**Broadcasting in the UK and the US in the 1950s: historical perspectives**

JAMIE MEDHURST, SIÂN NICHOLAS and TOM O’MALLEY (eds), 2016

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The catalogue of works which adopt a transnational perspective on media history has grown spectacularly over recent years – a point which is emphasised by the selective list given in the opening chapter of this further contribution to the field. These welcome developments in scholarship have helped to broaden the nationally-based and sometimes parochial perspectives which preceded them, as well as identifying some important patterns of influence – especially within Europe and between Britain and the USA. In considering Anglo-American exchanges in the field of broadcasting history, Michele Hilmes’ *Network Nations* (2012) is justifiably the most visible and best-regarded text. But even such an extensive history leaves space for more detailed investigation and this new collection focuses productively on 1950s broadcasting. Amid a rapid adjustment to peace-time prosperity, this was the era in which television struggled against radio for dominance on both sides of the Atlantic, as television programming and viewing habits were being formed, developed and widely discussed in public forums.

Nevertheless, this collection is not quite as transnational as its title suggests. The editors are British, and so was the location of the symposium where its chapters were first presented as research papers. As a result, only three of the ten chapters genuinely consider British and American developments on equal terms. The remainder ‘embed the international dimension within the discussion’ (p. 2) of British developments in programming, in viewing and in institutional arrangements for broadcasting. Nevertheless, this largely-British focus is forgivable on two grounds. First, because transnational media history can only ever be an extension – however welcome – of a national perspective. Nationally-based institutional forces and public expectations have always had a powerful determining effect on the roles and outputs of national media, even though they should not be seen in isolation, and this was very much the case with radio and television in 1950s Britain. Secondly, because the quality of scholarship within these articles amply justifies their publication regardless of way in which they are framed within this collection.

In the first of the transnational chapters, Darrell M. Newton focuses on *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*, the NBC discussion programme which periodically ran editions jointly hosted in the USA and Britain in conjunction with the BBC. In parallel with a history of these jointly-produced programmes, he focuses on the emerging 1950s hostility to immigration, comparing attitudes to Puerto-Rican immigration to New York with those to West Indian immigration to Britain. Such comparisons were the subject of an NBC/ BBC edition of *America’s Town Meeting* in 1955 whose content Newton records and analyses in detail. The result is not only an insight into transnational joint production, but a fascinating snapshot of the contemporary attitudes of broadcasters, experts and the public towards race and immigration.

Another chapter, by Kristin Skoog and Alexander Badenoch, records the foundation and growth of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television, a transnational community of leading women broadcasters. The authors show how these women, often marginalised within their own countries’ broadcasting services, sought empowerment through shared ideals and approaches, especially to the representation of women through radio. Elsewhere, Jean Chalaby continues his work on the international television format trade by tracing it back to its origins in a deal made by the BBC to show Mark Goodson’s *What’s My Line?* in 1951. Chalaby argues that it was this contract which established the legal foundations for the very notion of format rights at a time when the BBC was reluctant to acknowledge that such rights existed. Subsequently, in the book’s only truly global move, Chalaby shows how internationally-licensed game-show formats invaded Britain and then much of the world over the next forty years

The British-focused articles may be of less direct relevance to American readers, but several of them feature stand-out work which makes significant contributions to our existing understanding of broadcasting in this era, sometimes challenging the ‘things we thought we knew’ about the period. Siân Nicholas offers a welcome and detailed examination of the immediate post-war attitudes and service developments at the BBC which reveals a Corporation surprisingly critical of (and criticised for) its wartime role and almost embarrassed by the popular success of its wartime programmes. Andy Medhurst examines the 1949-50 Beveridge Inquiry, largely remembered now as heralding the end of the BBC’s monopoly but, he argues, seen at the time within the higher echelons of the Corporation almost as an existential battle. In considering television’s challenge to sound broadcasting in the 1950s, Kate Lacey avoids the conventional focus on audience figures and concentrates instead on the experiential differences between listening and listening-and-viewing. Tim O’Sullivan maps early British public perceptions of television as technical marvel, status symbol or ‘colossal waste of money and time’ (quoted on p. 85), noting also how the spread of television was restricted not by lack of demand but by the limited availability of receivers and the slow spread of transmitters across the nation. Finally, Allan Jones and Tom O’Malley investigate the attitudes of the scientific community and the New Left respectively to the new opportunities offered by television in 1950s Britain.

Perhaps it is wrong, then, to judge a book by its title. While the contribution that this collection makes to transnational scholarship about broadcasting may be relatively limited, it features three strong transnational chapters which do develop themes and analyses that embrace US- and European-focused perspectives very productively. For those seeking a clearer understanding of British broadcasting in the post-war period, however, its benefits are greater still. The chapters by Nicholas and Medhurst, in particular, challenge the accepted historical narrative and seem to demand its revision. For this, they deserve to be widely read.

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