

VOICES IN
THE AIR

Howard Broomfield had big ears. For Howard, radio was more than a medium, it was itself an instrument, a voice, a space where voices could sing where elsewhere they could hardly speak. Through Howard's craftsmanship at the studios of Co-op Radio in Vancouver, many voices came together to form the magic that only radio can fabricate--a magic that can transport listeners from time to space. Howard committed suicide in the middle of Expo 86. This one is going out for him tonight.

Not the BBC/IBA: The Case for Community Radio

by Simon Partridge
London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1982.

Nothing Local About It: London's Local Radio

Local Radio Workshop
London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1983.

Shut Up and Listen! Women and Local Radio: A View From The Inside

by Helen Baehr and Michele Ryan
London: Comedia Publishing Group with Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, 1984.

Rebel Radio: The Full Story of British Pirate Radio

by John Hind and Stephen Mosco
London: Pluto Press, 1985.

From Coast to Coast: A Personal History of Radio in Canada

by Sandy Stewart
Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1985.

What actually happens on radio? More specifically, what is actually broadcast to the listener? All of the books above address these questions. All pay attention to how particular kinds of radio sound, while assuming, and illustrating, that the sounds of radio are structured by the social, economic, legal, and political relationships through which radio speaks. Their arguments over the effect of these relationships on radio are primarily empirical--a critical, interventionist empiricism. The books document interventions in radio practice; they are also themselves interventions in the current dialogue about media uses.

An assumption common to these books is that radio's value needs to be defended against its current practice. Its value is seen to be in the unique ways radio communication defines the parameters of the social. All these books argue that such parameters are extended by emergent senses of locality and community and by the participation of women in program production. These parameters are shrunk by those who refuse to use radio creatively. This last argument occurs in the British books as an accusation against the BBC and in Stewart's book as poignant reminiscences of the old days at the CBC.

Beyond these common approaches, there are differences expressed in these books over how the parameters of radio content (and thus of audience construction) should be mapped. "The social" means one thing for community radio organizers, whose practice focuses on increasing the participation of social and community groups in production. It means something else for those animators of pirate radio who rush to import the latest hit records. Pirate radio, ostensibly concerned with contesting legal broadcasting restrictions, is often preoccupied with raising the standard of listener/consumer connoisseurship. It means something different again for Stewart, the historian of Canadian radio, for whom the nation still represents the most desirable site for a community bonded by shared radio programming.

Not the BBC/IBA was published before community radio had achieved even provisional legal status in Britain. Like the other books published by Comedia, Partridge's book is written as a direct intervention in a contemporary, political media debate. Partridge outlines the history of community in Britain and abroad, tracing the political, legal, and social developments that accompanied its emergence between the 1960s and the present. His purpose was to intensify the early 1980s campaign in Britain to license community stations. Since he wrote, it is clear community radio has lost an important battle, if not the war.

By the early 1980s, a number of community radio groups had formed in Britain, but none were licensed to broadcast. Their work was to animate existing community groups (not "audiences," but ethnic or community groups) in production. The Thatcher government squashed the move to license community radio and simply sent the applicants home, despite the heavy economic and political sacrifices such groups had made (by keeping silent, for instance) while preparing their applications. The reason was clear and more or less explicit: community radio programming could not be relied on to assist the current government. While Partridge does not spell out this conclusion, he encourages it. His concise history and analysis of the development of community broadcasting in Britain (and other countries) will not yet have lost its usefulness, since its goal, in Britain at least, has not yet been achieved.

Local radio--radio for a local geographic site, rather than for a social community--is called, in Britain, the "third stream" (the first and second streams being public and private broadcasting). Third stream radio is examined in the Local Radio Workshop's (LRW) detailed and uncompromising study of three "local" stations in London. Local radio developed in Britain as an attempt to counteract the centralized and determinedly non-commercial broadcasting style of the BBC. "Local" participation is mounted through phone-in shows, features on local personalities, and other such devices. In *Nothing Local About It*, the LRW replicates and dissects typical interactions between radio hosts or personalities and the listening audience. The interactions are exposed as artificial simulations of open participation. Typical "participation" is shown to be thoroughly pre-structured by program timing, language, response, and interpretation--in blunter words, by manipulating and bullying. The LRW's study of music broadcasting and its accompanying patter is acute and appropriately savage. But while it raises a number of questions about concepts of local radio, it doesn't answer them. Both this book and *Not the BBC/IBA* contain much practical information for people concerned with the mechanics of radio broadcasting.

