

***The Quieted Voice: The Rise and Demise of Localism in American Radio*, Robert L. Hilliard and Michael C. Keith, (2005)**  
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242 pp., ISBN 0-8093-2674-4, Paperback, £24.50

Radio scholarship is a growth industry these days, and after years of relative neglect, the history and importance of local radio in the United States is finally receiving as much attention as national network radio. Five years ago I could have quickly listed the key studies of American local radio, but today that list would be so long as to become tedious. Scholars are examining the intersections of local radio with class, gender, race, ethnic identities, regional identities, network strategies, Americans' sense of space and place and much more.

Hilliard and Keith's contribution is a historical survey of localism's role in the American radio industry to the present, and it is not a happy story. They argue that local radio programming is being killed by the forces of commercialism and consolidation; indeed, their use of 'quieted' in the title suggests a deliberate snuffing out similar to political prisoners getting 'disappeared'. Especially in music and news, commercial broadcasters are ignoring the needs and interests of local communities, preferring to squeeze in more commercials, standardize playlists according to market research and pay-for-play deals with major record labels, and replace local talent with automation, voice-tracking and national satellite-delivered programming. This goes hand-in-hand with the by-now-familiar problem of media conglomeration: significantly fewer owners control significantly more radio stations, resulting in less competition, less diversity of viewpoints and less opportunity for citizens to have a say in culture and politics.

One of the more valuable dimensions of this book is the authors' concise summary of 80 years of localism, and the book can double as a crash course in radio history. The story goes something like this: in the early 1920s, broadcasting was highly local, with technology limiting signals to a few miles during the day. With the 1927 Radio Act and the 1934 Communications Act, large corporate broadcasters and networks like NBC were given great deference in shaping the radio system, but local content continued to hang on thanks to some pro-localism principles embedded in radio policy (such as attaching licenses to specific geographic localities) and frequent Congressional pressure to support local broadcasting. This localism really came to the fore in the 1950s, when the networks mostly abandoned radio for television, allowing local stations with local content to proliferate. Then came the era of deregulation beginning in the 1970s, which reached its apogee in the 1996 Telecommunications Act and subsequent relaxation of rules limiting how many stations a company could own. Not only did these policy shifts lead to massive consolidation in the industry, but also included removing requirements for local news and the ascertainment of local needs, allowing absentee owners to centralize programming from remote locations, either simulating a local presence

(e.g. through the insertion of local references into a computer-automated programming stream) or ignoring locality altogether. Now further intertwined with the globalizing strategies of multinational conglomerates, the cumulative effect of these changes has been to turn American commercial radio into a bland, standardized and corporatized entertainment vehicle, rather than a site for fostering local identities, local cultures and local public spheres.

The key weakness of this argument is also its strength: simplicity. Although Hilliard and Keith are respected media historians who clearly know their stuff, the lack of subtlety and nuance in their account gives the book urgency but also diminishes its scholarly value. How you respond to *The Quieted Voice* will therefore depend on how you respond to a certain genre of populist political-economic analysis, specifically those calls to activist arms whose primary goal is to inspire policy reform, and whose declension narratives tend to feature the depredations of greedy corporations, the ineffectual tut-tutting of weak and corrupt regulators, and over there, tied to the railroad tracks, the ravishing but helpless public interest, convenience or necessity.

Thus, if your goal is to inspire political action to reform the media system, then this is the take on localism that you want to read (and give to others to read). The authors find support for their contentions in voluminous testimony from musicians, radio producers, politicians, journalists and others, who describe the diminishment of local radio and its negative consequences for the arts, politics, our sense of community, even public safety. Their introduction to radio history helps readers understand some of the technological, legal and economic issues implicated in the question of localism. Importantly, they consider alternatives to the current commercial system, including low-power FM and internet radio, but conclude that what the United States really needs is either political efforts to reduce consolidation of ownership and increase requirements for local content, or for listeners to stop listening, which might force commercial broadcasters to change strategies and bring local news and music back into their programming. Indeed, they argue that 'localism . . . may turn out to be the only means of saving terrestrial radio' (p. 212).

This is not the book to read, however, if you seek to understand the social and cultural dimensions of how and why localism might be both a valuable *and* problematic concept. The basic political-economic explanation here is accurate enough: localism is expensive, so stations try to maximise profit by minimizing local content, and regulators, by and large, let them get away with it. However, while intuitively persuasive, this approach oversimplifies the complex reasons that localism has been such an abused and vexing policy goal since the dawn of broadcasting.

