

Book Review

De radio. Een cultuurgeschiedenis



Huub Wijfjes (ed.)

De radio. Een cultuurgeschiedenis
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In December 2019, this journal published a set of articles on the history of radio in a handful of European countries. In their introduction, the editors to this special issue ‘Developing Radio Histories’ (Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, Anya Luscombe and Huub Wijfjes) showed how radio historiography evolved over time and recently developed into a more sophisticated field. One of these changes is a shift away from a technology determinist approach to one where social, political-economic, commercial and cultural shifts are taken more seriously into account. This change in radio historiography acknowledges that technology is more than just about technical inventions and applications, and that it is socially constructed and connected to contemporary social environments, cultural practices and norms. This multifactorial approach comprises a growing interest in studies that look at audiences and their everyday

experiences of modern life through audio-visual media. Other changes are linked to approaches that focus on radio's intermediality, where radio's history cannot be understood without looking at what happened with other media and cultural industries like theater, popular music, television and the internet. Another recent trend in radio historiography, especially since 2000, is to consider radio more insistently as a transnational medium. Most histories of radio, so the editors argue, are locked into national contexts, and tend to forget how the medium was intrinsically apt to be applied as a tool in international relations, colonial projects, cross-border propaganda and public diplomacy.

One of the strengths of *De radio. Een cultuurgeschiedenis* is precisely that the authors try to apply most of these trends in this multiperspectivist history of radio in the Netherlands. This is not surprising because this volume, which is edited by the Dutch media historian Huub Wijfjes, contains thematic chapters by seven authors, including contributions by the editors of the above-mentioned theme issue of *TMG Journal of Media History* (22, no. 2, December 2019). *De radio* is a nicely illustrated and designed volume with nine chapters on a variety of perspectives. After a useful introduction, Huub Wijfjes goes into the prehistory and the early period in the development of radio, indicated here as a media-archaeological approach to radio broadcasting. I will not go into the question whether this chapter could be labelled as media-archaeology, but what is interesting here is that

Wijfjes doesn't restrict his story to a list of technological inventions and developments. In this strong contribution, Wijfjes illustrates the complexities in the development of radio broadcasting from an international perspective, with many protagonists and organisations being active in developing radio in a varied set of countries. It is a pity that there is no reference here to Brian Winston's model of (media) technological change, but Wijfjes nicely illustrates the phases of scientific knowledge ('science'), the idea to develop a medium ('ideation'), followed by the first concrete applications ('prototype'), the 'performance', 'invention' and later 'diffusion' of the new medium. Besides the international dimension of this story and the importance of an *histoire croisée* (entangled history) approach, this first chapter underlines the importance of a set of radio amateurs in the development of the new broadcasting medium in The Netherlands. Some of these, like the engineer and radio pioneer Hanso Idzerda, went on to collaborate with the Philips company.

The second chapter uses a mix of technological, social, cultural and political factors in order to describe the specificities of Dutch radio during the 'golden age of radio' between 1920 and 1960. Unlike most other countries where public broadcasting organisations were often national or federal state corporations, the broadcasting system in the Netherlands was organised around member-based broadcasting associations. This arrangement had close ties to the 'pillarisation' of Dutch society, where different ideological,

religious and political groups (e.g. Catholics, Protestants, socialists, communists) developed their own parallel network of separate leisure, media and other organisations (e.g. newspapers, magazines, sports clubs, schools). In his chapter, Wijfjes nicely interweaves this structural-political and ideological narrative on separate radio societies under a public broadcasting umbrella, with a story on what these member-organisations offered on a symbolic level – information, ideological propaganda, music, entertainment. An intriguing part of this chapter deals with ‘*zuiltucht*’, or the degree to which members of the different pillarised broadcasting organisations were loyal to, or disciplined by, their own pillar. Although Dutch radio was structurally based on representing the different pillars and their ideological-cultural ideals, Wijfjes speculates about audience’s autonomy to be less loyal than hoped for, and to be seduced by competitive organisations – sometimes just simply by offering cheap presents or organising special events with well-known artists open for all.

The third chapter, also by Wijfjes, goes into what happened since the 1960s when the closed system of pillarised organisations under a common public broadcasting structure was broken. Wijfjes’ historical narrative is again multiperspectivist. Besides dealing with technological shifts (e.g. the arrival of the transistor radio) and with social and cultural developments (e.g. youth movement, flower power, grassroots movement), the author writes about how new commercial competitors (e.g. Radio Luxembourg) challenged the public

broadcaster and his pillarised organisations. The most important of these challenges came from illegal offshore commercial stations such as Radio Veronica (1960), that offered popular music from a ship anchored off the Dutch coastline. Other commercial stations arrived like Radio Noordzee, Radio Caroline and Mi Amigo, and they helped to let the public broadcaster rethink its overall policy. The history of Dutch radio changed dramatically in this period, with the arrival of new stations, a shift in the public broadcaster’s programming strategy, and a series of legal policy initiatives (e.g. the 1967 Broadcasting Act) and a restructuring of the public broadcasting system. The final part of this comprehensive chapter goes into the meaning of digitisation for Dutch radio. Wijfjes argues here that although the radio landscape in the Netherlands became even more complex, public radio broadcasting persisted and still is a central player. But the main impact of digitised radio services is the one of individualisation, of the shift towards a more pronounced ‘listener’s autonomy’.