In *Shut Up and Listen!* we meet Doreen. "Doreen" is the archetypal character invented by radio programmers to justify the type of programming most often provided for women. In explaining programming decisions, "Doreen" is constantly and uncomplimentarily alluded to: "Doreen isn't stupid, but she's only listening with half an ear, and she doesn't necessarily understand 'long words'..." *Shut Up* is the most specific of the growing number of demographic mythologies (in this case, the housewife) to appear in recent print.¹ The book is an account of the experiences of several women in organizing as a collective to produce radio programming inside a "local" station in Cardiff, the Cardiff Broadcasting Company. Their task was to actively counter the dominant image of women listeners as passive, domestic, and isolated. The authors document this process through a week-by-week chronicle of program development, which encouraged women's participation through programs on health, childcare, new technology, and other issues. The book includes a study of radio advertising, a discussion of useful program content, and a review of political, legal, social, and cultural issues relevant to the struggle for increased community access to radio.

Rebel Radio is also dedicated to the cause of increased access to radio. Hind and Mosco begin with a "potted history of pirate radio," demonstrating their romantic zeal by starting the story with Marconi. Theirs is a maverick approach to radio: equally enthusiastic about programs dedicated to Jamaican music, "People Against Marxism" (Radio Enoch, from Coventry), and the large number of ethnic communities who have saturated London's airwaves in recent years. Many of the pirate groups have been primarily concerned with ensuring access to a particular musical style; some with the economic advantage of circumventing British broadcasting policy's advertising restriction; others with representing the political views of peace groups, gays, and other activists. *Rebel Radio* is a rich and varied read, with extensive interviews and participant's accounts. The authors argue against the imposition of value judgements or any other form of restriction on access. Their sympathy for pirate radio is rooted in a lively pluralism, and in the insistence that listeners should have access to a wide range of programming choices.

Rebel Radio willingly explores the many conflicts between the groups involved--conflicts over representation (who most validly represents the interests of the Greek community in London?), interference (pirate broadcasters may just as easily interfere with each others' airwaves as anyone else's), copyright and other legal issues (the Musicians' Union, for instance, is unhappy about the loss of fees from pirates), and the role of advertising (the mainstay of the larger, commercial pirate stations who specialize in pop music). Pirate broadcasters of every culture and ideological stripe are allowed to speak for themselves in this book. They offer a vivid sense of the frolics, risks, ambitions, and obstacles encountered by outlaw radio. The book includes appendices on the law and on technical procedures for prospective pirates.

Stewart's book *From Coast to Coast* reflects an urgent need to capture a history of CBC Radio that has threatened to fade as fast as CBC itself. Although the recent birthday celebrations stimulated all sorts of radio reminiscences, Stewart's book stands alone as a document of radio programs, personalities, techniques, and achievements over the past half-century.

From Coast to Coast has a lot of pictures. They show people dressing to the nines to make a studio appearance: the Happy Gang in all their glory, singers, family dramas, teen dances, symphony orchestras, big bands, mining disasters, and all sorts of radio personalities, including that most photogenic of people, Glen Gould. It's ironic, somehow, that these pictures work so effectively in communicating the magic that is radio broadcasting.

Stewart's text is detailed, personable, gossipy, infectious. It's also very moving. The story charges ahead through a medley of chronicles and anecdotes whose aura counteracts the accompanying theme of betrayal and decline. There have been plenty of books about broadcasting in Canada, but hardly any that talk in such detail about the people who produced it. It gives a human face to the CBC as a social construction, a creation, a collective work of art, if you like. The lengthy love affair with radio documented by Stewart is full of joyous, determined,

punchy creativity and collaborative enthusiasm--and even risk-taking--which even now refuses to be stifled by the baboon of privatization and cut-backs that threatens to submerge public discourse in the scramble for an exportable cultural economy. There is no lack of present evidence for such stubbornness, fortunately. Those of you interested in our own magical and, I hope, not-so-transient radio history will find this chronicle a likeable feast.

¹ A detailed critique of the interaction of demographics and programming policy may be found in Hennion and Meadel's study in the popular music issue of *Media, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 8 (1986), and in my "Regulating Difference: Radio Music and the Regulatory Double Bind," IASPM-Canada Working Paper, 1986.

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