

**Wang, Jennifer Hyland, University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Some Science and ‘Je Ne Sais Quoi’: Showmanship and the Early Days of Radio, 1927-1934”**

The years 1927 to 1934 were a tumultuous time in the radio industry, as the commercial networks struggled to harness the power of broadcasting and claim it as their own. In our histories of early American broadcasting, scholars often focus on the programming experiments on network radio and the attempts by executives to woo advertisers and audiences to the new mass medium. Yet, in these discussions, we generally ignore the network executives themselves. How did those who planned radio view their profession, their professional obligations, and their responsibilities to audiences? How did radio men compete with the advertising men, vaudeville agents, and government regulators threatening their autonomy on the airwaves?

Based primarily on accounts in the trade press and the NBC papers in the Wisconsin Historical Society, I discuss how the networks, particularly NBC, created a gendered and classed persona – the radio showman – to manage industry tensions as the American system of broadcasting was formed. Against vaudevillians eager to invade radio, advertisers interested in commercializing the medium, and regulators monitoring the public service of commercial broadcasters, the networks claimed the role of a “microphone impresario” – a man of taste, experience and independent judgment. At the end of this critical period in radio history, embattled network executives forged a vision of radio showmanship – a commitment to variety and balance in programming, the scientific management of radio audiences through audience measurement, and the use of professional instinct to entertain audiences – that helped the networks limit the influence of others on the medium. The professional identity developed during these formative years would have lasting impact on American radio, helping to rationalize the marginalization of educational broadcasters, protecting the commercial foundation of American broadcasting, and prescribing limits on the development of daytime programming in radio.

**Jennifer Hyland Wang** is an independent scholar researching gender and broadcast history. Her 2006 dissertation, *Convenient Fictions: The Construction of the Daytime Broadcast Audience, 1927-1960*, described the interaction of the daytime female audience with the radio and early television industries. Her work can be found in *The Radio Reader* and *Cinema Journal*.