form. Academics now accept *The Simpsons* as brilliant satire, but satire has long been a part of broadcasting.⁶

Further, consider that while Alfred Hitchcock was adding to the accepted canon of great cinema with *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1957), he was also hosting and having final creative say in a top 10-rated TV series. No one can doubt that as Hitchcock passed his fifty-fifth birthday on August 13, 1954, he was at the top of his artistry, a cinema master; however, we are only now learning to appreciate his complex artistic work on the leading television network in the USA, the Columbia Broadcasting System.

The problem is that evaluation makes artistic analysis so difficult. Broadcasting fits any philosophical criteria for what an artistic text is – save that for most of its history elite ideology has undervalued it as compared to older art forms. It was mass, or worse yet, popular culture, not complex artwork. I seek to take evaluation out of the equation. The novel, for example, is not dismissed because so many poor ones (by whatever criteria) have been written. Television, just like the novel, is narrative. It was never a "vast wasteland" – just vast. Only with perspective can we make sense of this idea. Others have attempted to do this, but as of now the best analysis is Kristin Thompson's *Storytelling in Film and Television* and Jason Mittell's *Genre and Television*. For textual radio analysis, there is even less.⁷

Warnings

These are my five basic assumptions. But there are equally five problems to which I wish to alert the reader. So please read my historical analysis with these five warnings in mind.

(1) Radio developed as a mass medium in the United States during the 1920s; television broadcasting commenced during the late 1940s, but reached dominant status only in 1960. The rise of radio and later of television stands purely as a contemporary phenomenon. Traditional historians generally find the study of radio and television's development simply "too new, too recent," and warn historians of electronic mass media to be very, very careful. In their view, analyzing how radio and television broadcasting has changed over time is not true history but some sort of variation on the study of "contemporary history," a specialized study filled with multiple problems and pitfalls from which historians of the nineteenth, eighteenth, and seventeenth centuries are exempt because they have perspectives based on the passage of time. I take their warnings seriously but choose to plunge ahead.⁸

- (2) Most program titles are wrong. These are often hard to determine. For example, which is correct: Amos 'n' Andy or the Amos and Andy Show? Amos 'n' Andy properly refers only to the nightly serial version of March 19, 1928 through February 19, 1943. The title appearing at the top of page 1 on each serial script is AMOS AND ANDY, but the title registered as a trademark with the US Patent Office in 1928 is officially Amos 'n' Andy, with two apostrophes, and all of the scripts were copyrighted under this title. The Amos 'n' Andy Show is properly used only to refer to the October 8, 1943 through May 22, 1955 weekly half-hour sitcom, or to the 1951–3 CBS TV series. Although newspaper schedules sometimes abbreviated the series title to Amos 'n' Andy, the actual half-hour scripts are all titled the Amos 'n' Andy Show and were copyrighted under that title. These were two very different series in terms of both format and content, not a continuous run. For clarity, I strive to label the correct title when first mentioned and then slip into the common parlance. See the index for clarification.9
- (3) Throughout its history, there have been dire warnings about the end of broadcasting. Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, pundits predicted the end of radio. But today these assertions seem almost laughable. As my historical analysis will show, broadcasting has survived nicely in the USA, and will continue to do so. Technology gives broadcasters greater options, but this has never entailed the end of radio or television. Entrepreneurs, listeners, and viewers adapt. If anything, more time is allocated to broadcasting. For example, as FM radio emerged in the 1970s as a clear-sounding vehicle for delivering music to a mass audience, AM radio evolved from the country's main provider of pop music into an outlet reserved almost entirely for news, talk, and sports. Historical analysis shows this adaptation can change over time. Identifying a key change one that defines a new period requires I make judgments. I hope that further perspective does not necessitate whole-sale rewriting. ¹⁰
- (4) As of the present day we are in a Golden Age of access at least thus far. Archival work is necessary for many documents and programs, but less so for the most popular ones. Just go and buy a DVD or CD copy. Most exclude the advertising, so they are not pure reproductions, but the era of having to go to the Library of Congress to hear or see broadcasts is over. Thousands of titles are available. As of this writing www.tvondvd.com and Radio Spirits are the best, but surely libraries will come to acquire CD and DVD copies as they have books. Or at least I hope so. An important recommendation: With the age of the CD and DVD, there are millions of sources for the programs I analyze. Go to Google and acquire those that most interest you.¹¹
- (5) I love broadcasting. And so do millions of my fellow residents in the USA. Indeed, the data repeatedly show broadcasting as the activity people spend more time involved in as listeners or watchers than any other save sleep, work or going to school. Broadcasting offers us powerful aesthetic experiences. The pleasure can be so moving that like Orson Welles we can not stop. Analyzing the history of broadcasting can, I argue, increase this pleasure.

