

David Goodman and Joy Elizabeth Hayes, **New Deal Radio: The Educational Radio Project**, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022, 210 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

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Relative to other wealthy democracies, the American public media sector is frail and government funding for media is miserly. However, this was not always the case. Throughout the New Deal era, the federal government embarked on an ambitious effort to create structural alternatives to the commercial radio industry. In ***New Deal Radio: The Educational Radio Project***, David Goodman and Joy Elizabeth Hayes chronicle how the U.S. Office of Education's Educational Radio Project assumed a much more active role in cultural production than is often assumed by media scholars. Goodman and Hayes perform a historical autopsy of the project, plumbing the imbrication of radio, democracy, and citizenship during this critical juncture in American media history.

The first pages of *New Deal Radio* contextualize the genesis of the Educational Radio Project amid the triumph of the commercial radio industry over the radio reform movement in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During this period, activists and reformers variously sought to create a national public broadcaster—an American corollary to the British Broadcasting Corporation in the United Kingdom—or “set-asides” dedicated to airing noncommercial educational programming. However, the Federal Communications Act of 1934 institutionalized the commercial broadcasting model and dashed the reform movement's hopes of securing a dedicated spectrum for educational and noncommercial broadcasters. The Educational Radio Project was borne of this defeat, established as a public-private partnership in which government content was broadcast over the airwaves of large commercial radio networks such as NBC and CBS. Without dedicated frequencies of their own, the project leaders were forced to work with the commercial broadcast industry rather than against it.

While the introduction plumbs the broad political context leading up to the formation of the Educational Radio Project, the remainder of *New Deal Radio* drills down into the content of the project's shows and the personalities who produced them. Indeed, Goodman and Hayes's mode of storytelling tends to privilege personalized narratives and close readings of radio programs over sweeping structural analysis. To plumb the lifeworld of the Educational Radio Project, the authors draw on extensive archival research conducted at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Goodman and Hayes consult a diversity of sources from the archive, including program recordings, scripts, production memos, correspondences with network executives, and listener responses to the programs.



The first chapter provides the conceptual ballast of *New Deal Radio*. Goodman and Hayes describe the Educational Radio Project's chief innovation as *dramatized documentary*. The project's liberal use of drama reflects a skepticism of a British documentary tradition that privileged the rote recounting of facts over emotional suasion. Instead, the project heightened the dramatic intrigue of its radio programs through the strategic deployment of sound effects, stirring music, and narrative plot devices designed to trigger emotional responses from listeners. In addition to incorporating dramatic elements into documentary radio programming, the authors also stress that the project's programs were "governmental"—produced to inform citizens, explicate the role of government in modern life, and coach listeners in the virtues of bourgeois citizenship.

Each subsequent chapter of *New Deal Radio* interrogates a single radio program, focusing on how each show translated New Deal policies into broadcast content. In chapter 2, Goodman and Hayes elucidate how the *Brave New World* program presented a dramatized depiction of Latin American history to marshal support for the Good Neighbor policy, the Roosevelt administration's decision to halt the parade of military invasions in Latin America and adopt a noninterventionist stance toward other countries in the hemisphere (p. 42). In chapter 3 we are introduced to *Americans All, Immigrants All* (p. 63), a radio program that promoted cultural pluralism through cheery vignettes that extolled the positive contributions of different ethnic groups to American society. Chapter 4 turns to *Wings for the Martins* (p. 85), a 26-episode sitcom created to foster modern educational values by following a fictional middle-class family as they navigate issues related to schooling and parenting. Chapter 5 focuses on *Democracy in Action* (p. 105), which uses historical dramatization to explain the need for government intervention in labor, health, housing, and other economic sectors. Chapter 6 provides an overview of *Pleasantdale Folks* (p. 129), a dramatic soap opera produced to increase the public's awareness of the social security and welfare system.

