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4-1-2008

Review: *Electric Sounds: Technological Change and the Rise of Corporate Mass Media* by Steve J. Wurtzler

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Recommended Citation

Horten, Gerd, "Review: *Electric Sounds: Technological Change and the Rise of Corporate Mass Media* by Steve J. Wurtzler" (2008).
Humanities Faculty Articles & Other Works. 13.
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STEVE J. WURTZLER. *Electric Sounds: Technological Change and the Rise of Corporate Mass Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. xi, 393.

All of us are familiar with the ways in which the digital revolution is reshaping our current media environment, be it through the uses of music, the innovations in the film industry or its impact on radio and television broadcasting. In his book, Steve J. Wurtzler reminds us that media revolutions like these are not new and have fundamentally restructured our media uses and experiences in previous eras. The one that he focuses on took place in the early decades of the 20th century when the introduction of electric sound, first through the telephone and the phonograph, followed by the emerging radio industry and Hollywood's conversion to sound movies, forever altered Americans' media experiences and practices.

The strength of his study lies in its interdisciplinary nature and in the fact that it combines topics generally treated separately, such as the history of the phonograph, radio broadcasting and the film industry. Wurtzler calls his approach an example of the "technological history of media" (p. 14), which highlights the cross-disciplinary nature of his explorations that combines history of science with cultural and media studies. Throughout his discussion he emphasizes that although significant and even dominant at times large media corporations did not by themselves decide upon the uses of new technologies: "Upon innovation, media technologies have multiple, often conflicting identities. The ultimate meanings they take within social relations are the product of contestations and struggles" (p. 15).

Chapters 1 and 2 trace the technological innovations of electrical sound technology as well as the dissemination and publicity surrounding these new media practices. Wurtzler explores the paths of the emerging electric acoustics with great care and based on meticulous research. He recalls the many debates these innovations inspired, especially the hope and call for a "new acoustic consumer democracy" (p.2). And while some of these options became reality and coexisted side-by-side, Wurtzler also makes it clear that large corporate giants like RCA, AT&T and General Electric used their market dominance to increasingly control these new industries, especially through strategic acquisitions and selective prosecution of patent rights. Advocates for an expanded, participatory media democracy thus frequently had to be satisfied with niche markets and a marginal existence and were easily trounced by the dominant commercial media paradigm. Media conglomerates, tie-ins and synergy were already well established patterns by the early 1930s. RCA, for example, owned the film studio RKO and the Victor phonograph company as well as controlled the NBC radio network, and it used these assets for concentrated and coordinated media campaigns.

In Chapter 3 Wurtzler examines the links between and impact of already established media practices on newly emerging ones. Several themes of this insightful analysis are particularly noteworthy. One relates to the relative quick adoption of phonograph usages by the emerging radio industry in the 1920s. The fact that the radio set quickly emerged both as a musical/entertainment instrument as well as a priced piece of furniture was modeled after the phonograph industry, which already had made the same transition by the late 1910s. In the process, the technological workings of the new machines were gradually disguised, accelerating what the author calls "the dissimulation of the machine" (p. 120-21). Another intriguing example of cross-media adoption of uses was the brief

but failed experiment with sponsored films in the early 1930s, discussed in the ensuing chapter. Inspired by the success of radio sponsorship, film studios explored commercial sponsorship of films. Several national manufacturers and advertisers signed agreements with Paramount and Warner Bros. and produced films extolling the power of the disinfectant Lysol (*A Jolt for General Germ*) or the adventures of tea and coffee cultivation (*On the Slopes of the Andes*). Ultimately, both advertisers and studios agreed that product placements in films were by far more effective and less intrusive forms of sponsorship, discontinuing commercially sponsored films.

The discussion in Chapter 4 also picks up on the explorations of Chapter 2 and analyses the conflicts and struggles which decided the social roles the new media would perform. Exploring aspects such as the work of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) during World War I, the development of a network-dominated radio industry and the establishment of the Federal Radio Commission in the late 1920s, among others, Wurtzler confirms what a number of media historians have argued before him: “Acoustic media could promote democracy—but democracy understood as ‘consumer democracy’ in the first instance and only secondarily cultural and political democracy” (p. 224). In the last substantive chapter, the author finally traces the sound battles that were being fought in a number of these industries during the 1920s especially. At heart of the controversy was the question whether the first responsibility of electric acoustics was to accurately record and replay sounds (transcription paradigm) or whether media could use sound for novel expressions and even illusion (signification paradigm). Wurtzler convincingly demonstrates that the initial preponderance of the transcription model, where audiences wanted primarily authentic and untainted recordings slowly gave way to what the author refers to as “signifying fidelity” (p. 268). This meant, for example, that Hollywood recording engineers increasingly expanded their “arsenal of tools through which they might technologically mediate sound so as to signify fidelity to an original event” (p. 276).

Even though a number of Wurtzler’s arguments retrace those advanced by other media historians, *Electric Sounds* expands our understanding of this critical era of media history and is particularly valuable in terms of understanding the cross-media influences. In the conclusion to his book, Wurtzler also analyzes the parallels between the electric sound revolution to the one that we are currently undergoing and highlights what we can learn from those past experiences. All of these aspects make the book an important contribution to the fields of history of technology and media studies.

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