



Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles Over U.S. Television, by Allison Perlman

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BOOK REVIEW

Allison Perlman. *Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles Over U.S. Television*. New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 2016, 241 pp., ISBN No. 978-0-8135-7229-1 (paperback).

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Progressive advocates of media reform are, for now at least, on a roll. Recent years have brought victories both on defense (e.g., the defeats of the Stop Online Piracy Act in 2012 and the Comcast–Time-Warner merger in 2015) and on offense (the 2015 reclassification of broadband services to secure network neutrality). This winning streak might have come to a wretched end by the time you read this, of course, but it seems that the public’s awareness of the importance of media policy (at least digital policy) and ability to effectively engage in media advocacy have taken a turn for the better in the 21st century.

Allison Perlman’s outstanding new book, *Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles Over U.S. Television*, functions as a kind of prehistory of our current Internet era of media policy activism, focusing on the period from the late 1940s to the early 2000s, when broadcasting was the primary arena and the politics of ownership and representation dominated reformers’ agenda. She looks at six case studies: the struggle for educational television in the 1950s and 1960s (focusing particularly on the Joint Committee on Educational Television); the Black Freedom Movement and efforts to achieve civil rights in broadcasting in the 1960s and 1970s; the feminist movement’s attempts to use the Fairness Doctrine, Petitions to Deny, and other mechanisms to force broadcasters to improve gender representations in the 1970s; the clash between deregulatory forces and civil rights groups (especially the

NAACP) over diversity and discrimination in the context of the culture wars of the 1980s; the fight for “family-friendly” programming by cultural conservatives from the 1970s to the 1990s; and the complex history of Latina/o advocacy in broadcasting from the 1980s into the 2000s.

A number of core questions identify what is at stake in each of these case studies: What is “diversity” and what place does it have in our understanding of the “public interest”? What rights do minorities and underrepresented groups have in seeking a media system that speaks to their needs and reflects their interests? What is the connection between ownership and representation, and between representation and the lived experience of different members of society? Can and should media regulation be a site at which social problems are proactively addressed, specifically by correcting for market failure in order to bring about greater social justice and equality?

In exploring these questions, Perlman’s book makes several significant contributions. First and foremost, Perlman is most interested in how minority and underrepresented groups organized, identified their policy interests and goals, and then used media policy advocacy to work toward those goals. In other words, unlike many excellent policy histories that explore policy struggles against corporate control of the media, Perlman explores social and cultural struggles for rights and recognition that, at various times and places, *took the form of media policy advocacy*. Her overriding question is, How did advocates for social change seek to compel broadcasters and policymakers to recognize their interests and incorporate those interests into the definition of the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” that guided media regulation? Perlman’s focus is less about social advocacy to change media and more about media advocacy to change society.

A second contribution, implied in the previous point, is that Perlman approaches policy like a cultural historian; she continually strives to connect specific legal and technical fights outward to larger social and cultural contexts. She gives us the big picture, of course, often over a multidecade sweep, but as a good historian she is also able to situate events squarely within the meanings of their own time. Consider, for example, reserved television frequencies for educational stations in the 1950s. The fight for these set-asides is usually cast as a prelude to 1960s educational television—charming little baby steps in the spirit of “Thank goodness they set aside channels in the ’50s so we could have PBS in the ’60s!” Avoiding such teleological and developmental arguments, Perlman helps us understand what those set-asides meant in their own time—for instance, how they helped mediate tensions between urban and rural in postwar America. She also reminds us that those steps (baby or otherwise) were already in a particular direction: “The reservations enabled the growth of public television but they also structured the limiting way that its public, and its public obligations, would be understood” (p. 31), including suspicion of the popular, political timidity, and an acceptance of the primacy of commercial television.