After these chronologically organised chapters, the following parts of the volume are thematically oriented. Philomeen Lelieveldt writes about Dutch radio’s importance for the world of classical music. In this fine chapter on radio’s intermediality (Chapter 4), the author argues that the medium was an important cultural institution as a producer and promotor of classical music. The fifth chapter deals with popular music. Its author, Lutgard Mutsaers, gives an historical account of the interaction between the Dutch music industry and the new medium, which

became its most important distributor. Chapter 6 focuses on radio news and information. In her contribution, Anya Luscombe indicates how news and information were relatively weakly developed in the first decades, but that the number of news items slowly increased at the end of the 1930s when Germany invaded Poland – hence illustrating the importance of international political urgency. The arrival (1951) and success of television (1950s) also dramatically changed radio news and journalism. The number of news items increased significantly, and radio news also tackled news topics and developed new programming techniques. Luscombe also argues that radio journalism became more critical in the 1960s – a tendency which caused problems with internal censorship, and corporate policies of ‘text control’ and ‘moral restrictions’ within the public broadcaster (p. 235-236).

The next chapter goes into radio’s engagement with sports. In his contribution, Ruud Stokvis argues that radio was by far the most important medium for sports coverage and sports promotion in the Netherlands, at least until television took over its hegemony. In this detailed chapter on radio programs, sports events and influential sports journalists, Stokvis also touches upon an underdeveloped, but hugely interesting aspect which is audience’s experience of radio. In a pillarised society, radio’s sports coverage could act as a trigger, Stokvis argues, to ‘abolish religious and regional separation.’ (p. 279)

The final contribution to *De radio* deals with international radio initiatives in the Netherlands,

more in particular those in the context of the Dutch colonial project and radio world services. In his interesting contribution Vincent Kuitenbrouwer tells the story of Dutch initiatives to broadcast internationally, for instance at the end of the 1920s when engineers from Philips were successful in establishing a broadcasting service between Eindhoven and the Dutch East Indies (the Dutch colony consisting of what is now Indonesia). The most important part of Chapter 8 is devoted to the Dutch radio world service, that was founded after the Second World War (1947). Radio Netherlands Worldwide (*Radio Nederland Wereldomroep*) was a public broadcaster, producing and transmitting programs for international audiences outside the Netherlands. At the end of his chapter, Kuitenbrouwer addresses the issue of the end of the world services in 2012. One of the reasons for abolishing the *Wereldomroep* was linked to austerity policies of the right-wing cabinet under Prime Minister Mark Rutte, characterised by severe budget cuts. Politics and government’s austerity policies, however, were only one of the reasons why the Dutch traditional world services were reduced. In his chapter Kuitenbrouwer argues that international radio is in many respects at odds with digitisation, calling it an ‘outdated medium’ because thanks to digitisation Dutch audiences have a direct access to all kinds of radio channels and initiatives.

Boasting an impressive amount of detailed information on Dutch radio history and using a multiperspectivist approach, *De radio* is a fine

piece of contemporary collaborative media historiography. Two final reflections. First, on radio history and the national context. Reading *De radio* from a Belgian perspective, I was struck by the fact that apart from technology and foreign popular music, radio history seems to operate within very national confines. Reading the book, I often thought that a similar (but non-existing) book on Flemish radio history would produce a similar list of groundbreaking policy initiatives, important radio events, and enigmatic radio personalities, but what about parallel developments or even entangled histories? Second, on radio history and audience experiences. Working myself on the history of film and cinema from the perspective of audience experiences and memories, I wondered whether a bottom-up approach and oral histories would produce an interesting and refreshing extra layer for understanding radio's historical role. Some

chapters in this book produce interesting hypotheses on, and traces of, audiences, for instance in terms of listener's letters, audience's loyalty to pillarised radio initiatives (cf. *zuiltucht*), or audience's engagement with sports through radio. If this adventure of studying radio audiences is to be undertaken, it is high time to dig more deeply also into all kinds of traces on audience's engagements with, loyalty to, and enjoyment of radio.

Notes

1. Kuitenbrouwer, A. Luscombe and H. Wijfjes, "Developing Radio Histories," *TMG Journal for Media History* 22, nr. 2 (2019): 1–7. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18146/tmg.593>.
2. Winston, *Media, Technology and Society: A History: From the Telegraph to the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 1998/2003).

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