

Meyers, Cynthia B., College of Mount Saint Vincent. “BBDO and US Steel on Radio and Television, 1948-52: The Problems of Sponsorship, New Media, and the Communist Threat”

The period 1948 to 1954 was a disorienting time for the broadcasting industry and the advertising industry that helped support it. Few were aware that the well-established means of doing business, such as single sponsorship, live NY-based programming, and advertising agency production of programs, would not fully survive the transition from the radio era to the television era. Networks, advertisers, and advertising agencies were forced to experiment, improvise, and jockey for advantage in a rapidly changing media environment.

As a case study of this period I propose analyzing materials from the Bruce Barton Papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Barton helped found the advertising agency Batten Barton Durstine & Osborn. US Steel was one of BBDO’s most important clients. During this period, BBDO helped US Steel manage labor unrest and negative public perceptions. BBDO oversaw US Steel’s sponsorship of a radio program featuring a well-known theater company performing quality plays, *Theatre Guild on the Air*. However, BBDO and US Steel struggled with how to transition the program from radio to television. Moreover, as concerns grew that Communists were attempting to infiltrate programs and subvert them, advertising agencies in charge of the programming sought to satisfy clients and audiences that only “loyal Americans” staffed their programs. The Barton Papers include memos discussing how to “protect the advertiser’s interest” by avoiding “the use of people who could be questioned” (B. Duffy to J. MacDonald, 11 December 1952, Barton Papers, Box 81, WHS).

My presentation considers three issues: how BBDO used radio and then television programming for institutional advertising campaigns for US Steel; how BBDO managed the transition from radio to television in the face of changing economics and program forms; and how fears of communist subversion affected BBDO and US Steel’s approach to program sponsorship.

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