Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television
Vol. 31, No. 3, September 2011, pp. 355–372

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

THE PROBLEMS WITH SPONSORSHIP IN US BROADCASTING, 1930S–1950S: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY

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Sponsorship, or advertiser control of programming, was the predominant form of program financing in American commercial broadcasting in the 1930s; by the end of the 1950s, only a minority of programs were sponsored. Factors such as television's higher programming expense and the networks' increased interest in program control undoubtedly contributed to sponsorship's decline.[1] However, another important cause, arising from within the broadcast industry itself, has not been well analyzed in broadcast historiography.[2] Although reformers blamed sponsorship for over commercializing broadcasting,[3] some broadcasting industry insiders also were critical of it, believing it undermined broadcasting not because it was too commercial but because it eroded broadcasting's *commercial effectiveness*. Sponsored entertainment might serve advertisers' needs, but if audiences were alienated by heavy-handed sponsorship, broadcasting would not be able to sell them things.

This internal critique of sponsorship arose from a segment of the broadcasting industry deeply involved in the production of sponsored programming: members of the advertising industry. During the 1930s and 1940s, a majority of nationally broadcast sponsored radio programs were produced by top advertising agencies, for example, *Kraft Music Hall* (1933–1949) by J. Walter Thompson for Kraft; *Cavalcade of America* (1935–1953) by Batten Barton Durstine & Osborn for Du Pont; *Show Boat* (1932–1937) by Benton & Bowles for Maxwell House Coffee; and *The Jack Benny Show* (1935–1944) by Young & Rubicam for General Foods. Members of these and

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ISSN 0143-9685 (print)/ISSN 1465-3451 (online)/11/030355–18 © 2011 IAMHIST & Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/01439685.2011.597994

other advertising agencies, who often referred to themselves as 'admen' in the jargon of the time, worked closely with the advertisers, their clients, to develop radio as an entertaining advertising medium.[4]

The role of the advertising industry in the history of American broadcasting has not been much discussed.[5] There are many possible reasons for this: sparse documentation; a general lack of awareness of the significance of advertising agencies' work in radio (owing in part to the fact that agencies did not receive on-air credit for producing and writing sponsored radio programs); and an understandable tendency to focus on institutions more obviously identified with broadcasting, such as networks, regulators, and electronics corporations.[6] Including advertising agencies in broadcasting history improves our understanding of the development of American commercial broadcasting because agencies and admen played key roles promoting radio as an advertising medium, developing it as an entertainment medium, and shaping early television. Much of the extant material that demonstrates the significance of advertising industry involvement in early broadcasting is found only in archives. Hence, this study relies heavily on archival sources, including the records and papers of NBC and the agencies J. Walter Thompson, BBDO, and Benton & Bowles, as well as contemporaneous advertising industry trade magazines. These materials reveal intra-industry conflicts over sponsorship that were not well known outside the advertising industry.

An anti-sponsorship discourse emerged within the advertising industry from the very beginnings of commercial broadcasting. As sponsorship evolved and became predominant, admen found at least five problems with sponsorship. The first was that to grant program control to advertisers was also to grant editorial control to advertisers, undermining the print media convention of editorial separation from advertising. The second problem was that advertiser program control prevented oversight of the radio schedule as a whole. In sponsored radio, individual advertisers controlled their individual time slots without regard to other advertisers' program choices. There was no 'publisher' to oversee the quality or logic of the radio schedule, resulting in infelicitous adjacencies. The third problem concerned the wisdom of combining advertising and entertainment in sponsored programs. Did entertainment distract from the selling message or reinforce it? Did audience interest in stars undermine or support the selling goals? How closely should advertising be integrated into entertainment? The fourth problem concerned the advertisers themselves; sponsor meddling was blamed for bad programming, often by admen made defensive by attacks on their shows. Finally, the problem of over-commercialism and its result, audience alienation, also seemed attributable to sponsor control. If advertising were better contained, then audiences might be more receptive to it.

Admen proposed a solution to the problems posed by sponsorship: shift program control into the hands of the networks, which would, presumably, exercise more appropriate editorial control than the advertisers. This proposal did not come to fruition until the early television era, when a former radio adman named Pat Weaver attempted as NBC-TV president to execute what he called the 'magazine plan' on television: to rent to advertisers interstitial minutes within programs controlled by the networks, like magazine publishers selling ad pages in between editorial material. After some initial opposition, this plan supplanted sponsorship as the predominant form of broadcast commercialism. The greater oversight and flexibility of programming and advertising that it allowed benefited not only the networks but the advertisers and advertising agencies as well.

Early radio commercialism: the advertising industry's ambivalence

Sponsorship, or the financing and control of programming by advertisers, arose as a solution to a problem in early American broadcasting. While patent-holders and manufacturers could profit from selling radio equipment, broadcasters could not charge audiences admission fees. Broadcasters could sell access to airwaves to advertisers who, eager to attract and retain audiences, would finance the programs to fill that airtime. However, concerns that commercialism would alienate audiences slowed the development of sponsorship. Local businesses and retailers founded stations and at first experimented with broadcasting as a form of public relations.[7] Looking for a way to profit from broadcasting, AT&T's station WEAF sought to establish a market for airtime beginning in 1922.[8] But AT&T feared that direct selling by airtime buyers would drive away audiences, and so limited the scope of advertisers' talks to preclude mention of price or other product details. Instead, AT&T encouraged advertisers to create 'sponsor identification' in the minds of audiences who would buy a sponsor's products out of gratitude for free entertainment.

Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover concurred that such indirect advertising was best for the broadcast medium.[9] Hoover worried that a radio listener, unlike a reader of magazines or newspapers, was unable to skip an advertisement and could more easily be offended by being forced to listen. Hoover feared that alienating listeners with 'direct advertising' could be the 'quickest way to kill broadcasting.'[10] He assumed that radio would become a medium of cultural uplift dependent on inoffensive commercialism, limited to establishing a corporation's identity, trademark, and public image—all goals of what was called 'institutional advertising' as opposed to direct product advertising.[11] Sponsorship, combined with indirect or 'institutional' advertising, seemed like the best solution for commercializing broadcasting without alienating audiences. The Radio Act of 1927 and the Federal Radio Commission's General Order 40 of 1928 both supported this aim by favoring commercial stations for allocation and licensing.[12]

Sharing many of these same assumptions, many admen resisted exploiting radio as an advertising medium in the 1920s. Some, accustomed to print, suspected it as an aural medium reminiscent of medicine shows; others doubted its selling impact.[13] Like Hoover, they feared that direct advertising would offend audiences. *Printers' Ink*, an advertising trade magazine, editorialized in 1923 that listeners who have been 'wheedled into listening to a selfish message will naturally be offended.'[14] As one advertising manager put it, 'We feel that direct advertising through the radio would be more likely to antagonize rather than produce sales.'[15] Early sponsored programming thus limited product mentions to program titles (*The Eveready Hour*, *The Gold Dust Twins*). Advertising agencies also feared offending the print media, since most advertising agency revenues at the time came from commissions received from print media in return for placing advertising. Another concern was that radio was ephemeral; no one knew how many listeners received a broadcast commercial message; there was no way to measure its 'circulation.'[16] Other admen discounted their clients' interest in radio, believing them to suffer from 'acute inflammatory radioitis,' or the desire to scratch the 'publicity itch'—to seek glory, not sales.[17] And finally, some admen questioned the power of sponsor identification. If competitors, such as Clicquot Club and Canada Dry, each provided sponsored programs for similar products, then which ginger ale company would reap the gratitude of listeners?[18]

Advertising agencies entered broadcasting despite these reservations; by 1929, they oversaw one third of network programs.[19] Their clients, the advertisers, who were in the business of manufacturing soap or soup, were not specialists in entertainment. Neither at first were their advertising agencies; however, unlike theatrical or musical producers, they could be trusted to put the advertiser's selling goals foremost. Agencies soon met this demand with a variety of services, including program concept development, talent scouting and recruitment, script writing, commercial copywriting, airtime purchasing, station and network liaison work, and overall program management. Advertising agencies that offered radio services were of two types. First were the well-established agencies that started radio departments in order to expand service to already existing accounts, offering radio as just one service among many. For example, BBDO produced *Parade of the States* (1931–1932) for its client General Motors and J. Walter Thompson continued to serve longtime client Lever Brothers by overseeing *Lux Radio Theatre* (1934–1955). The second type were agencies specializing in radio services that attracted (or poached) new clients seeking such services. For example, Benton & Bowles, founded in 1929, landed Bristol-Myers and General Foods accounts by developing their radio programs (e.g., Maxwell House *Show Boat* and Fred Allen's programs until 1935). Blackett–Sample–Hummert specialized in daytime serials ('soap operas') for clients Procter & Gamble and Sterling Drug, including *Ma Perkins* (1933–1960), *Just Plain Bill* (1932–1955), and *The Romance of Helen Trent* (1933–1960).

The consensus that radio was reserved for indirect selling eroded during the Depression, when advertisers, with broadcasters' consent, turned to commercials mentioning product features and prices.[20] And yet, despite this shift, the single sponsor format continued to thrive, in part because it served the needs of key institutions. Broadcasters, on the whole, were relieved of most programming production costs during an economically perilous time, and they settled into the business of selling airtime in 15-, 30-, or 60-minute blocks. Advertising agencies benefited from the new business of producing radio programs, earning commissions on airtime costs and talent fees during an otherwise shrinking economy. Some radio advertisers experienced such a rapid increase in sales, as did Pepsodent when *Amos 'n' Andy* first became a hit in the late 1920s, that other advertisers flocked to radio, demanding sponsored programs of their own.[21] By selecting the programming they sponsored, advertisers could control the context of their advertising messages, and those messages reached increasingly larger audiences. And, finally, audiences received 'free' high-quality programming financed by advertisers, who could afford to hire top performers and writers, in return for which audiences had only to deliver their attention, and, advertisers hoped, their gratitude toward the sponsor. The sponsor system seemed to serve the needs of the developing commercial broadcasting industry; many believed that it would last.

