
In retrospect, the back cover of this book serves as something of a warning: National Public Radio (NPR) personality Dick Gordon writes that Michael McCauley’s book is like “that missing piece of the family archives.” While this has a clear element of truth, Gordon fails to mention that McCauley also serves as the nostalgic relative who takes you through the archive, naming all the characters but really saying nothing about the larger social context. One leaves feeling better informed about faces and names, yet still wanting for a sense of the greater social significance.

To be fair, perhaps scholarly analysis is not the purpose of this study, but the author’s actual intention is not quite clear. The publisher’s comment clearly states the book’s promising ambition to place “the development of NPR within the historical context of the wider U.S. radio industry, the ideological debates of postwar America, and contemporary debates about the ways in which mass media can better serve the citizens of a democracy” (bookflap). How does the reader reconcile this seemingly scholarly approach with an introductory chapter that concludes with the line “we are now ready to meet some of the people who helped build public radio into the industry we know today” (p. 12), as though we are being led to the NPR staff social?

In the end, this book is about NPR and written for NPR listeners. As Dick Gordon forewarns: welcome to the family archives.

NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio tells the story of the birth (conceptualized at a San Diego conference in 1969, incorporated a year later) and subsequent development of National Public Radio in the United States through to the present day. People and programs come and go, their character, efforts, and accomplishments described in detail by McCauley, but a greater sense of the value of public broadcasting in America remains conspicuously absent from the proceedings. If McCauley’s statement that public broadcasting was designed “as an entity that would not threaten the profits of commercial broadcasters or the sensibilities of conservative politicians” (p. 34) is true, why is it that NPR has been in the Republican crosshairs virtually since its inception? Richard Nixon vetoed reauthorizing the Public Broadcasting Act in 1972 and Ronald Reagan brought in massive funding cuts to public broadcasting during the 1980s. Obviously someone felt threatened.

For Canadian communications scholars grappling with the myriad issues surrounding our own CBC, understanding the rationale behind such political assaults on NPR south of the border is key to developing an understanding of the role played by public broadcasting in the global media picture.

McCauley does a commendable job in examining the formative early years of radio and the surprising number of educational radio broadcasters in America; however, the reasons surrounding the birth of NPR in the late 1960s are not as clear. Canadian readers will take interest in the fact that NPR architect and Buffalo native Bill Siemering, whose show This Is Radio provided the template for NPR’s long-running All Things Considered, credits his approach to radio to “listening to neighboring CBC stations” (p. 26) and that the debut of All Things Considered on May 3, 1971, included a dramatic anti-war piece from the CBC.

McCauley’s emphasis on audience numbers, funding sources, and demographic research results in a book that often reads more as a marketing report than as a thoughtful analysis of a key element of the American political landscape. There is no vitriol in the writing concerning the enemies of NPR, but of course, it is hard to demonize the economic establishment when your subject is almost single-handedly saved from financial ruin by a $200 million donation from Joan Kroc, heiress of the McDonald’s hamburger fortune.
The book follows a fairly straightforward chronological approach to the NPR story. After a brief tour through the history of radio in the United States, McCauley examines the rise of NPR out of the foundation laid by the Association of College and University Broadcasting Stations (established in 1925 and later renamed the National Association of Educational Broadcasters). Key figures such as Siemering and first NPR president Donald Quayle steer the group through the turbulent first few years when, for example, the staff of the show *All Things Considered* did not even have recording equipment until two weeks before the show was to debut.

McCauley’s attachment to and fondness for his subject matter are clear and do not pose a problem for his study of the evolution of NPR and the changing cast of characters who have played key roles; however, any greater sense of why NPR was needed in the first place and the role it continues to play in the overwhelmingly commercially driven American media environment is sorely lacking. At a time when the Bush administration has been accused of blatant partisanship for appointing Kenneth Tomlinson as chair of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (leading several Democrats to call for his ouster) and Republicans have considered a full withdrawal of funding for public broadcasting, citing Hurricane Katrina re-building projects as an excuse, the American citizenry needs to examine the role played by public broadcasting in relation to the greater public sphere.

There is also cause for concern regarding McCauley’s closing argument that for NPR to “provide listeners with the basic informational tools necessary for civic competence” (p. 120), the network should move away from dealing with a wide range of material and instead gear its programming more to the fuzzy concept of the “monitorial citizen” (p. 120). According to McCauley, this “new model of citizenship” (p. 120) is preferable because instead of acquiring a mountain of information via NPR, the vast majority of which McCauley argues is of little consequence to the average citizen, monitorial citizens “sample the information landscape for precisely the things they need” (p. 120).

This poses some very serious challenges to the overall purpose of public broadcasting and may well explain why McCauley generally avoids the issue. How does one reconcile the “monitorial citizen” with the traditional philosophy of public broadcasting serving as a vehicle for robust political discussion and a plurality of voices? What are the issues that bind the people as a community?

Readers will find McCauley’s work lacking as an academic study or a work that sheds new light on the relationship between public media and citizenship. In the end, he offers more advice for NPR (appeal to various ethnicities) and gives due tribute to those who have built public radio into a formidable presence in American media. This is where McCauley’s book works best: as a celebration of accomplishment at NPR.

*Gregory Taylor*  
*McGill University*