Stephen Sposato and WM.A. Smith
Radio: A Post Nine-Eleven Strategy for Reaching the World's Poor
Lanham, MA.: University Press of America, 2005, pp. xxvii + 243.

The reason I am in a position to write this review is because of my life-long love for radio. My father introduced me as a child to BBC Radio 4, still the first medium I turn to in the morning and the last I switch off before retiring. Its news output is superior to anything that is broadcast on television, and its comedy is the most innovative available in the UK today. Hearing the news of Indira Gandhi's assassination at 3am on 31 October 1984 via the BBC World Service turned me on to the excitement of international radio broadcasting. Even today during my travels to the distant corners of the world the thrill of hearing the BBC's announcer declare "This is London" prior to a rendition of Purcell's 'Lilibulero' still makes me proud to be British in a way the national anthem never can.

Today listening to the radio is easy: my digital radio gives me a crystal clear reception of Radio 4 and the BBC World Service wherever I am in the UK; I no longer spend time twiddling dials and straining to hear through the static the station identification signals from Radio Australia or Radio China International; and I no longer despair as I did during the Cold War that almost every station encountered on my shortwave radio seems to be Radio Moscow International. All the serious listener needs now is a URL, a good broad-band connection and Windows Media Player, and I can as easily switch between domestic and international radio as I can turn on an electric light. For all intents and purposes the romantic era of radio broadcasting has gone.

But it has gone only for some and only for a minority. As Stephen Sposato and WM. A. Smith reveal in this outstanding collection of essays radio remains the

dominant medium for a considerable number of people in under-developed areas of the world. It is not the medium of choice; there is no choice when poverty, illiteracy, and the lack of technological infrastructure make access to alternatives (especially the internet) difficult, if not impossible. For this reason it is entirely appropriate for the authors to remind readers that perhaps the greatest advance in radio broadcasting, if not in national and international communications, was the invention of the transistor in 1948. The transistor allowed the manufacture of cheap portable radios that might be purchased by individual households or for community listening. Without the transistor it is unlikely that radio would have realised its versatility: it would not have made the contribution to education, nation-building and democracy that Sposato and Smith describe in this fascinating and compelling documentary. Or as Muhiuddin Haider writes in the introduction:

> Radio is a uniquely capable technology for reaching the world's poor, marrying many of the strengths of modern broadcast and mass communication with the qualities of being low-cost, comparatively low-tech, and readily usable in the limited technological environment of underdeveloped countries and regions (p.xxi).

Even my father's favourite BBC Radio 4 programme *The Archers* makes an appearance in the book as a model of what we would today label 'infotainment': it is not surprising that in its fifty-six years history, making it the longest running radio programme in the world, many of *The Archers*' fans may have forgotten that their beloved soap opera was designed to give farmers agricultural news, information and advice in the austere 1950s. In one sentence Sposato and Smith capture the climate of

post-war British innocence: ‘In a series of client interviews, Harry Burt, a Lincolnshire farmer, suggested that what farmers really needed was a popular program, a farming version of the hit radio soap of the day “Dick Barton,” private eye’ (p.55). Overlooking the mistake here that every radio nerd will pick up – Dick Barton was introduced as ‘Special Agent,’ not a ‘private eye’ – we can nevertheless mourn for long lost times when BBC producers sought and acted upon the advice of individual Lincolnshire farmers.

The book adopts a wide-ranging focus: each chapter offers a geographical case-study, primarily from Africa or Latin America, to demonstrate how radio has been used in international development. The authors report how the use of drama is used to deliver advice about health, family planning, the virtues of breast feeding, and how to avoid and deal with sexually transmitted diseases. ‘Spot advertising’ in Honduras instructs listeners how to avoid dehydration, still one of the biggest killers in the developing world, while Radio Mineras in Bolivia and South Africa’s ‘Soul Buddyz’ programme contribute to a renaissance of community. The use of this variety of case-studies reveals serious scholarship and an aspiration to be prescriptive in how best to spread the message of international development.

This leads me to my two criticisms of the book. First the subtitle: ‘A post nine-eleven strategy for reaching the world’s poor’. Given that there is very little mention of the tragic events that unfolded on 11 September 2001 or its consequences for listeners and broadcasters, the subtitle is something of a misnomer. It is also intellectually flawed since one of the most powerful arguments of the book is continuity: for what other reason would the authors include a discussion of Grace Archer’s death? And surely the use of ‘Spot Advertising’ reveals an undeniable link with radio’s history: selling soap, selling a presidential candidate, selling breast

feeding – spot advertising has been there, done that. It is also unfortunate that the authors forget to outline the strategy they promise in the subtitle, and they certainly do not suggest a strategy that departs radically from anything that came before 911. If anything, the radio audiences considered in this volume would judge the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic to be more relevant and a more significant event in their history.

My second concern is that the book is overly descriptive and short on analysis. While is it possible to make a claim that the story can tell itself – the scripts reproduced in almost every chapter are fascinating to read and do allow a clear understanding of how the radio broadcasts work – a little more editorial input would have provided a greater sense of the why, how and with what effect, especially in terms of bringing the threads together and helping to drive the discussion towards the strategy the subtitle promises. In too many chapters a short paragraph introduces and concludes the reproduction of a script, an approach that is frustrating in a book that seeks a serious academic readership.

In conclusion, this is a well-written and engaging set of essays that are a powerful reminder that even in our multi-media age good old-fashioned radio can still play a valuable role in informing, educating and entertaining audiences. Readers will enjoy the tour of the developing world and a glimpse into the working practices and broadcasts of radio stations there. But like me, they may be left wanting more analysis to fully appreciate radio's impact and potential.

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