The problem of program control

The shift of program control or editorial responsibility to the advertisers and their agencies was a marked departure from the traditional advertising business model. In print media, publishers and editors provided editorial material; advertising agencies brokered the sales of interstitial blank pages to advertisers seeking the attention of readers of that editorial material. Though they wrote advertising copy that filled those blank pages, agencies did not charge advertisers for copywriting; instead, they charged a commission on the sale of space by publishers to advertisers. Radio developed differently; according to BBDO executive Howard Angus,

> when radio began the broadcasting companies couldn't afford to pay for their entertainment . . . They said to the large national advertiser, 'If you will put on a fine singer and a fine orchestra and a fine quartet, why, we will let you mention the name of your company.' In doing just that the radio companies actually said to the advertisers: 'Here is a nice chair marked 'Editor' and another nice chair marked 'Circulation Manager.' Would you kindly sit in both and do their jobs as well as your own?'[22]

Many shared Angus's concern about the merging of advertising and editorial roles. A JWT executive worried in 1928, like his colleague in *Printers' Ink* five years before, that since 'All radio "space" is *editorial space*' and since advertising space cannot be 'skipped or delayed until time suits its reading,' advertisers risk earning 'ill will' from listeners if the advertising is not 'universally pleasing.'[23] An 'Advertising Agency Executive' complained that radio risked losing credibility with listeners by 'selling its editorial pages.'[24] He argued that 'scattering the responsibility' for programming among advertisers and their agencies created a cacophony rather than a coherent editorial voice, possibly confusing or alienating audiences. As a possible solution, 'Advertising Agency Executive' suggested the networks should take control of programming as if they were magazine editors, leaving only brief periods, at intervals of a half hour or so, to the agencies and their advertisements.[25]

In 1933 William Benton, founder of top radio ad agency Benton & Bowles, met with NBC executives to discuss how to improve radio. Benton argued that 'Broadcasting must be improved or lose its listeners.'[26] The advent of the Depression had increased the use of 'hard sell' advertising, in which repetitive hectoring ensured that audiences comprehended the advertising message but risked annoying them as well. Complaints about hard sell strategies had followed.[27] Better programming could offset these complaints. But, as Benton pointed out, 'Advertising programs [are] not built for listeners, but to suit client whims.'[28] Benton was explicitly criticizing his own clients for a shortsightedness that, he implied, could undermine the success of radio as a commercial medium.

If advertisers' narrow interests prevented them from creating programs 'built for listeners,' who should oversee programming instead? Although the United Kingdom had instituted a centralized, tax funded system of programming, the political climate in the United States was hostile to tax-supported programming, where it was perceived as a merger of state power and media as well as a violation of the First Amendment.[29] So Benton, during his 1933 meeting at NBC, suggested that NBC take over programming functions and sell interstitial minutes to advertisers. Network control would prevent advertiser abuse of airtime and provide editorial oversight as in print media. However, NBC executives regarded advertiser control of rented airtime as too well established to change. Wrote NBC executive Wayne Randall in response to Benton's proposal: 'Not a chance. Development of present sponsored program has gone too far.'[30]

When some advertisers and their agencies put unfair, misleading, or offensive advertising or programming on the air, other agencies often complained to networks.[31] But networks, especially NBC, avoided directly adjudicating such disputes in order to prevent accusations that it favored one advertiser or agency over another. This frustrated the agencies trying to prevent offensive advertisers from driving away audiences for other sponsors. In 1937 BBDO radio director Arthur Pryor, Jr., asserted in a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters,

> The advertiser is not responsible for improving, or even maintaining the quality of your medium. It's up to the broadcasters entirely. And when an advertiser wants to broadcast something that's stupid or in bad taste, you have got to be the one that says: 'No.'[32]

Pryor, like other admen, hoped to improve broadcasting's efficacy as an advertising medium with more centralized programming and advertising control. He hoped that such centralized control would reduce the potential for audience alienation.

The problem of schedule control

Sponsorship allowed advertisers to fill their rented airtime any way they and their agencies wished without regard to the programming before or after. Advertisers who had not entered radio early enough to establish a 'time franchise,' or monopoly on a time slot, effectively were blocked from broadcast advertising. The two national networks differed in how to adjudicate access to airtime that became available. CBS gave preference to higher paying advertisers while NBC gave preference to advertisers with seniority. Both network time sales policies, however, prevented the building of audience flow, the movement of audience attention from one program to the next. A large portion of an audience tuned in to an 8:00 p.m. comedy program sponsored by one advertiser might tune out at 9:00 p.m. when a historical drama began.

In a 1933 letter to NBC executives, adman William Benton suggested cross promotion between programs in order to build audience flow. If Jack Pearl, star of the Lucky Strike program, pretended to come on the air accidentally during the preceding Maxwell House program, according to Benton, 'This ought to do a lot to carry the Maxwell House audience over into the Lucky Strike audience.'[33] But NBC declined to interfere with sponsors' programming, worried that it would be accused of favoring one advertiser over another. Advertisers, meanwhile, complained about having 'little or no control' of what preceded or followed their programs.[34] In print media, pricing depended on 'adjacencies,' that is, the adjacent editorial content, in addition to circulation (or audience size). Lacking control over adjacencies on radio, advertisers chafed at their inability to build audience flow by positioning their programs next to like programs.

