



The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public. By Elena Razlogova. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 216 pp. ISBN 9780812243208.

In *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public*, Elena Razlogova presents an innovative study that contributes greatly to scholarly understanding of the dynamics between early radio broadcasters and their audiences in America. Based on her 2003 dissertation, Razlogova's work examines what she describes as the "golden age" of radio: the period between 1920 and the early 1950s. During this era, Razlogova argues that "audiences were critical components in the making of radio, the establishment of its genres and social operations" (p. 3), although she acknowledges that the degree of influence listeners exerted within the industry waned after the late 1930s. Razlogova's argument is largely based on her skillful analysis of thousands of audience letters. She presents these letters in conjunction with the written responses, and subsequent actions of the people the audience sought to influence—local and national radio personnel, magazine editors, program writers, sponsors, and officials of the Federal Radio Commission (renamed the Federal Communications Commission in 1934)—to demonstrate the ways in which listeners' expectations translated into change within the nascent industry.

The monograph is organized in a series of chronologically ordered case studies. Four of these focus on individual genres of programming, while the others examine the emergence of the national network system, the influence of radio fan magazines, and the rise of quantitative ratings analyses. Razlogova supports her argument best in her early chapters, which trace the development of sports broadcasting and soap operas. In these chapters, she clearly exemplifies the ways in which listeners—including a largely male contingent of working class immigrant boxing fans and an audience comprised mainly of wage-earning women—influenced content-related decisions, such as the ambient sounds sports fans desired to create a more participatory experience, and character development and story lines in soap operas. In addition, these listeners' letters led to change in the technology used to transmit programming, the development of technique in sportscast announcing, the times when programs would be broadcast, and which companies were permitted to sponsor specific programs. These chapters (among others) also demonstrate another impressive use of sources. By matching the names and addresses on letters with U.S. census returns, Razlogova is able to determine the sociocultural demographics of letter writers in relation to specific genres, which, given the thousands of letters she analyzed, is a significant contribution to our understanding of the listening public.

As Razlogova reminds us, however, while listeners continued to voice their opinions throughout this period, they were able to make the most impact when dealing with smaller, local stations. Therefore, as large commercial national radio networks, including NBC and CBS, gained control over the majority of American frequencies, "relations of reciprocity became the exception rather than the rule" (p. 97). A chapter focusing on Theodor Adorno's work with the Princeton Radio Study reveals how by the early 1940s, the implementation of empirical statistical methods and the formula-

tions of ratings led to a fundamental redefinition of the meaning of listener response. Listener opinion had once played a crucial role in developing content and technology, but by the 1940s the audience was largely shut out of the creative process.

Throughout the narrative, Razlogova invokes the notion of the “moral economy” as a means of contextualization, positing that a populist American moral economy based on notions of fairness, social justice, and a strong sense of anti-corporatism led listeners to write to broadcasters in the first place. The moral economy, she claims, also included local broadcasters, who believed that they had a responsibility to engage with and respect listener opinions. Although the author’s use of the concept in itself is not problematic, her analysis of audience demographics raises questions about whether or not this particular manifestation of a moral economy was shared by all Americans, as she suggests. In instances where the demographic composition of letter writers is discussed, working class listeners predominate, regardless of the genre under investigation, suggesting that perhaps what was being expressed was, more specifically, a moral economy that existed among the working class. At the very least, it is clear that men and women of the working class were those most likely to articulate these shared principles as they related to radio broadcasting.

But this is a minor criticism of what is overall a well-written and important contribution to the field of communication history. Indeed, while previous studies, most notably those of Kathleen Newman (2004) and Bruce Lenthall (2007), have placed radio listeners at the centre of analysis, Razlogova is the first to argue that audiences had a central influence on industry development in the medium’s early days in the 1920s. In broaching the subject of industry formation from the perspective of the listener, the author also challenges the dominant top-down narratives, which are written primarily from corporate and regulatory perspectives. While these histories are crucial components of the scholarship, Razlogova demonstrates that in some contexts, individuals without official decision-making powers could be just as influential as those with them. The result of this reinterpretation is a fascinating, innovative, and nuanced study in the history of radio.

References

- Lenthall, Bruce. (2007). *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the rise of the modern mass culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Newman, Kathleen M. (2004). *Radio active: Advertiser and consumer activism, 1935–1947*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

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