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Big Voices of the Air

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■ Foust, J.C. (2000) **Big Voices of the Air**. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 249 pp. Hardcover: \$54.95

Those of us who grew up listening to the clear channel giants like WLW during the waning years of clear-channel broadcasting remember nighttime

AM radio as way to visit distant cities; to hear music and information from places different from that **where** we lived. In retrospect, some may also assume that these stations existed as the result of a clearly defined FCC policy designed to ensure that this long-distance radio service was available to the American public in the most effective and efficient manner.

Finally, we may have thought the powerful clear channel stations were at the head of the broadcasting pecking order; unchallenged leaders of a commercial radio monolith whose place was understood and accepted by all.

Big Voices of the Air gently corrects these and other misconceptions about clear channel radio.

Big Voices is a readable "examination of the clear channel debate from a policy-making perspective." In its eight chapters, the book chronicles the major issues and policies that led the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to allocate clear channels in the 1920s, the growth and experimentation with "super-power" in the 1930s, to the slow, but ultimate, demise of true clear-channel broadcasting in the 1940s, 50s and early 1960s.

Foust explains the early rationale for the clear channel radio — that of ensuring that rural listeners had service — and traces the parameters of an internal struggle between commercial broadcasters competing for dominance by manipulation within the political area. Each chapter addresses the debate from a different perspective. Chapter content includes a primer on the technical characteristics of AM radio, a thorough discussion of the trade and lobbying organizations affecting the clear channel debate, the efforts of clear channel stations to elicit support from farm groups, and an examination of the fail-

ure of FCC Docket 6741's comprehensive review of the clear channel policy. It is interesting to note that the stations' trade organization, the Clear Channel Broadcasting Service, built its case for continued clear channel operation on rural service. The reality is that the stations never really targeted rural listeners, nor did they receive strong support from farm organizations during Docket 6741 hearings.

In the latter portion of the book discussions of policy are interwoven with references to the changing landscape of AM radio in the 1950s and 1960s. Ultimately, it is a shift in America's listening and viewing habits that makes the resolution of Docket 6741 moot.

Big Voices of the Air is a welcome contribution to the literature. It provides a closer look at an often neglected or glossed-over period in broadcast history. It also provides fresh perspective on the policy debate surrounding clear-channel AM radio. Foust frames his discussion nicely around Krasnow and Longley's venerable policy analysis model. This well accepted framework for policy analysis adds to the book's appeal in both history and law and policy classes.

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