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Book review: Radio in the Global Age

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HENDY, David (2000), *Radio in the Global Age*, (revised edition), Polity Press, Cambridge, 260pp. ISBN 0 7456 20698

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The first thing that strikes you about David Hendy's comprehensive overview of contemporary radio is that it exists at all. Radio, as the author notes early on, is often overlooked among the modern media. The medium McLuhan designated as "hot" in a world he predicted would favour "cool" media (p. 1), radio has survived; thrived even. In Australia, for example, Australians have between them some 36 million radios and more than half of all households boast five or more sets (Radio Marketing Bureau, 2000, 242). But as much as radio is ubiquitous, it remains "taken for granted" and a media minnow (p. 2-3). Radio, Hendy (p. 5) says early on, "needs to be reconnected with the mainstream of media and communication studies".

The casual relationship we enjoy with radio is made explicit in our pattern of consumption. By the end of the last decade, the Australian Bureau of Statistics could report that adult Australians watched about two hours of television a day and listened to about 80 minutes of radio (ABS, 1997:37). But, unlike television, radio was primarily an accompaniment to other activities and received our undivided attention for just eight minutes daily (1997:41).

While listeners in the developed nations tend to treat radio as a sort of aural wallpaper, for much of the developing world it plays a completely different, and pivotal, social and political function - as the primary means of disseminating information, particularly in areas of low literacy. The indifference with which radio is sometimes treated tends to obscure the significance of patterns of change within the industry and the way in which these fit into larger media debates. Hendy's (p. 5) focus is that radio, in one sense the most localised of the mass media, is also part of the wider environment and that "...many of the same processes - the growth of multinational corporations, the splitting of audiences into niche markets, the drive to reduce costs and maximize profits - can ... be used to explain many of its characteristics".

It is difficult to avoid comparing Hendy's volume to Andrew Crisell's landmark 1986 book *Understanding Radio*, republished in 1992. Like Crisell, Hendy is concerned with the politics of radio transmissions, the nature of the medium and the way in which it is consumed, and the nature of sound in an image-obsessed world. But Hendy's book contains more detail on radio industry structures, including ownership

and funding, formats and demographics, syndication and the impact of digitisation. Hendy notes that the British radio industry has been cautious in its approach to digital transmission, because of the initially low take-up rate by listeners. But over the long term he sees it as spelling greater segmentation of the market. Radio may also become more like other media since digital technology also offers the possibility of radio with text and/or pictures.

There is a wonderful catalogue of data here. In terms of its organization, the radio industry involves two activities: broadcasting and production. But these complementary functions do not have to be conducted simultaneously and thus radio worldwide is generally a mix of these two systems, producing material in-house and using syndicated material as well. Yet while the market for intra-national program sales can be high (as the Australia-wide syndication of the Sydney-based talk-back hosts Alan Jones and John Laws programs, has shown) the trans-national market is low, largely because of the degree to which radio is language-based. Hendy's example (p.13) of BBC program sales provides a fascinating example. Of the approximately £126 million worth of programs sold by the BBC per year, less than £1m is earned from radio sales, not least because most of the English-language markets are in developing nations with little to spend on broadcast rights. Elsewhere (p. 11) we learn, that one hour of radio costs about the same as three minutes of TV, that the production costs of a music radio station are about one quarter of those of news and that live news costs about half that of packaged news to produce (p.37).

While radio programming can be catalogued in a multitude of different ways, at their most basic, stations tend to fall into two camps: either talk or music. Popular music radio is generally highly automated and was one of the first broadcast formats to take advantage of computerisation. In talk radio, as we have seen, costs rise with the degree to which news and current affairs are packaged. Live talk is one of the cheapest formats in broadcasting, the presenter's salary notwithstanding. But news programs with a high degree of live content can also descend into trivia. Hendy (p. 91) refers to the phenomenon of making a "fetish" out of instant communication of events, before their narrative has become fully resolved or, in other words, until the facts are fully known. Live news is not just instant; it is also "highly perishable".

This points to the trouble with radio for those of us interested in information programming. Not only do quality radio news and current affairs come at relatively high cost, but the audience for such programs, heard primarily on the AM band, is falling and with it the employment of radio reporters. In Australia, this slide was detailed in a 1997 Communications Law Centre report (CLC:29), which found that the employment of journalists in commercial radio stations fell nearly 40 per cent in the decade between 1986 and 1996.

Radio finds itself competing for a static resource. The number of

potential listeners is not growing to any significant degree. In addition, radio faces a new threat as it moves towards digital transmission: a more “promiscuous” audience which will use the options afforded by digital sets to “station hop” (p. 54), in the same way that TV viewers have been doing ever since remote controls were introduced in the early 1980s. As Hendy puts it, the challenge for radio will be, not to gain listeners, since there is not substantial increase in listeners to be gained, but to retain them.

Though Hendy makes considerable effort to give his book a global feel, its focus is, inevitably British and, to a lesser extent, American, though these markets have echoes in smaller centres such as Australia and the Pacific region.

It seems at odds with the spirit of this book to suggest that one of the reasons that monitoring developments in radio is so important is that they presage likely trends in television. For example, radio was first to offer a diverse number of programming formats – from “news and talk” to contemporary rock, easy listening, classical, sport and so on. As more delivery systems are available to television it too will become a more segmented medium, with implications for program making and employment. But this is to ignore the real value of Radio in the Global Age, which makes a compelling case for the importance of radio in an increasingly crowded media and adds significantly to our understanding of its role. David Hendy writes from a personal understanding of the medium combined with great attention to detail and an engaging writing style; all of which makes this a very valuable contribution to the literature on the broadcast media.

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