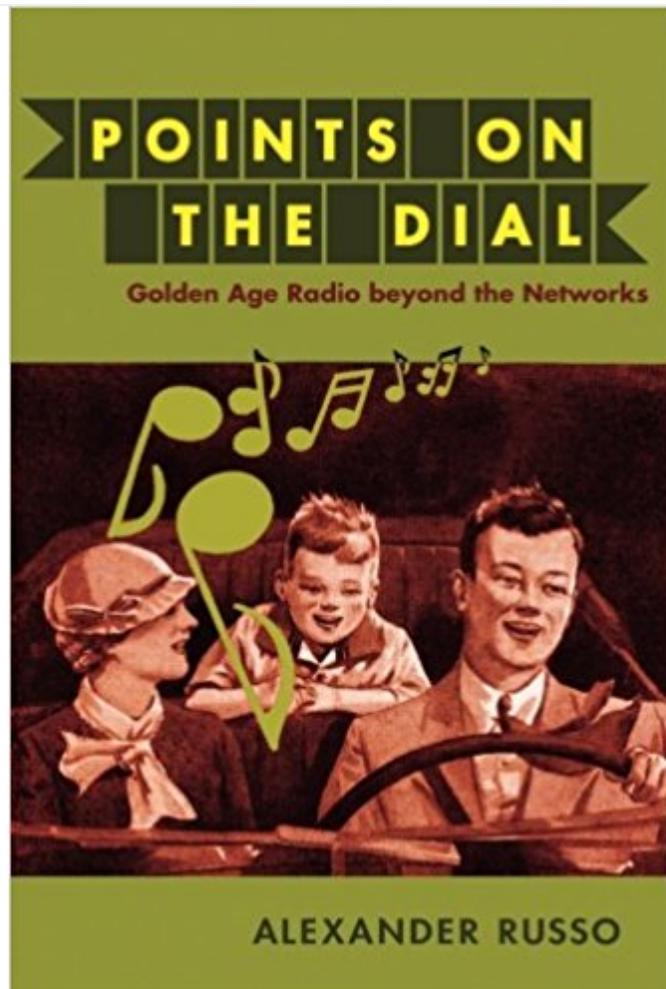


{essays in history}

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Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks



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Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks. By Alexander Russo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Pp. 292. Cloth, \$84.95. Paper, \$23.95.

Scholarship on the “golden age” of radio has largely emphasized two developments: It has examined the role of radio in creating a homogenous and national identity amongst the American audience. It has also addressed the changing nature of the radio industry, specifically focusing on the contributions of key individuals, such as Todd Storz and Gordon McLendo, in saving what many believed was a fading medium. In contrast, Alexander Russo argues in *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks* “that between 1926 and 1951 (the ‘network era’) radio as a cultural form in the United States was not the homogeneously constructed ‘imagined community’ that is inscribed in popular memory. [Instead], radio stations drew upon not only national network feeds but also a wide range of programming sources including regional networks, sound-on-disc transcription recordings, and nationally produced scripts performed locally” (2).

In other words, although radio was able to create a novel form of national identity, it did not create this identity in a vacuum immune from regional influences. Smaller communities, often independent from one another, helped in shaping a broader mass audience for radio. These communities show that network radio was not a changeless phenomenon, often reflecting regional variations and sensibilities. In contrast, Russo states that “instead of seeing the networks as monolithic and the era as static, it is imperative to recognize that while performers may have remained the same, the structure of programming schedules, the organization of individual shows, and the experience of listening changed continuously” (5). In order to accomplish his goal, the author takes an interdisciplinary approach, focusing on the multiple dynamic forces that shaped radio. More broadly, his examination of the interwar and postwar periods shows how “the story of radio’s specialization and transformation influences not just our understanding of the history of a communications medium but also how we interpret the history of

consumer culture, the historically specific ways in which we listen, and the way we construct identities based on taste cultures” (14).

Russo shows that radio networks sought to portray an image of a homogenous community largely for economic purposes and not for creating a genuine national identity. Instead, networks often faced significant pressure, like traditional print media, from advertisers and sponsors. As a result, “split networks” became a common occurrence where advertisers relied on the acquisitions of network affiliates instead of larger purchases with the parent network. Similarly, networks depended on “spot broadcasting,” a phenomenon in which sponsors actively sought to provide specific programs and announcements based on demographics. Rather than providing a uniform broadcast, spot broadcasting targeted specific potential markets. By examining these cases, Russo shows that, like other mediums such as print and television, radio networks also focused on regional markets that could prove economically significant and were less interested in creating a true national community, which curtailed cultural differences.

Russo’s work provides two key examples of the way in which broadcasters filled gaps during transmissions: regional networks and sound-on-disc transcriptions. The author observes, “regional networks challenge the assumption that radio network interconnection was necessarily equivalent with national scope, and sound-on-disc transcriptions address the issue of liveness and the presence of recorded materials in golden age radio” (46). More specifically, Russo uses New England’s Yankee Network and Colonial Network to demonstrate the importance of small demographic markets. The examination of regional networks also shows the often-clashing relationship between regional network affiliates and national network subsidiaries. In particular, network subsidiaries exerted pressure on regional programmers to buy all of a network’s broadcasts instead of select ones.

The author concludes his work by examining how spot broadcasting became the dominant method of radio broadcast and how networks came to target the “distracted listener.” Although spot broadcasting had always been an important part of how regional programming was constructed, not until later did national networks embrace it as a dominant marketing strategy. As Russo shows, “the robust system of spot broadcasting created by station representatives, regional networks,

transcription producers, and advertising agencies suggest that local stations possessed significant autonomy in programming schedule practices” (117). The independence of regional networks shows the influence small networks had on national broadcasters. Small broadcasters increasingly used transcription discs that helped in increasing their revenue. At the same time, the emergence of “music libraries” helped strengthen the quality of regional networks and helped to distance them further from national broadcasters. As Americans bought multiple radios, especially in automobiles, national networks shifted from seeing radio as a primary form of entertainment. Instead, they embraced new ways of appealing to distracted listeners such as disc-jockey programs and morning shows. In the end, by embracing distracted listeners and listening practices, spot broadcasting played a crucial role in the redefinition of distracted listening and in facilitating radio’s status as a secondary medium” (150).

Points on the Dial is a thorough examination of the peak of radio transmissions. By examining a variety of sources from transcripts, broadcasts, and newspapers, the author provides a remarkable groundwork for future scholarship. While earlier examinations have viewed the radio as largely homogenous, *Points on the Dial* provides a new foundation that shows radio’s influence on future mediums. More specifically, the reexamination of radio shows that the medium did not change due to external pressures exerted by television. Instead, radio’s transformation to a secondary device resulted from widespread industry practices that often preceded their adoption on television.

The largest limitation of Russo’s work is that he fails to truly detail the role of regional subsidiaries in affecting the national radio industry as a whole. The author’s account of radio production emphasizes that there was considerable tension between regional subsidiaries and national networks. Yet, his narrative largely deals with the experiences of a small group of regional networks, such as New England’s Yankee Network and Colonial Network. Thus, it is unclear if the experiences of these network subsidiaries and their audiences exemplified the nation as a whole. Despite this flaw, Russo’s study helps in demonstrating the importance and need for scholarly examination of regional influences on national networks. Furthermore, by using an interdisciplinary approach to

examining the medium of the radio, the author provides multiple perspectives on radio's "golden age" that largely validate his thesis.

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