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Gary R. Edgerton

Butler University, gedgerto@butler.edu

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Updating the Standard for the Next Generation of Electronic Media Historians

Gary R. Edgerton

Christopher H. Sterling & John M. Kittross. *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting* (3rd ed.). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002. vii_975 pages. Boxed features, illustrations, tables, short chronology, glossary, historical statistics on electronic media, selected bibliography, author index, subject index. \$59.95.

Michele Hilmes. *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002. v_428 pages. Photographs, notes, further reading, websites. \$58.95.

Broadcasting as a field of study is at least 75 years old. Part of the discipline's folklore has it that Edward R. Murrow took the first radio announcing class ever offered in the U.S. at the then Washington State College in 1928. "It was called community drama, in order to qualify as an academic course," explained Alexander Kendrick, one of "Murrow's boys" and the initial biographer of the legendary newsman (Kendrick, 1969, p. 100). Whether this offering was really a historical first is beside the point; what is important for our purposes is that Murrow's formative educational experience in broadcasting was tellingly pre-professional in orientation, thus setting the appropriate example for the literally tens of thousands of students who followed in his fabled footsteps over the next half-century.

In the beginning, especially, broadcasting in American higher education received far too many of its developmental cues from the industry that it purported to analyze and critique. Historical scholarship, in particular, was largely a peripheral concern. One glaring exception to this early tendency was Erik Barnouw's groundbreaking and highly influential three-volume history of broadcasting in the U.S.—*A Tower in Babel* (1966), *The Golden Web* (1968), and *The Image Empire* (1970). The seminal impact of this trilogy cannot be overestimated. In a 1991 special issue of *Film & History* devoted to "The Future of Media Historical Research," Christopher H. Sterling wrote of his heartfelt personal appreciation of Erik Barnouw's pioneering work.

It's now been a quarter of a century—almost to the day—since I walked into the old University Co-op bookstore near the University of Wisconsin in Madison, to find a book called *A Tower in Babel*, about the rise of American radio to 1933. I shelled out \$8.50 for a copy in days when I could rarely afford a book at its retail price (I was just in my first year of graduate work), took it home and devoured every word in two or three days, hungrily reviewing its bibliography of riches I barely knew about. I was especially excited to see that a serious author and a university press were issuing a scholarly series (two more volumes were promised) about a topic I found exciting—but figured few other people cared about. Maybe this *was* a legitimate field of study after all! (Sterling, 1991, p. 45).

Barnouw's trilogy was clearly something of an anomaly at the time. A handful of American radio histories did exist, although none were as broadly conceived nor as well

researched and readable as *A Tower in Babel* and its two successive companion volumes (Archer, 1938, 1939; Dunlap, 1935). Barnouw was also familiar with the first installments of Asa Briggs's monumental chronicle of radio and television in Britain, coming as these books did from his own publisher, Oxford University Press (Briggs 1961, 1965). Still, he actually found more numerous and seasoned models for planning his general history of broadcasting by reviewing the existing film and journalism literatures (Emery & Smith, 1954; Jacobs, 1939; Knight, 1957; MacGowan, 1965; Mott, 1962; Ramsaye, 1926). Even then, the sheer quantity and quality of historical research that existed about movies and newspapers far outstripped anything comparable on radio and television. The "field of study" that Sterling referred to was heavily socially scientific at the time, mostly producing public opinion surveys, experimental studies on media effects, and quantitative content analyses. This is the scholarly context into which Chris Sterling and John Kittross published their first edition of *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* in 1978.

Many of us who were young graduate students then welcomed *Stay Tuned* with nearly the same kind of enthusiasm with which Sterling had greeted *A Tower in Babel* more than 20 years before. Barnouw, too, was our first point of reference, but *Stay Tuned* was even more meticulous and comprehensive in telling the interrelated stories of radio and television as industries and institutions, sketching out the broad parameters of what happened with unmatched depth and detail. The great value of Barnouw's trilogy was that it was the first history of broadcasting in the U.S. to attempt a multidimensional approach to the material, integrating biographical, social, political, and industrial information into a wide ranging three-volume narrative. Sterling and Kittross learned from Barnouw's model and even expanded on his holistic design, as the historiographic choices that they made in the original edition of *Stay Tuned*— and have continued in their two subsequent revisions and updates (1990, 2002)—reflect more the dominant social scientific perspective of the broadcasting field over the last generation, a time when this subject became an increasingly legitimate undergraduate and graduate major.

