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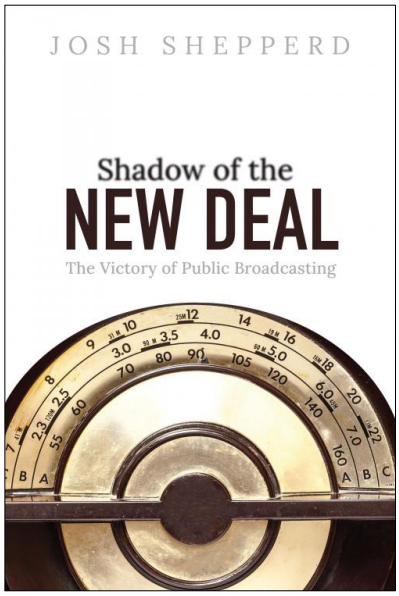
Josh Shepperd, **Shadow of the New Deal: The Victory of Public Broadcasting**, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2023, 244 pp., $28.00 (paperback).



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I begin typing my thoughts on a monograph subtitled ***The Victory of Public Broadcasting*** on the very morning the news breaks: "Corporation for Public Broadcasting Will Shut Down" (Mullin, 2025). A result of funding cuts by the second Trump administration, this entity—which has backed NPR, PBS, and local radio and TV stations across the United States since its creation through the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967—will cease operations in January 2026. In the wake of the unprecedented crisis facing U.S. public media—and higher education, the book's secondary subject—***Shadow of the New Deal*** takes on new affective and political resonance.

The book also holds professional relevance for me; it opens with, and is continually enlivened by, the brutal and pithy observations of Charles Siepmann (1899–1985), a former British Broadcasting Corporation veteran commissioned to evaluate U.S. university radio stations, where the author's, Josh Shepperd, story originates. Seen later as an early architect of the country's public media, Siepmann not only contributed many refreshing and biting lines to the genre of review writing (in which this author now participates), he also played a foundational role in launching media and communication studies at New York University (NYU), before Neil Postman rebranded the department where this author is now employed (see Pickard, 2016).

This lesser-known piece of institutional and intellectual history at NYU epitomizes a broader condition identified by Shepperd and his predecessors in U.S. media historiography: a field that, even in its critical modes, has concentrated so heavily on profit-driven commercial media, while neglecting their noncommercial counterparts. Well before *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Postman, 1986) lamented the state of commercial television, Siepmann's "Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees" (a.k.a. the Blue Book) (Federal Communications Commission [FCC], 1946) laid out a vision for educational broadcasting. He drafted this report for the FCC, drawing on data from Dallas Smythe—then the FCC's chief economist and later the theorist of the "audience commodity." *Shadow of the New Deal*, recipient of multiple awards and honorable mentions, addresses this historiographic gap through exemplary archival work.

The book focuses on public media's "crucial exploratory period" between 1935 and 1952 (p. 6), tracing its origins in educational broadcasting—radio stations run by universities as extensions of the classroom, grounded in the New Deal premise of equal access to education. Around these modest operations, an array of actors emerged from across public, private, and civic sectors. Shepperd

demonstrates, in richly detailed fashion, the ways in which the "nexus of regulation, aspiration by [media] reformers, government organized collaboration, and philanthropic vision, influenced how noncommercial institutions were built, and how information emanating from those institutions was coded" (pp. 71–72). The writing is lucid, and the book is organized not chronologically but thematically, around five interlocking facets central to the consolidation of public media: advocacy, funding, distribution and facilities, research and development, and policy. The chapter and subsection titles are longer than typical, serving as guides for the reader through the often-entangled threads of this history.

One of the book's core contributions lies in unpacking communication regulation as a form of contentious knowledge making, where actors vied to define key policy concepts for institutional gains. For example, the term "education" became a busy site of contestation, with both commercial networks and university stations laying claims—to the absurd degree of the former arguing that barn dances could be "educational"—in pursuit of favorable policy treatment. The fluidity of these definitions, once formalized and put into practice, often led to unintended consequences. The most striking example is "public interest," the mandate directing regulatory discrimination, such as frequency allocation. As someone who ploughs through the furrows of Chinese policy discourse on "public interest," I marvel at the U.S. operationalization of the term—ranging wildly from requiring a full day of filled airtime to "hooking up" and satisfying the audience. A radically different political system did not necessarily produce the best iterations. Shepperd's history reminds readers that layers of translations by self-interested actors are indispensable to any policy making and implementation; no vision or ideal can be realized without negotiation and mediation.