The problem of balancing entertainment and advertising

As the responsibility for program selection fell largely on the advertising agencies, they had to balance the interests of audiences with those of the advertisers. As one adman noted, 'Radio listeners want programs to be *interesting*, and sponsors want them to be *profitable*.'[35] Admen mediated between the two competing goals, as Y&R radio department head Hubbell Robinson noted in 1932:

> The question of entertainment versus advertising is fast reaching the state of a perennial bugaboo in connection with commercial radio broadcasts . . . [M]ost clients . . . insist on as much direct selling talk as they can crowd in. Showmen, actors, script and continuity writers insist on cutting the selling talk to the minimum. On the horns of this dilemma the radio advertising men balance themselves as best they can . . .[36]

To attract audiences, advertisers relied more and more on star talent. BBDO executive Howard Angus worried that 'advertisers have gone crazy and are selling stars instead of their products.'[37] Depending on stars, as Peck agency radio director Arthur Sinsheimer complained, 'serves rather to add to the glory of the featured artists than to increase materially the sales of merchandise of the sponsor.'[38] Adman Jarvis Wren stated flatly that 'to place the entertainer in charge of your radio advertising is to subordinate the advertising viewpoint to the artistic viewpoint.'[39] L. Ames Brown argued,

> A $20,000 all-star program on a coast-to-coast network may get fine press notices and win the sympathetic applause of those self-appointed advertising critics who are working for high cultural standards–-but it's a dead loss to the advertiser if it's all showmanship and no salesmanship.[40]

Not only were stars expensive, they felt varying levels of allegiance to sponsors. Bandleader Fred Waring believed advertisers should give 'radio artists' a freer hand in developing programs: 'Advertisers should realize that people listen to the radio not for the advertising but for the entertainment.'[41] In contrast, singer Kate Smith believed that performers and sponsors should be mutually cooperative. The radio performer must approve of the product she promotes: '[I]t is vital that the product must be one of mutual approval and admiration by both the artist and the sponsor . . . There must be complete *esprit de corps* between sponsor, agency and artist.'[42]

Advertisers used stars not only because they attracted audiences but also because advertisers sought to forge a strong positive association between a star and the sponsoring product to stimulate sales. However, some questioned the usefulness of such an association. Which sponsor would audiences identify with radio, stage, and screen star Eddie Cantor, who performed on *The Chase & Sanborn Hour* and on

The Eddie Cantor Radio Show, programs sponsored in turn by Old Gold cigarettes, Sunkist, Chase & Sanborn coffee, Camel cigarettes, and Texaco?[43] Some listener surveys concluded that the association of stars with products or sponsors was weak.[44] Why then should sponsors pay for an expensive star?

These and other problems with managing the demands of show business (fickle audiences, constant need for new material, talent management, high failure rate) drove adman Jack Boyle to suggest in 1939—as had Benton in 1933, and An Advertising Executive in 1931— that the stress of developing programs be removed from sponsors and agencies and shifted to broadcasters. Boyle suggested that broadcasters develop programs and then offer to sell advertisers 'spots' for commercials, with pricing based on the size of the audience, just as in print media. Boyle wrote of the stress from 'the responsibility and fear each year of taking a gamble in the somewhat unpredictable show business.'[45] A failed program could create a negative association with their product as well as a successful one a positive association.

The problem of sponsor meddling

As early as 1927, admen complained that radio sponsors would ignore their professional advice, meddle in issues of which they knew little, and stubbornly insist on having their way.[46] Those sponsors believed that since they were paying the piper, they should call the tune. One observer claimed hyperbolically that sponsors 'tramp with hobnailed shoes over the gossamer fabric of the entertainment.'[47] In transcribed private staff meetings, JWT executives complained of sponsors' unreasonable demands: 'The client decides that Helen Kane ought to sing "Annie Laurie" instead of "That's My Weakness Now."'[48] Another interfered with the talent: 'I saw an eminent manufacturer of perfumery march up to a dull, middle-aged actress and tell her tearfully: "My good woman, I'm paying for this program and I want you to put some passion into it!"'[49] The conservatism of many sponsors and their distrust of show business, recalled NBC executive Mark Woods, 'cramped and confined ingenuity' in early radio programming.[50]

By the late 1940s, the problematic sponsor had become a character in popular culture, memorialized in Hollywood films such as *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949) and *The Hucksters* (1947), the latter based on the 1946 bestselling novel by Frederic Wakeman. Wakeman's novel was a thinly veiled *roman a clef* of his experiences in radio while employed by the advertising agency Lord & Thomas. In the novel, Vic Norman joins an ad agency to oversee the radio programming of the Beautee soap account. The sponsor, Evan Llewellyn Evans, is modeled on Wakeman's former client, American Tobacco head George Washington Hill, who had revived the cigarette brand Lucky Strike with the program *Lucky Strike Hit Parade* (1935–1950). Evans, like Hill, demands total fealty from his agency; he intimidates underlings by performing such stunts as spitting on a conference table. He lectures Norman on advertising strategy: 'All you professional advertising men are scared to death of raping the public; I say the public likes it, if you got the know-how to make 'em relax and enjoy it.'[51] Norman, although repelled by Evans and his advertising strategies, invents a radio commercial in which a 'colored maid' repetitiously chuckles, 'Love that soap.'[52] However, when