Notes

- 1 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, Film History: An Introduction (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), pp. 2–10.
- 2 Edward Bliss, Jr., "Edward R. Murrow and Today's News," Television Quarterly, 9/4 (1970): 33–9; New York Times, Weekend Arts, September 23, 2005, pp. B3, B19; Wall Street Journal, September 9, 2005, p. W7.
- 3 Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kitross, Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), pp. 878–929. For literature after that I recommend an afternoon of cruising Amazon.com and other websites for recently published work.
- 4 For radio technology I recommend Hugh G. J. Aitken's Syntony and Spark: The Origins of Radio and The Continuous Wave: Technology and American Radio, 1900–1932 (both Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976 and 1985 respectively); and Susan J. Douglas's Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). For television's basics there are the many books of Albert H. Abramson, my favorite being The History of Television, 1942 to 2000 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003). For modern TV which will become all digital sometime after this book is published I recommend Constance Ledoux, Digital Television (Ames, IA: Blackwell Publishing Professional, 2003), knowing that it will seem out of date when you read this. Yet as history it is first rate.
- 5 The show Amos 'n' Andy hits a touch point of racism and that has been the focus of most studies. But the ratings showed that this radio duo was popular with both black and white US audiences. I argue that the show's greatest claim to innovation lies in its distribution to many stations by 12-inch 78 rpm records rather than through AT&T wires as NBC was doing in 1928. This proved the source of the duo's popularity, so NBC signed them. See Elizabeth McLeod, The Original Amos 'n' Andy (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), pp. 33-45.
- 6 Kristin Thompson makes the case for this in her book Storytelling in Film and Television (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), where she ranges from cinema to television as equally difficult tasks.
- 7 Thompson, Storytelling in Film and Television; Jason Mittell, Genre and Television (New York: Routledge, 2004). See David Thornburg, "TV as an Aesthetic Medium," Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 4 (1985): 161–73, an early attempt that did not jumpstart textual analysis but showed how hard it was, and continues to be.
- 8 Questions of contemporary history are thoroughly discussed in Anthony Selden (ed.), Contemporary History: Practice and Method (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), while John Higham's "The Future of American History," Journal of American History, 80 (March 1994): 1289–1307 offers a first-rate discussion of where the study of US history stands today and might best go in the future.
- 9 McLeod, The Original Amos 'n' Andy lists five titles for this single show in her index.
- 10 Washington Post, January 8, 2006, pp. N1, N8.
- 11 As I write a new resource has come across my desk: Susan and David S. Siegel, *A Resource Guide to the Golden Age of Radio* (York Heights, NY: Book Hunter Press, 2006), which lists 2,300 Special Collections on radio alone.

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This book started when Jayne Fargnoli asked. Jayne proved a dream editor. I also wish to thank Ken Provencher and Michael Henry who helped put this book together. Data surrounded me as Senior Scholar of the Library of American Broadcasting. David Bordwell inspired me to think by starting with a clear and open mind, with questions of my own, not of others. Anne Beatts graciously spoke with me. But, of course, without Marilyn Moon, there would be no book. What are better words than: thank you again!

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Introduction

Broadcasting's Beginning: The Big Bang

Broadcasting was put on its feet commercially in 1921 by the rush to pay \$300 a set for earphone receivers when the Dempsey–Carpentier fight was put on the air by what was then known as "wireless telephony."

Alva Johnston, Saturday Evening Post, September 19401

When the Saturday Evening Post – a generation after the fact – looked back in time, it seemed obvious when broadcasting began. In examining the evidence, it does to me as well. Most scholars date broadcasting's beginnings to November 2, 1920 when KDKA broadcast the results of the presidential election. But that was heard by a few hundred folks at most. Others, such as Michele Hilmes and Susan Smulyan, are not deceived by Westinghouse's massive publicity machine but choose not to pinpoint a date, arguing for a continuous evolution until 1922. I argue there was a single event on a single day when hundreds of thousands of people heard radio for the first time and millions read about it. That day was July 2, 1921, and thereafter broadcasting was launched.²

Boxing would seem an odd choice. But during the 1920s there was no greater celebrity than Jack Dempsey. (To be fair, Smulyan mentions this as one possibility.) To begin, radio needed a star – Dempsey – and a producer/promoter. That was Tex Rickard. In a shaky wooden stadium holding 91,000 over the 4th of July weekend in 1921 in Jersey City, New Jersey, Rickard pitted Dempsey against Frenchman Georges Carpentier and the next day announced a gate of \$1.5 million. Radio was noted as an added attraction and thereafter radio broadcasting was put into the public's mind. This was the Big Bang of broadcasting, when people in the USA learned about and paid attention to mass entertainment over the airwaves.

Like P. T. Barnum, Tex Rickard had an extraordinary ability to sense the public's needs and then meet them. He promoted every heavyweight title bout that resulted in a new heavyweight champion in the 1920s, but Dempsey was his star. The 1921