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Beyond the Networks* by Alexander Russo*

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Book Review of
*Points on the Dial: Golden Age
Radio Beyond the Networks*
By Alexander Russo

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Alexander Russo's *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio Beyond the Networks* adds to the recent spate of books that investigate seemingly simple but in fact remarkably complex moments in radio history. Russo argues that between the 1920s and 1950s American radio was neither "monolithic" nor "static," but rather an arena rife with challenges, negotiations, and battles waged on many disparate fronts. His account disputes two prevailing assumptions about American radio in this period: first, that it was characterized by the dominance of national networks, and, second, that these networks were instruments of "national unity" (2-3). Russo does not entirely refute earlier histories that have stressed how integral the national networks were to American radio's development, nor that the networks did in fact create some semblance of cohesion at the national level. But by closely studying factors beyond the role played by the national networks during this period, he brings to light new facets of radio's "golden age."

The subtitle of the book, "Golden Age Radio Beyond the Networks" is perhaps a little misleading, as Russo's analysis *is* in fact all about networks, just not the usual suspects. Instead of examining the national networks (NBC Red, NBC Blue, and CBS), Russo investigates radio's less well-known regional and local networks, which shared—and competed with the national networks for—advertising dollars, programming, and listeners. To achieve this Russo examines what he terms "four overlapping axes," audience construction and reception, program distribution technologies, and programming aesthetics (11).

Points on the Dial challenges national network-centric histories, many of which make the case that NBC and CBS established their dominance over the radio industry shortly after their creation in 1926 and 27, respectively. Furthermore, Russo argues for the importance of alternative programming sources during this period, writing that "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). These alternate programming sources and distribution anticipated radio (and later, television) broadcasting's later shift from "live" to recorded programming.

Over the course of five chapters Russo uses the broad umbrella of program distribution to link together a number of seemingly distinct investigations. In chapter one his focus is on radio's "split networks"—stations that purchased and aired multiple national, regional or local network programming, whose existence demonstrates the diversity of network affiliations on early radio. Here he also explores the concept of "spot broadcasting," a term describing many modes of advertising and station announcements. Russo writes, "the primary users of spot advertising were national advertisers seeking to localize their message," a key concern among networks and stations that received programming from multiple sources, yet wanted to retain a local identity for their radio station (35).

In chapter two Russo examines the negotiations between regional and national networks in terms of programming choices and financial decisions, performing a case study of the business practices of John Shepard, a regional network and radio station owner. Chapter

three shifts gears somewhat, and “examines the technological, discursive, and institutional histories of sound-on-disc transcriptions as a means of program distribution” (12). In tracing out these histories, Russo discusses early broadcasting’s culture of “liveness” and the emergence of program distribution channels outside of the AT&T wire services. Chapter four returns to spot broadcasting, the existence of which helps suggest another “way in which radio’s mode of address was not univocal but was rather the product of organizations that acted in a variety of contexts and spatial scales” (116). This leads to a discussion of radio “flow,” and listener dissatisfaction with the abundance of radio’s advertising messages.

In chapter five, Russo again shifts focus to radio reception, including the “assumption of domestic, familial reception as radio’s ideal form” (156). He examines the differences between “primary” and “secondary” listening, including the implications for radio once television broadcasting emerged. This chapter complements the previous work of television historians such as Lynn Spigel and Anna McCarthy, both of whom have explored television’s consumption in relation to the politics of public and private spaces. Russo follows Spigel’s and McCarthy’s examples by exploring the different modes of radio listening as they circulate between the private spaces of the home and the automobile, and the public spaces of business and commerce. Russo’s methodological approach, described as an “interpretive methods of social, cultural, and broadcasting history as well as media theory,” thus produces a study that melds radio scholarship together with historical and theoretical work in sound and technology studies, and early cinema and television studies, in order to construct his assertion that radio, like other media forms, is at once “a technology” and a “cultural form” (185). By performing a trans-media analysis of radio, Russo is able to show the interconnectivity between different media technologies in the twentieth century, and the inability to extract them from their historical and technological context.

Alexander Russo’s contribution to the existing historical scholarship on American radio will be appreciated by specialists in the discipline, as well as scholars interested in the production, reception and distribution of “golden age” radio. *Points on the Dial* reminds readers and scholars of the usefulness of exploring seemingly large moments of media history to extract the exceptions, the

undercurrents, and the intricacies at work, which productively add to our growing understanding of the history of radio and television in the United States.

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