Norman realizes that he is abasing himself to win Evans' approval, he is so disgusted with himself he quits. His refusal to cater to Evans redeems Norman.[53]

Wakeman blamed self-interested sponsors for the alienating and obnoxious aspects of commercial radio. Wakeman insisted his novel was not a condemnation of advertising but simply an 'indictment of despotism in industry, *any industry*, that prohibits the creative function'—in this case, commercial radio's abdication to despotic sponsors.[54] Radio producer Dan Golenpaul recalled that admen confided in him that they found sponsors like Hill 'a thorn in their side, because he was getting away with horrible commercials,' but they could not openly disagree with Hill without losing the large American Tobacco account.[55]

In a 1947 interview, Wakeman argued that broadcasters ought to take control of programming to prevent despotic sponsors from ruining radio:

> [Y]ou radio people should take back your programs from the hucksters. Take back your networks. Take back your stations and do your own programming without benefit of what any sponsor thinks any program should be . . . commercials can then be sold to advertisers on a dignified, properly controlled basis that will protect the program, not destroy it. It works with newspapers and magazines—why not with radio?[56]

NBC executives privately disputed Wakeman's implication that 'sponsors wouldn't be pulling this kind of thing on the air if the broadcasters controlled the programs,' although, in this period, networks were also considering how to assert more program control.[57]

The problem of over-commercialism

During the late 1940s, when US commercial radio networking reached its peak revenues and listenership, broadcasters were forced to defend themselves from a growing chorus of critics.[58] To justify the sponsorship system, they argued that radio was less commercialized than print media. NBC President Niles Trammell pointed out that while nearly 50% of magazine space is devoted to advertising, 'only 6.8% of the network's total program time is devoted to commercial announcements.'[59] Trammell sidestepped the fact that advertisers controlled the *program content* of most network time; if advertiser control over total program time were included, commercial time would have been greater than '6.8%.'

Some admen countered the critics by defending their work for sponsors. Carroll Carroll, who at JWT scripted *Kraft Music Hall* featuring Bing Crosby, argued with those who believed commercial radio was hampered by advertiser control:

> If advertisers sometimes butt into the jobs of the [radio] writers and directors, so, too, does the money on Broadway and in Hollywood dictate to the creative echelon. But advertising men are attacked for doing what bankers and other angels [Broadway investors] do.[60]

For Carroll, the commercial imperatives of radio were no more or less than those of other entertainment industries. Carroll also argued that ‘the critics of commercial radio are critics not of art, not of intrinsic goodness, but of the national taste.’[61] Elitist critics simply did not share the tastes of the majority of Americans, but advertising agencies shaped programming that served those tastes.

Other admen, however, believed that radio advertising needed improvement. Radio advertising had been dominated by hard sell ‘reason-why’ advertising strategies— hectoring repetitive lists of reasons why to buy, based on the assumption that audiences were not intelligent. Adman and former congressman Bruce Barton of BBDO declared in an interoffice memo that

> This formula by which the listener is treated as a moron was unquestionably effective when it was evolved by Mr. [George Washington] Hill [of American Tobacco] and Mr. [Albert] Lasker [of Lord & Thomas] but those were the days when radio was new, when passenger trains ran at 40 miles an hour and airplanes at 90.[62]

BBDO executive Charles Hull Wolfe argued that the postwar radio era needed a ‘new approach to radio advertising’ which is ‘more business like,’ ‘more socially conscious,’ and ‘more research-minded.’[63] Internally, then, industry insiders acknowledged critics’ complaints about the obnoxiousness of hard sell advertising and sought to soften it. However, sponsor control of programming limited efforts at reform.

Pat Weaver’s ‘magazine plan’

NBC-TV president Pat Weaver’s promotion of a network ‘magazine plan’ after he joined NBC-TV in 1949 reflected his experiences with sponsorship in radio. From 1935 to 1938, Weaver was the Young & Rubicam account executive producing *Town Hall Tonight* featuring Fred Allen, a comedian known for resisting agency and network directives.[64] From 1938 to 1941, Weaver was an advertising manager for George Washington Hill at American Tobacco, the radio sponsor satirized in *The Hucksters*. Weaver observed the problems of sponsorship from the perspectives of agency, talent, and sponsor. After World War II, he proposed that ad agencies, as the primary program producers, form a cooperative to share television’s expected increased costs.[65] When he found few agencies willing to reform the radio business model for the new medium of television, he went to the networks, hoping to convince them they were best positioned to control television programming. In Weaver’s view, the networks could take a ‘broader’ view of programming, unlike an individual advertiser and its agency, ‘whose chief aim was to sell his commodity.’[66]