The late Erik Barnouw was indeed a pioneer on many fronts. His recent memoir describes the dizzying array of positions that he held in his long and varied career—actor, stage manager, lyricist, translator, journalist, broadcast writer, director, and producer—before becoming a university professor, curator, archivist, and the preeminent historian of broadcasting with the publication of his trilogy (Barnouw, 1996). He created the benchmark that Sterling and Kittross (1978) were to build upon in researching and writing *Stay Tuned*. Where Barnouw's historical narrative was always informed first and foremost by his personal experiences of having worked in the broadcasting and advertising industries, Sterling and Kittross were far more scholarly in the way that they self-consciously crafted a historiographic approach that is probably best described as developmental and empiricist in outlook.

By adopting a developmental view of radio and television history, Sterling and Kittross perfectly exemplify a second wave of historical consciousness, mapping out this newly emerging field of broadcasting. Their principal goal in writing and now revising and updating *Stay Tuned*

for a second time remains to thoroughly delineate in one manageable volume the specific contours and traditions of this young discipline for their academic peers and students. “In order to affect the future wisely,” write the authors toward the end of the first chapter of the third edition, “we *must* become aware of past principles, trends, decisions, and events” (16). In this way, developmental history on any topic always attempts the dual functions of informing and socializing those who are drawn to a particular field of study. This practical dimension of *Stay Tuned* also infuses this history of radio and television with a much clearer purpose, dovetailing nicely with the more vocational disposition of the broadcasting discipline when the book was first published.

In addition, developmental histories are characteristically structured according to the nature and scope of their subjects, rather than employing some broader outside framework such as society, politics, economics, or culture. In *Stay Tuned*, specifically, Chapter 1 is even entitled “The Context of Broadcasting,” defining the appropriate unit of analysis by which Sterling and Kittross relay “the unfinished story of broadcasting” throughout the remainder of the book (16). Besides this introduction and the concluding Chapter 12, which is called “Lessons from the Past for the Future,” the ten middle chapters systematically organize the topic at hand around nine essential headings: Technology; Broadcasting Stations; Broadcasting Networks; Educational Broadcasting; Broadcast Advertising; Radio-Television Programming; The Broadcast Audience; Regulatory Trends; and Broadcasting and Society (including Foreign Broadcasting). In making their intentions transparent, the authors explain, “The system of broadcasting in the United States is virtually unique in the world (not necessarily better; simply different), and this book explores how the system is unique, how it got that way, and why” (15).

In practice, a developmental perspective is frequently combined with one or more other outlooks in constructing a more fully realized historiographic approach. In the case of *Stay Tuned*, for instance, Sterling and Kittross reflect their social scientific roots by designing and executing a classic example of an empiricist history of broadcasting. The first job for empiricist historians is exhaustively to assemble the “facts” of history into identifiable patterns that largely reflect the field’s (and their own) commonsense view of the subject. In managing this research agenda, Sterling and Kittross are always striving—as much as possible—for a posture of impartiality and neutrality. “We try to provide data that may help you [make decisions],” disclose the authors in their preface, “but we are not egotistical enough to act as ‘the’ judge. Although both of us are trivia buffs, we also are well aware that trivia of person, time, place, and gadget is much less important than are trends” (xx).

As a result, Sterling and Kittross become researchers par excellence in *Stay Tuned*, collecting and arranging together in one volume a reasonable facsimile of what is currently known and accepted as the standard version of American broadcasting history. They provide two alternative tables of content—one structured chronologically, the other topically—for easy access to the patterns and themes that they underscore throughout the text. They also include 137 boxed features, illustrations, and tables; a 19-page chronology of American broadcasting; a

highly useful glossary of nearly 450 basic concepts; 52 pages of historical statistics on electronic media; an extensive up-to-date selected bibliography including books, websites, and background information on key museums, specialized libraries, and archives. This single volume has understandably grown in size by more than 73% over its three editions (from 562 to 705 to 975 pages), reflecting a comparable expansion of the supporting literature on the subject.

Stay Tuned is quite simply a *tour de force* of developmental and empiricist history. It can be used as a textbook for students, a primer for the uninitiated scholar, or a handy guidebook for those of us who are generally familiar with the topic, but need a comprehensive one-volume reference work to check on any one of the myriad of specifics that are now an understood part of the history of American broadcasting. No better single source presently exists, even as the next generation of electronic media historians is already rethinking and rewriting the established approach and agenda of radio and television history as best exemplified by the third edition of *Stay Tuned*.

