

Razlogova, Elena. *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2011. 216 pp. \$39.95.

Elena Razlogova's *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public*, reexamines the "golden age" of radio, a period from the 1920s to the late 1950s. Razlogova rejects the common narrative of radio's development, which begins with participatory amateur radio but quickly becomes dominated by "one-way local, commercial, educational, and non-profit broadcasting" (2). As an alternative to this narrative, Razlogova examines a huge body of evidence, in the form of listener letters, fan and amateur radio magazines, and corporate archives to tell a different story, one that emphasizes the effect listeners had on shaping radio technology, broadcasting policies, programming, and ultimately the medium itself.

Chapter 1: "At Ringside" details how, in the early days of the 1920s, radio's moral economy emerged from the trial-and-error process of developing and perfecting radio technology. Razlogova uses a series of famous boxing matches as the touchstone of this chapter. Early broadcasts of boxing matches and the resulting listener feedback served to shape listener expectations of broadcasting. Early radio amateurs were often called on to give feedback on everything from microphone selection to antenna length. Even the standard radio voice was largely shaped with feedback (often live and real-time via telegraph and telephone) from listeners. This early participatory atmosphere shaped listener's understanding of the medium, leading to listeners expecting their voices not only to be heard by the corporate broadcasters but to be acted upon. In particular, Razlogova argues that radio listeners developed an expectation of fairness and reciprocity.

In Chapters 2-4, Razlogova traces the heyday of participatory radio. Chapter 2: "Jumping the Waves" examines how the American radio listener's "sense of fairness informed popular opposition to the rise of corporate network broadcasting" (32). Following from the model developed in the early 1920s and described in Chapter 1, Razlogova details how independent and local stations worked to establish a rapport with a specific subset of the audience and how radio magazines had to work to reeducate listeners to a new model, as large corporate networks increasingly took over the medium. Chapter 3: "Voice of the Listener" explores fan magazines, describing how magazines gave listeners the opportunity to see themselves as part of an ongoing and formative debate about the nature of radio: "Magazines built informal bonds of accountability and entitlement between broadcasters and listeners. Listeners debated how the radio industry and society would be structured" (73-4). This ongoing debate was based on the listeners' understanding that they had the power to control the medium. Chapter 4: "Listeners Write the Scripts" documents how listeners were able to do just that. Here, Razlogova illustrates how the system already established in radio, which involved ample listener feedback through letters and other media, was incorporated into the new network broadcasting system in the 1930s. In this period, writers, radio executives, and advertisers paid close attention to responses from listeners and used that feedback to make adjustments to everything from programming to the plots of popular soap operas.

In Chapter 5: “Measuring Culture,” Razlogova uses Theodor Adorno’s involvement in the Princeton Radio Research Project as a touchstone to explore the rise of a scientific approach to radio in the late 1930s and 1940s. In this period, radio networks responded to the claims of social scientists that they could quantify listener preferences with empirical methods. These new approaches to studying listeners transformed the way radio programming was made: by the 1940s, “Postwar polls reflected an earlier trend--commercial radio had become less interactive and personal” (114). Rather than listener letters, the networks relied on and responded to data gathered by pollsters and researchers.

As radio became less interactive and personal, the public became more and more disillusioned with the medium. In Chapter 6: “Gang Busters,” the author locates one opportunity listeners had for expressing their dissatisfaction with both network radio and society: the true-crime show *Gang Busters*, which ran from 1935 to 1957. While the show put the criminal at the center of the plot, listeners, some of whom provided first-hand evidence for the making of the show, were outraged when the writers and creators of the show failed to represent the “truth” as listeners understood it. By ignoring the social factors contributing to crime, as well as racial and ethnic complexities, listeners felt that the networks had fundamentally abandoned them.

The rise of the local radio industry in the 1940s and 50s was the result of a public that felt abandoned by network radio. In Chapter 7: “Vox Jox” Razlogova describes how small, independent stations came to prominence by providing listeners with the reciprocity and direct (or seemingly direct) connection they craved. In particular, disc jockeys established relationships with their radio audience and with local record stores and small record companies. The rise of disc jockeys, who valued and responded to their listeners, led to major changes in radio programming. Disc jockeys popularized the playing of pre-recorded music, eventually guiding the early debates about recording as an art of its own. Disc jockeys were also better able to serve the needs of niche audiences, and as a result, disc jockeys helped promote and develop new and emerging audiences and genres of music, including rhythm and blues. By the late 1950s, the new formats developed by disc jockeys and local radio had again become standardized, and “the national music industry had reasserted its control over radio” (151).

In the Epilogue, Razlogova applies the “moral economy of radio” that she has been developing over the course of the book to modern debates surrounding piracy and intellectual property. She problematizes notions of “fair use” and the concept of an inherent sense of fairness. Razlogova also illustrates that the seemingly new problems of the digital age have their roots in the thinking that evolved surrounding radio, both as a technology and as an artistic and commercial medium. *The Listener’s Voice* is at its core a historical study that seeks to reexamine and re-envision the history of radio. The evidence Razlogova has marshaled is impressive and compelling, and the implications for our understanding of today’s debates even more so.

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