This is most notable in the ways that the authors overstate the purity and virtue of localism while reducing corporate broadcasters to mustachio-twirling caricatures. Localism emerges here as something of an unalloyed good; despite the occasional caveat or qualifying parenthetical, the

book overwhelmingly depicts local radio as a potentially idyllic space of cultural diversity, citizen participation, and vibrant local public spheres. The problem is not that this is wrong, but that it is incomplete, ignoring the problem of defining exactly what localism and local content are, or what the local community is and who has the power to speak for it. For example, the authors neglect a by now substantial body of work that complicates easy distinctions between 'local' and 'national' radio, and instead write as if it is more or less obvious what localism is. This leads to problems such as a recurring conflation of indie music with localism, as if untying the admittedly unholy knot between the major labels and commercial radio would necessarily also be a blow for 'local' content (a dubious assumption). Similarly, the authors neglect important work that doesn't fit their populist narrative, like Chris Anderson and Michael Curtin's study of localism hearings in Chicago in 1962. The hearings revealed widespread public indifference to the principle of localism while privileging white elites who advocated localism as a solution to the threats of 'vulgar' mass culture as they saw them. In other words, localism can be an egalitarian ethos of broad civic participation, but it can also be a tool of class and racial oppression, privileging local elites quite independently of corporate greed, and the fact is that local broadcasting was and is often reactionary, parochial, and exclusionary. Greater localism, even if we could better define it, would be no guarantee of the kind of idealised radio that the authors envision.

Additionally, experts in radio history will find much to quibble with along the way. For example, the 'main studio rule' did not emerge in the late 1930s as a way to strengthen localism, as the authors contend (p. 47), but in the early 1930s as a purely bureaucratic method of pinning down a station's locality for the purposes of complying with the Davis Amendment (which itself was not about localism but about equitable regional distribution of the economic advantages of radio at a time when the lion's share of licenses went to broadcasters in northern cities). And while I share the authors' commitment to media reform, their overblown heroes-and-villains perspective sometimes harms their credibility. Take, for instance, this passage about the supposedly homogenous content of globalized corporate media: '[W]hat happens when that content becomes homogenised to reflect the beliefs of the global media owners and replaces the beliefs and concerns of the many localities globalized media serve? Although occurring decades later than prognosticated, globalization takes on the aura of thought control predicted in the book *1984*' (p. 201). This is such a ludicrously strong assertion of cultural imperialism that the only sensible response is: Really? While I am certainly ready to believe that Rupert Murdoch fantasizes about replacing my beliefs with his own, it is dismaying that such a gross oversimplification of the processes of media production and reception could still be written at this stage of communications scholarship.

This, then, is a book that highlights alarming trends in our media system and powerfully fulfils its goal of pressing the case for reform.

1 Arnheim fled to Italy, following a Nazi ban on his German works in 1933, and completed *Radio* abroad (Behrens 1998). The first publication of the book was in an English translation. This review uses the most recent, 1986 Ayer reprint, which is an unaltered reproduction of the 1936 original.

However, it also oversimplifies difficult issues and obscures the complexity of the role of the local in American life and the media system. What it comes down to is: do you want your radio history in black and white, or in shades of grey?

*Reviewed by Bill Kirkpatrick, Denison University*

### Reference

Anderson, C. and Curtin, M. (1999), 'Mapping the Ethereal City: Chicago Television, the FCC, and the Politics of Place', *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 16: 3–4, pp. 289–305.

***Radio: An Art of Sound, Rudolf Arnheim (1936),***  
**(trans. Margaret Ludwig and Herbert Read)**  
London: Faber and Faber, 296 pp., Hardback

In 1936, German film theorist Rudolf Arnheim presented his latest book to the world, with a title that declared a shift from cinema to a new object of inquiry: *Radio*.<sup>1</sup> In a few short years, Arnheim noted, radio had swept the European continent, with sets now found in all locations from the largest city to the smallest fishing village. In addition to its revolutionary social implications, the aesthetic possibilities of this new medium were staggering: 'Broadcasting has constituted a new experience for the artist, his audience, and the theoretician', Arnheim explained, as 'for the first time it makes use of the aural only, without the almost invariable accompaniment of the visual which we find in nature as well as in art'. Only a 'few years' experiments with this new form of expression', he continued, had produced results nothing short of 'sensational', paving the way for a new art of sound that would complement what Arnheim had argued in his film writings to be the essentially visual art of cinema (p. 14). Although seven decades later *Radio* unquestionably shows its age, Arnheim's book has enjoyed numerous re-printings and is still required reading for today's radio and sound scholars, remaining one of the most thorough and sustained treatments on record of a medium whose own longevity and influence has been matched by few in modern history.

While *Radio*'s object of study was a novel one for its time, readers of Arnheim's landmark 1932 book, *Film as Art*, will find his methodology familiar. 'Even today', he notes in his introduction, 'wireless is followed with much less attention' and had far 'less . . . written and read about it' than film (p. 17). Nonetheless, radio's auralty offered artists a unique 'new means of expression' (p. 14) that could be studied using the same 'esthetic (sic) method which I have already used in my researches on film'. Rooting itself in 'an analysis of the conditions of the material, that is to say, the special characteristics of the sensations which the art in question makes use of', *Radio*, like *Film as Art* before it, makes a case for the specificity of the medium and from this aims to deduce the 'expressive potentialities of