

Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935–1947. By *Kathy M. Newman*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. xiii + 237 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables. Cloth, \$55.00; paper, \$21.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-520-22372-1; paper, 0-520-23590-8.

Reviewed by Douglas B. Craig

“This book had its beginnings,” Kathy M. Newman writes in *Radio Active*, “in my quest to prove that radio was not a force for evil, and, more specifically, that it did not merely ‘passify’ [*sic*] its listeners” (p. 2). Newman aims “to search out clearly documented and unmistakable forms of radical social activity” (p. 2). An associate professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, Newman challenges the traditional Marxist view of audiences as purely commodified, amorphous entities, arguing that radio audiences during the 1930s and 1940s sometimes tried to resist the impact of commercialism upon U.S. radio broadcasting and broadcasts. Far from being passive consumers, Newman argues, radio listeners could at times be active molders of radio programming, flexing their muscles to express their approval and disapproval of specific programming.

Radio Active is divided into two parts. The first section looks generally at radio listeners, those Newman describes as “radio intellectuals,” and the beginnings of direct action, such as listener boycotts that stimulated radio audiences to become more politically engaged. Part Two features three case studies illustrating listener activism and empowerment. “In the end,” Newman declares, “the stories in this book are meant to inspire us to think about ways we might want to use, protest, and/or produce mass culture for ourselves” (p. 13).

At its best, *Radio Active* is both original and provocative. Newman’s discussion of the “radio intellectuals”—social scientists, psychologists, and audience analysts—is interesting. Her biographies of Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno, respectively the best-known analyst and the most famous critic of radio during this period, while not novel, provide a context for the debates between intellectuals and industrialists regarding the social impact and utility of radio. Newman’s discussions of James Rorty, Ruth Brindze, and Peter Morell shed light on these controversies as well. These three writers, who criticized the tenor and direction of commercial broadcasting in the 1930s,

composed trenchant criticisms of the power wielded by radio advertisers over a medium that professed to aspire to civic education and enlightenment. Little is known, however, about Rorty, Brindze, and Morell outside their books, and Newman has performed a valuable service in bringing their broader views to light.

Part Two of *Radio Active* is the more original section, where Newman explores genuinely new ground, beginning with a fascinating account of the CIO boycott of Philco Radio for its sponsorship of radio commentator Boake Carter. The CIO and its president, John L. Lewis, had become frequent targets of Carter's commentary, which emphasized the CIO's and Lewis's alleged extremism and obstructionism. This spurred a CIO boycott of Philco, forcing the company to cancel Carter's contract in 1938. Another chapter examines the role of radio soap operas in capturing female listeners, who became radio's most prized audience. This chapter is full of new material, making it a valuable addition to the existing excellent studies of television soap operas, particularly Robert C. Allen's *Speaking of Soap Operas* (1985). Newman's content analysis of "The Story of Mary Martin," which aired after 1937, is particularly useful, as is her concluding case study of "Consumer Time," a program carried by CBS between 1935 and 1947 that addressed the concerns of consumers and tried to educate them so they could exercise their power of the purse effectively. It was, Newman claims, "one of the few radio programs that was *designed* to make listeners 'radio active'" (p. 155).

The faults of *Radio Active*, however, threaten to outweigh its virtues. Although Newman has read exhaustively in the radio literature of her period, and although she acknowledges her scholarly debt to the works of Susan Smulyan (*Selling Radio* [1984]) and Robert McChesney (*Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy* [1992]), her grasp of the literature is incomplete. In Part One, she retraces research on areas already covered in published work, such as my own *Fireside Politics* (2000), and her arguments would have been improved had she adopted a more historical perspective. Those who argued for consumer empowerment during the 1930s, for example, owed much both to the muckrakers and progressive reformers of the early years of the twentieth century and to the New Deal reformers of the 1930s. Newman virtually ignores the pivotal role of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in limiting radio broadcasters' ability and willingness to create truly "radio active" listeners. Had she chosen to examine the FCC,

she could have built significantly on the work of McChesney, whose critique of early radio's subservience to the production side of capitalism ended with the demise of the Federal Radio Commission, the FCC's predecessor, in 1934. Not until the conclusion of the book, and then only cursorily, does Newman acknowledge the role of advertising agencies in creating much of the radio networks' programming during the 1930s and 1940s.

Newman also tends to oversell her conclusions. The evidence of consumer activism by radio listeners is slighter than her conclusions might suggest; what is notable about the Boake Carter boycott is not so much its typicality as its rarity. Programs like "Consumer Time" were also heard infrequently on American airwaves, and—as Newman concedes—even that show was more often given over to wartime food conservation imperatives than to consumer activism. Although Newman claims to have "told the story" of the creation of "a culture of 'radio activity'" between 1935 and 1947 (p. 166), she has in fact achieved something less. Her case studies provide vignettes rather than sustained analyses of her sources, and her sweeping conclusions teeter uncertainly on top of a too-slim evidentiary base. Passages are sometimes marred by awkward phrasing (Boake Carter is said to have "increased the volume of his torpor" on page 97), and her structure is often disjointed. Had she paid more attention to the wider picture, weaving the case studies into a broader interpretative framework, *Radio Active* would have been a better book.

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