



Across the Waves: How the United States and France Shaped the International Age of Radio

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BOOK REVIEW

Across the Waves: How the United States and France Shaped the International Age of Radio

DEREK W. VAILLANT, 2017

Chicago, University of Illinois Press

pp. xiii + 239, \$29.95 (paper)

Derek W. Vaillant's *Across the Waves: How the United States and France shaped the International Age of Radio* takes on the task of shedding light on the neglected history of transatlantic radio broadcasting between France and the United States. By doing so, it reflects the transnational turn embraced by many broadcasting historians, and it helps further the understanding of international media history, and of Franco-American relations. This book dwells into the complex U.S.-French radio history, and its multitude of cultural, political and technical entanglements, from the early 1930s to 1974, when France dismantled its state media system; a period referred to by the author as 'the international age of radio'. As the author acknowledges himself, he has tried in this book to go beyond the concepts of 'Americanization' and 'remaining French' that have dominated the perception of Franco-American broadcasting and cultural history. *Across the Waves* analyses the transatlantic developments of radio broadcasting in order to offer a renewed perspective of this intertwined history. It also attempts to deconstruct these two concepts that are described as appealing, but limited to truly encapsulate the situation, especially as they neglect the influence of French broadcasts, and broadcasters, on the United States. This book is written accordingly to a rather traditional, though justified, chronological approach, in order to reflect the evolutions of Franco-American radio history, with a clear cut following the aftermath of World War II.

Throughout the chapters, the author regularly changes his lens of inquiry, by dwelling on various aspects of radio history, as he looks at cultural, technical and political (at national and international levels) aspects of the Franco-American 'international age of radio', during peace as well as war times, with a fascinating chapter on the US broadcasts to France during the second World War. Another chapter, a case-study on the 'first weekly transatlantic women's radio talk show' (p. 101), *Bonjour Mesdames* (Hello, ladies), highlights these changes of lenses particularly well. Vaillant analyses in it the technical and material aspects of this programme, while revealing its cultural impact, especially on questions of gender norms, and bringing it into a larger scale of analysis, by showing how it can be

seen as an ‘ideological artifact of the mediated geopolitics of the Cold War’ (p. 103), following the ideology behind the Marshall Plan. This example also highlights another strength of Vaillant’s monograph, which is its ability to change scales and theoretical approaches to construct a convincing narrative. This narrative is indeed based on contextualisation, on comparative approaches of the two countries, as well as a transnational perspective and a series of carefully chosen case studies that highlight the overarching argument. This is made possible by the extensive use of archival material (some pictures, maps and transcriptions of radio programmes are also present in the publication) throughout the book, which reveals the depth of the research undertaken on both sides of the Atlantic. The variety of sources used is impressive and supports the variety of lenses and approaches chosen to write this book, which is further pushed by the author’s strong knowledge of radio historiography in the United States and in France. Both sides of this transatlantic history of radio seem to be equally represented, and *Across the Waves* truly manages to find a balance and does not give more weight to one country over another.

The publication is a useful tool for any scholar interested in broadcasting history, in international relations, or in the cultural history of France and of the United States, for it is at the crossroad of these fields. As mentioned above, Vaillant’s publication appears to carry on with this transnational turn in broadcasting history, and, in that sense, it seems to follow in the footsteps of Michele Hilmes’ *Network Nations* (2012), in the sense that it helps deconstruct the dominance of closed national perspectives on media history, by building bridges between the United States and European nations. One other element regarding Vaillant’s book should be noted: it is a well-written piece of historical analysis, and the author manages to tie together an enjoyable writing style with scholarly rigour and a complex conceptual framework, something which should be praised.

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