NBC hired Weaver in 1949 to develop its television division. NBC and CBS were finally interested in wresting program control from advertisers, but were still reluctant to take on production costs. Unlike other broadcast reformers, Weaver viewed television mainly as an advertising medium, a medium that could outperform radio, but only if the flaws of radio, such as sponsor program control, were corrected. In a speech to NBC executives, Weaver noted: ‘I have been mixed up in a lot of radio and television, but I was not concerned only with these media, but rather with the entire scope of selling products and services through advertising.'[67]

Weaver proposed multiple sponsorship to manage the high costs of television and used the phrase 'magazine plan' to suggest a familiar advertising model. In a 1949 memo, he argued that television could not follow the radio 'pattern' because 'There is not enough money to put on full programs for a single product (as generally the case in radio).'[68] Multiple sponsors might spread the costs among themselves, allowing advertisers with lower budgets access to television audiences. Weaver pushed for network-owned programs, such as *Today* and *Tonight*, that could attract audiences to network-produced content and sell interstitial minutes to multiple advertisers. He wanted programs like *Today* to 'try to approach the television medium as if the parallel were more like the magazine field than the radio field.'[69] But the magazine plan required abandoning the notion of sponsor identification as the key benefit of broadcast advertising.

Weaver's magazine plan and multiple sponsorship were not new ideas. 'Participating' sponsorship, in which more than one sponsor financed the program and airtime, had been increasingly prevalent in radio, especially in daytime programs such as *Breakfast Club* and *The Marjorie Mills Hour*.[70] Those programs' success selling products indicated that audiences could distinguish among multiple sponsors and that a tight association between program and product was not essential for effective advertising. Nonetheless, some admen resisted the shift away from single sponsorship. Ned Midgley argued that if gratitude were the basis of sponsorship, multiple sponsorship causes 'the listening public' to be 'so confused it could not tell what product to buy!'[71]

The rise of network program control and the decline of single sponsorship

The process by which networks gained program control was complex, conflicted, and lengthy, taking up most of the first decade of network television.[72] Both NBC and CBS had begun taking more control over programming in 1940s radio and in early television, but both networks were stymied by the legacy of the sponsorship model they had previously championed and by their continuing reluctance to take on the entirety of program costs.[73] But now the networks had strong incentives to gain program control. Network program ownership prevented the removal of a successful program to a competing network.[74] Schedule control allowed networks to build audience flow and shape audience attention. And not least, networks found that subsidizing a program's costs with multiple advertisers purchasing interstitial minutes was more profitable than selling an hour of airtime to a single sponsor.

What may be less obvious is why some members of the advertising industry welcomed the transition to television as an opportunity for changing the broadcasting business model of sponsor program control. Young & Rubicam founder Raymond Rubicam had long objected to the 'domination of radio by the advertiser' and by 1951 believed it would be 'a tragedy to see the development of television confined by the limitations that have characterized radio.'[75] Noting that sponsorship is the 'sole source of broadcasting revenue' and that the few advertisers who are able to buy airtime must reach the largest audiences possible in order to 'make the advertising pay,' Rubicam explained that this had caused 'a constant pressure downward on over-all standards, and has led on the whole to a throttling of variety.' Calling the sponsorship system 'a monopoly of radio and television by advertisers to the point where the public's freedom of choice in programs is more of a theory than a fact,' Rubicam called for different business models, including subscription television. Fairfax Cone, head of the agency Foote, Cone, Belding, likewise wrote RCA chief David Sarnoff to argue that neither advertisers nor the public were well served by radio's sponsorship format. A few advertisers dominated the schedule, and audiences were limited to the programming those advertisers sponsored. According to Cone, 'in no other medium of advertising save radio does any advertiser rule that medium.' Cone suggested, as had Benton, Weaver, and others: 'Make programming for the networks a network obligation,' and 'Sell advertising time on the basis of one- or two-minute commercial spots supplied by the advertiser through the advertising agency.'[76]

Meanwhile, as the transition to television progressed, advertising agencies debated remaining in program production, given that television's production costs were roughly 10 times that of radio.[77] Agencies had covered radio programming costs by charging advertisers commissions on talent and airtime; however, commissions could not cover television's higher production costs. Thomas Harrington claimed that only one agency was making a profit from television; for the rest, according to one agency head, 'When we get into television, we lose our shirt.'[78] Another advertising executive hoped that the agency commission would soon be extended to 'all costs of television production,' not just time and talent, and that agencies suffering a 'temporary profit loss' would benefit from higher commissions once television matured.[79] Unfortunately, advertisers, faced with paying for television's higher production costs, became less rather than more willing to increase their compensation of advertising agencies.