Throughout *New Deal Radio*, Goodman and Hayes depict a mode of cultural production that is rife with contradiction. The Educational Radio Project extolled the virtues of public service over commercial airwaves, utilized commercial radio techniques to promote civic values, and readily drew on the attention-holding strategies and showmanship of entertainment radio to create educational programming. In so doing, *New Deal Radio* combats the image of government-sponsored media as staid, stale, and sclerotic. In fact, Goodman and Hayes argue, the Educational Radio Project did more than coopt the aesthetics and production techniques of commercial broadcasters: In blending documentary and dramatic modes of storytelling, the project paved the way while commercial media outlets followed in their wake.

Nevertheless, the Educational Radio Project was constrained by a cauldron of interests and influences. Although NBC and CBS desperately wanted to *appear* to serve the public interest, network executives often prioritized their company's bottom line behind the scenes by imposing commercial standards on the project's programming, refusing to air the project's programs during prime-time hours, and even appointing personnel to collaborate with the project who were openly hostile to the aims and ambitions of educational radio. Goodman and Hayes also note the stifling influence of Republicans and anti-New Deal Democrats throughout the book, who frequently disparaged the Project's productions as partisan propaganda and apologia for progressive government. Rather than confront these charges head-on, many project members worked assiduously to allay the fears of their most vociferous political critics by using plots, rhetoric,

and aesthetic conventions deemed inoffensive and apolitical. In this way, concern that overzealous reactionaries would *interpret* the project's programming as government propaganda led the creators of many programs to engage in self-censorship.

Although *New Deal Radio* offers a rich, textured analysis of an often-overlooked period of state-led cultural production in the United States, normative bite was often lacking throughout the book. For instance, while the authors persuasively detail how innovative the project was at the level of genre, rhetoric, and presentation, the authors are not particularly critical of the political substance of the project's programming, which was—in my opinion—often enfeebled and milquetoast. In radio content produced by the project, the New Deal was consistently framed in the most innocuous and inoffensive way possible, offering covering reassurances to the public that everything is as it always was. For instance, Goodman and Hayes argue that *Democracy in Action* “consistently portrayed the New Deal as in the mainstream of American political tradition rather than as a radical break from it” (p. 116). The Good Neighbor Policy was similarly couched as “an evolution of historical practices rather than a radical break” with American military hegemony in the hemisphere (p. 42). The authors further observe that *Democracy in Action* emphasized “the limited, delegated, and problem-solving nature of American government” (p. 116).

These modest sentiments are far afield from the much more radical and militant “cultural front” politics that permeated elements of the theater, film, music, and art industries during the New Deal era (Denning, 2010). In both temperament and political content, the Educational Radio Project was firmly positioned at the rearguard rather than at the vanguard of New Deal cultural politics. The political gulf between the Educational Radio Project and the cultural front may, in part, reflect their respective class composition. While the cultural front drew from the ranks of America's multiracial working classes, the Educational Radio Project was comprised of “middle-aged men of European descent at the height of their careers” (p. 8). Ultimately, Goodman and Hayes's analysis would have been enriched by placing the Educational Radio Project in conversation with other New Deal cultural programs such as the Federal Theatre Project or the Federal Music Project.

Nevertheless, by reaching deep into the annals of American media history, Goodman and Hayes paint a compelling picture of an innovative, activist state working assiduously to stitch together public consensus for Franklin Roosevelt's policy agenda. Along with Josh Shepperd's (2023) *Shadow of the New Deal*, *New Deal Radio* marks a renewed interest in the possibilities of state-led cultural production. *New Deal Radio* is no doubt as much an artifact of the present as the past—speaking both to the growing dissatisfaction with the contemporary commercial media landscape as well as a rejection of the premise that there is no alternative to it. Media reformers and activists searching for public alternatives to commercial media will find guidance from the historical example of quasi-public broadcasting artfully illustrated by Goodman and Hayes.

### References

Denning, M. (2010). *The cultural front: The laboring of American culture in the twentieth century*. London, UK: Verso.

Shepperd, J. (2023). *Shadow of the New Deal: The victory of public broadcasting*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.