

Ehrlich, Matthew, University of Illinois. "Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest"

Documentaries enjoyed a brief heyday on American network radio just after World War II. This paper will discuss a new book-length study of those documentaries. Journalists and dramatists joined efforts to use radio to remake America and the world for the better. Edward R. Murrow helped form the CBS Documentary Unit, and similar units developed at the other networks. They produced programs advocating action on everything from juvenile delinquency, slums, and race relations to venereal disease, atomic energy, and arms control. For a time, their efforts were enabled by the commercial broadcasting industry, which was under pressure from the Federal Communications Commission to demonstrate that it was truly serving the public interest. The director of the CBS Documentary Unit declared the emergence of "a virtual Utopia for craftsmen who believe in radio's usefulness as a social force." By 1951, however, that utopia evaporated as radio gave way to television, the "good war" against fascism gave way to the Cold War against communism, and many of radio's top "craftsmen" landed on the blacklist.

The study draws upon the NBC Company Records at the Wisconsin Center for Film & Theater Research in addition to the collected papers of several principal players in this era of documentary. It also draws upon original audio recordings, scripts, and notes culled from a number of other university archives, the CBS News Archives, the Paley Center for Media in Beverly Hills, California and in New York City, and various private collectors and online sites. The goal is to reveal how radio documentaries responded to the political, economic, and cultural upheaval of the era and how they highlighted what media scholar James Carey termed the enduring "moral and political ambiguities" of journalism and the American mass media.

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