Advertising agencies faced new competitors for program production. Program packagers such as Goodson–Todman and Barry–Enright could reap economies of scale by producing several programs in the same genre or format, such as quiz shows. Packagers could get by with a much smaller staff than an advertising agency, which had to serve multiple clients and their various advertising needs. Advertising agencies had no ownership or copyright claims to any programs, but packagers could benefit from shares in program ownership.[80] Packagers were thus able to supplant agencies in meeting the production needs of advertisers and networks in the early television era. By the mid-1950s, Hollywood film studios also entered filmed series production, providing high-quality, recorded, recyclable programs; by the 1960s, film studios dominated television program production.[81]

The single sponsorship model was finished off by the quiz show scandals of 1958–1959, when producers of programs such as Geritol's *Twenty-One* admitted rigging contests for dramatic effects—resulting in a very negative form of 'sponsor identification.'[82] But sponsorship had already declined, a victim of high production costs and the networks' realization of the advantages of central editorial control over programming and scheduling. In 1957, a third of television programs were licensed to sponsors; by 1964, the proportion had dropped to 8%.[83]

Although the shift to network control may appear to have been a triumph over advertisers, more accurately it was a success for those who sought to improve broadcasting's efficacy as an advertising medium. Corporate image advertisers—the sponsors of anthology dramas like *The U.S. Steel Hour*—may have felt harmed ceding their programming prerogatives to networks, since for such institutional advertisers, product sales were a secondary consideration. However, most advertisers, especially packaged goods advertisers, benefited from being relieved of the burden and expense of programming. They no longer had to link a product to one specific program or star—a tight association that inspired much of the fear behind the broadcast blacklisting phenomenon in the early 1950s. Advertisers enjoyed greater mobility and flexibility in reaching audiences. They were free to follow targeted audiences to the programs that audiences preferred by buying single minutes of time in those programs. Network program control allowed networks to charge higher market rates for interstitial minutes. Individual advertisers found it cheaper to pay for one interstitial minute at a high price per minute than 30–60 minutes of airtime at a lower price per minute (plus program costs). The extension of Weaver's 'magazine plan' across most of television programming also expanded the number of advertisers who had access to broadcasting, ending the monopoly of the time franchise of single sponsorship. Television advertising spending increased from $454 million in 1952, when the majority of programs were single-sponsored, to $1.6 billion in 1960, when the majority of programs were not.[84] This is evidence not only that networks profited from the shift away from sponsorship but that advertisers did as well: increased advertiser spending on television confirms that they perceived television to be of even greater utility as an advertising medium than radio. Advertising agencies, of course, expanded into the production of television commercials and the buying of television time, a more profitable business for them than full program production.

Advertising agencies likewise reconsidered the assumptions underlying many of their radio advertising strategies. As BBDO's Charles Brower noted, 'One sacred cow that we all believed in was ground to hamburger. That was "sponsor identification."'[85] To strengthen the association of the sponsor with the entertainment, many radio programs had integrated advertising into the program texts.[86] For example, Jack Benny famously referred to his sponsor in his greeting, 'Jello again, this is Jack Benny speaking.'[87] Continuity writers faced the ongoing problem of how to transition from the program text into the advertisement.[88] On the one hand, integrated advertisements seemed to smooth over the interruption the advertisement made into the program text, making it more palatable to listeners.[89] But on the other hand, integrated advertising locked the advertisement into the program. The 'magazine plan' freed advertisements from program texts, relieving writers of having to relate the advertising to the program and allowing copywriters to concentrate on improving the efficacy of the advertisement itself. Detachable advertisements were also mobile: the same advertisement could be inserted into multiple programs of different genres and be aired multiple times at different time slots. Consequently, television advertisements no longer depended on associations with a particular program or star, freeing up advertising agencies to develop new advertising strategies. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the decline of sponsorship and integrated advertising occurred just before the explosion in the 1960s of advertising strategy innovation referred to as the 'Creative Revolution.'[90]

Conclusion

From the earliest days of sponsorship, some admen questioned its utility; some proposed 'magazine' formats for radio instead. Many admen understood the drawbacks of sponsorship: the lack of centralized editorial authority or scheduling control; the threat of audience alienation if all programs were financed by advertisers pursuing sales rather than entertainment; the constraints on program innovation by interfering sponsors; and the lack of efficacy of sponsor identification. Although structural factors, such as the economics of television program production, impaired the viability of the sponsorship model once the radio network era ended, anti-sponsorship efforts within the advertising industry were also crucial in ending it. Former radio admen such as Weaver made concerted efforts to reform the business model of broadcasting—not to transform it into a non-commercial medium but to reform it by centralizing program control in the networks. Networks, believed radio admen such as Weaver, would take a wider view of audience interests than could self-interested advertisers; networks could build audience flow from program to program; and networks, like magazine publishers, could provide an environment of appropriate audience-responsive programming that would serve as a better vehicle for effective advertising than programming built on sponsor 'whim.' Of course, as historian James Baughman points out, some of the same problems attributed to sponsors—their indifference to the public interest and resistance to innovative programming—would eventually be attributable to the networks themselves.[91] But this was not foreseen by the admen who helped empower them.