Indeed, one of Shepperd's major messages is the necessity of concrete and innovative strategies to translate policy constructs into operational systems. He traces a trajectory from awareness-raising activism to infrastructure-focused advocacy in the making of U.S. public media. Across institutional boundaries, various actors worked—through trial and error—to calibrate the administrative, budgetary, and technical foundations for and the craft of public service radio, as "attempt(s) to scaffold democratic goals as a technical infrastructure" (p. 112). What resulted was still far from ideal.

Shadow of the New Deal acknowledges historical victories in long-overlooked corners, but it is equally clear-eyed about public media's "establishment" conservatism. Rooted in civic education and elitist philanthropic support, it was long marked by a paternalistic overtone and severe deficiencies in representing diverse voices across lines of gender, race, and sexual orientation. It was never built for structural transformation, nor designed as a forum for participatory democracy. In light of the collapse of federal funding, Shepperd's emphasis resonates. Setting aside competing ideals for restructuring public media, the immediate question is how to get money for nonadvertising media operations. Or, to rephrase, in today's United States, how might a coalition of actors—spanning different causes and constituencies—coalesce around a shared imaginary strong enough to force a policy U-turn, one that would restore, and ideally secure, fiscal commitments more substantial than ever before?

The book also foregrounds how R&D for public media shaped the disciplinary formation of American mass communication. While early effects research was attuned to assist commercial media, it was also mobilized to justify and initiate progressive media reform. This broader, system-building reformism—and its

fundamentally practical endeavors—offers a new context for understanding the firing of German philosopher Theodor Adorno from the foundational Princeton Radio Research Project. Soon after, Adorno would articulate his sweeping dismissal of the U.S. "culture industry" in a more developed form (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1972).

Stemming from the civic education mission, early public media developed genres such as children's programming, vocational training, and cultural heritage content—designed to "encourage the development of tastes and interests" (p. 108)—delivered in instructional, conversational, and dramatized forms. Yet as one reads the book, a question lingers: How did journalism take shape within this sector? After all, much of the longstanding animosity toward public media—which has now come to a head—has centered on its perceived "liberal bias" in news reporting. Ongoing debates similarly revolve around the fraught relationship between public funding and (news) media bias.

In today's moment of crisis, one hears echoes of a 1939 promotion of public media by a leading practitioner, who described it as "nonpartisan, nonpolitical, democratic, organized and operating in accordance with American ideas" (p. 99). What has changed, however, is that the very notion of "American ideas" now faces intense partisan pushback. In truth, Americanness has always been deeply political and partisan—a reality that becomes clearer when we situate the history of U.S. public media within international and geopolitical frames. That same practitioner bolstered his valorization by contrasting "[our] ideology of democracy" with "[their] ideology of totalitarianism" (p. 99). By then, as Shepperd also notes, wartime fiscal boosts had begun flowing into the sector. Wilbur Schramm, a recurring figure in this history, would later develop a global typology of media systems according to Cold War divisions. He went on to lead "communication for development" projects aimed at bringing "Third World" countries into the U.S. economic and ideological orbit—funded in part by USAID (United States Agency for International Development), another casualty of the Trump administration (also see Wu, 2022). To be clear, this transnational angle does not diminish the book's substantial empirical and conceptual contributions. Yet in an increasingly xenophobic climate, it sheds new light on the knotted struggles over what constitutes "media bias," "state media," partisanship, and the very idea of Americanness.

Shadow of the New Deal will appeal to historians of media, media studies, education, and educational research, as well as scholars of public policy. It also speaks, urgently, to activists and advocates seeking to sustain and reimagine a public media system capable of supporting democratic discourse.

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