A third contribution is a particular strength of *Public Interests*. Perlman is clearly of a new generation of critical-cultural policy scholars for whom policy is not the detached and rational province of technical experts but a specialized sphere that both informs and reflects larger economic and cultural struggles. In this view, the most interesting thing about broadcast policy is not assignment of frequencies or even regulation of content per se but the way media policy participates in larger struggles for social control. This perspective requires a deep dive into policy details, of course: There is plenty here to satisfy scholars and policy experts, and the book should immediately go on the syllabi of Media Policy classes around the country (I found it especially helpful in explaining the Federal Communications Commission's "distress-sale" rule and other policies intended to reconcile the FCC's fundamental commitment to corporate broadcasting with demands to increase racial and gender diversity). But Perlman's interest is less in figuring out the "best" policies, much less in approaching the policy sphere as a value-neutral zone of technocratic decision making and impartial interest-adjudication. Rather she is concerned with understanding how civil rights activists, feminists, and other groups engaged in media policy struggles as part of larger strategies of advocacy and activism. The book would thus be as equally at home in a course on social movements as one on the history of broadcasting, and specific chapters should be considered for classes in women's studies, Black studies, and Latina/o studies.

Her fourth contribution is the lesson she draws for activists, which she summarizes as "history matters," "identity matters," "capital matters," and "losing matters." For the latter, Perlman helpfully reminds us that, although the policy reform campaigns she studied often failed to meet their stated objectives, a lot of gray area can be found between winning and losing. Frequently, a failed challenge to a license renewal led to meaningful concessions by a particular broadcaster and served as a wake-up call and warning to others. Even the process of advocating in the media policy realm, Perlman argues, could have positive long-term effects in terms of identity- and goal-formation for those involved and of coalition building across social differences. Furthermore, in some cases, advocacy helped policymakers understand that the "public" of the "public interest" is far from unitary and therefore that regulatory actions have significant consequences for the social and cultural life of a diverse and divided polity.

Perlman excels at making complicated issues comprehensible, explaining even the most convoluted policies and financial transactions with admirable clarity. The book is accessible to undergraduates and thorough enough for scholars; both groups will thank her for her careful attention to organization, and her mastery of the subject matter and relevant literature is first-rate. The writing would benefit from more of her own voice. A neutral scholarly tone dominates, but the occasional flashes of humor or sarcasm (e.g., Latino groups "made the mistake of thinking that the control of the sector primarily serving, and profiting from, their

community ... involved the rights of Latino publics,” p. 165) demonstrate her potential strengths as a stylist and as an observer with a distinct perspective.

As she makes clear throughout the book, Perlman is far from naïve or Pollyannaish about economic and political forces that stand opposed to media reform. She recognizes that the activists she studied were forced to accept the inviolability of corporate capitalism and commercial broadcasting if they wanted to influence policy at all, and her conclusion that “capital matters” could hardly be expressed more directly. Nonetheless, she explicitly states that she does not want to present another declension narrative in which the good guys always seem to lose, a worthy scholarly stance but one leading to strained silver linings. In chapter after chapter, as advocates’ petitions are repeatedly denied and the Commission repeatedly violates its own diversity policies, Perlman insists on the value of the fight for media reform:

Media advocacy has decoupled the corporate interest from the public interest and challenged the tendency to see every field of activity through the lens of market relations. Accordingly, it has been a consistent site of resistance, for liberal and conservative groups alike, against the “everything is economized” rationalities of neoliberalism. (p. 182)

I wish Perlman had defended this proposition more vigorously; it seems equally arguable that the 40-year (and counting) hegemony of neoliberalism has been barely troubled by consistent resistance from within the system, whereas radical actors (such as radio pirates) and others working outside the official policy sphere may have achieved more in terms of lasting structural change in the public interest. In any case, those who like their policy history with a righteous dose of pessimistic corporate bashing may find the book too optimistic, or at least too measured; however, I find Perlman’s balanced assessments to be generative and productive.

In summary, Perlman’s meticulously researched and well-argued book is an invaluable addition to policy studies, media history, and the literature on social activism, addressing important omissions in all of those fields. It advances the recent emergence of cultural approaches to media policy research and demonstrates to those outside of policy studies why struggles over media regulation matter. As the tools, capacities, and concerns of media reformers continue to shift in the digital era, I strongly recommend this history for its careful explication of the past and thoughtful analysis of what we can learn from that history for our present and future.