As empiricists, Sterling and Kittross occupy one end of the historiographic continuum; a younger generation of critical or postmodernist historians of electronic media has started to reinterpret this subject area with a different set of assumptions. Where empiricists strive for a certain degree of objectivity, postmodernists are decidedly subjective in their theoretical outlooks. Empiricists perceive facts as being outside themselves to be gathered and categorized; postmodernists regard all facts as reflecting the relative position of the historian/critic. Empiricists value comprehensiveness, reliability, and validity in their work; postmodernists assume partiality, uniqueness, and contingency. The social science perspective no longer monopolizes the field of broadcasting as it did a generation ago. Instead, more humanities-based approaches to radio and television studies have resulted in a marked upswing in scholarly work in history, theory, criticism, styles and genres, authorship, political economy, institutional structures and other cultural matters such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class.

A case in point is Michele Hilmes's *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (2002) which now joins *Stay Tuned* and the handful of other general histories of broadcasting (Halliard & Keith, 1992), radio (Douglas, 1999; Hilmes, 1997; MacDonald, 1979), and television (Barnouw, 1990; MacDonald, 1994; Watson, 1998) published so far. Hilmes admits her "great debt" to Sterling and Kittross in her preface, noting that *Stay Tuned* "has provided a basic reference point and remains one of the most comprehensive sources for U.S. broadcasting history" (xvi). In *Only Connect*, though, the author is neither developmental nor empiricist in an approach to the subject that she characterizes as "interventionist history, seeking to generate questions as much as provide answers" (xvi). Unlike Sterling and Kittross, her goal is less to document and describe the evolution of an institution, an industry, and a profession; rather her stated intention is to "deflect or diminish the effects of certain counterprogressive events that would set back the cause of diversity and democracy" (xvii). Hilmes is thus writing *Only Connect* from a politically engaged perspective, where history is best

understood as an instrument of social change, rather than merely a record of the past, no matter how thoroughly rendered.

A third wave of historical consciousness has clearly emerged among electronic media historians, hot on the heels of scores of more targeted historical-critical studies that have all been published since the 1978 debut of *Stay Tuned*. Selected examples include aesthetic (Feuer, 1995), biographical (Marc & Thompson, 1992), cultural (Tichi, 1991), industrial (Boddy, 1989), intellectual (Czitrom, 1982), international (Smith, 1998), political (Allen, 1993), social (Spigel, 1992), and technological (Winston, 1998) histories of radio and/or television, as well as hundreds of like-minded books and articles that comprise an ever expanding scholarly literature. As Michele Hilmes asks in Chapter 1 of *Only Connect*, “Where can we possibly begin such a history? How could we draw lines around it sufficient to contain it within the covers of a single book? In short, we can’t. And part of the intellectual heritage of twentieth-century postmodernism is acknowledgment of this fact” (2).

Still Hilmes manages to construct an alternative historical model. This general survey of broadcasting history starts with a brief introductory chapter entitled, “Making History,” followed by a straightforward and surprisingly conventional storyline that is structured chronologically, beginning “Before Broadcasting” (Chapter 2) and ending at “2000 and Beyond: Looking Backward” (Chapter 14). In contrast to *Stay Tuned*, *Only Connect* is selective, rather than encyclopedic. Its first allegiance is to the social context, not to broadcasting *per se*. And its greatest strength is in its periodic detours—which Hilmes calls “connections”—where she develops two to three case studies per chapter, highlighting a series of both offbeat and significant individuals (such as radio personality Dr. John R. Brinkley, master programmer Fred Silverman), events (the payola scandal, the WLBT case and its racial connotations), programs (*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *The Sopranos*), and issues (unruly women on sitcoms and daytime talk, the tabloid presidency, among many other examples). These connections reveal much about broadcasting’s complex and ever changing relationship to the expressions of power, access, freedom, identity, and multiculturalism in contemporary America. Significantly, *Only Connect* is the first general survey of broadcasting to emerge from the second generation of scholars formally educated in electronic media studies. Given the continuing maturation of the field, more histories of radio, television, and the internet are likely to follow.

As a final note, broadcasting has become an increasingly problematical and outmoded concept in 2003. Even though it is prominently featured in the subtitles of both *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* and *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*, Hilmes alludes to it as “a rather archaic term” (410), while Sterling and Kittross question whether “‘broadcasting’ is still a valid label for the subject matter of this book” (xix). The co-authors of *Stay Tuned* probably sum it up best by concluding that “broadcasting has lost its once ‘special’ status and has been lumped in with other electronic media” (742). Digital convergence has apparently changed the terrain. Just as the borders of broadcasting as a technology and a process are being redrawn, so too is the discipline that once

bore its name being reconfigured. Electronic media scholars can now be social scientists, humanists, or hybrids of both traditions. The variety and complexity of a field of study that struggled for legitimacy only a generation ago speaks to its current vitality and richness, even as it outgrows its original name.

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