This study of the anti-sponsorship discourse within the advertising industry during the radio network era of US broadcasting gives us a fuller understanding of the debates that once raged over commercial broadcasting. This debate over sponsorship occurred not among critics of radio commercialism but *within* the advertising industry and, just as important, among those admen who had built careers in commercial radio. Anti-sponsorship admen, though they may seem to have taken a position in opposition to their own clients, the advertisers/sponsors, in fact sought to reform commercial broadcasting with the aim of making it a *more effective* medium for advertising. And, whatever their individual responsibility for its altered form, US commercial television, once sponsorship declined, did develop into the largest and most effective advertising medium of the twentieth century.

Notes

1 William Boddy, *Fifties Television* (Urbana, IL, 1990); and James Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station* (Baltimore, 2007).

2 Scholarship on the commercialization of US broadcasting includes Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922* (Baltimore, 1987); Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: the commercialization of American broadcasting, 1920–1934* (Washington, D.C., 1994); Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel* (New York, 1966); Laurence Bergreen, *Look Now, Pay Later: the rise of network broadcasting* (Garden City, NY, 1980); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American broadcasting, 1922–52* (Minneapolis, 1997); Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: the battle for control of U.S.*

Broadcasting, 1928–1935 (New York, 1993); John Spalding, 1928: Radio becomes a Mass Advertising Medium, *Journal of Broadcasting* 8 (1963–64), 31–44; and Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: a critique of the policy of commercial broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago, 1996).

3 For more on the broadcast reform movements and the debates over the commercialization of US broadcasting, see Kathy Newman, *Radioactive: advertising and consumer activism, 1935–1947* (Berkeley, 2004); McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy.* For a discussion of similar debates over commercialization in UK broadcasting, see Sean Street, *Crossing the Ether: British public service radio and commercial competition, 1922–45* (Eastleigh, UK, 2006). Street points out that the UK policy of tax-supported non-commercial programming monopolized by the BBC was strongly contested by rival populist commercial broadcasters in the 1920s and 1930s.

4 Although several women rose to influential positions in the advertising industry during this period (for example, Helen Resor at J. Walter Thompson), men dominated the field. I use the term 'admen' to emphasize this.

5 The role of advertising agencies in US broadcasting history has been almost entirely overlooked according to Michele Hilmes, Nailing Mercury, in: Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (eds.), *Media Industries: history, theory, and method* (Malden, MA, 2009), 24, with the exception of two dissertations: Cynthia B. Meyers, *Admen and the shaping of American commercial broadcasting, 1926–50,* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005, and Michael Mashon, *NBC, J. Walter Thompson, and the evolution of prime-time programming and sponsorship, 1946–58*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 1996.

6 Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: from radio to cable* (Urbana, IL, 1990), 81.

7 R. J. Arcenaux, *Department Stores and the Origins of American Broadcasting, 1910–1931*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens, 2007. For an argument for the vitality of early commercial radio, see Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: rogue radio broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia, 2005).

8 William Peck Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer: the WEAF experiment, 1922–26* (Cambridge, MA, 1946).

9 Herbert Hoover, Opening Address, Recommendations for the Regulation of Radio Adopted by the Third National Radio Conference, October 6, 1924.

10 Hoover, Opening Address, 4.

11 Frank A. Arnold, Reminiscences, 1951, 5, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York (hereafter OHRO).

12 McChesney, *Telecommuncations, Mass Media, and Democracy*, Chapter 2.

13 Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley, 1985); Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers* (New York, 1984).

14 Radio an Objectionable Advertising Medium, *Printers' Ink*, February 8, 1923, 175.

15 Leroy Jenkins, Letter to B. F. Goodrich Company, May 26, 1925, Box 3, Folder 126, NBC Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison (hereafter WHS).

16 Agencies View Radio Advertising in Survey by Station, *Advertising & Selling*, April 30, 1930, 90.

17 Acute Inflammatory Radioitis, J. Walter Thompson *Newsletter*, February 15, 1928, 81–83, JWT Newsletter Files, Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History, Duke University Library, Durham, NC (hereafter HCSAMH).

18 Acute Inflammatory Radioitis, 82.
19 J. Fred MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!* (Chicago, 1979), 32.
20 Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*.
21 Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy* (New York, 1991).
22 Howard Angus, The Importance of Stars in Your Radio Program, *Broadcast Advertising*, February 1932, 26.
23 Acute Inflammatory Radioitis, 83.
24 An Advertising Agency Executive, When Will Radio Quit Selling Its 'Editorial Pages'? *Advertising & Selling*, July 22, 1931, 17.
25 An Advertising Agency Executive, when will Radio 18.
26 Wayne Randall, Memo to Frank E. Mason, April 26, 1933, Box 34, Folder 34, NBC Records, WHS.
27 Inger L. Stole, *Advertising on Trial: consumer activism and corporate public relations in the 1930s* (Urbana, IL, 2001); Newman, *Radioactive*.
28 Randall, Memo.
29 Streeter, *Selling the Air*.
30 Randall, Memo.
31 For example, Donald S. Shaw, Memo to John Royal, March 15, 1935, Box 34, Folder 34, NBC Records, WHS.
32 Oppose Federal Radio Station, *Printers' Ink*, July 1, 1937, 54.
33 William Benton, Letter to M. Aylesworth, August 25, 1933, Box 16, Folder 12, NBC Records, WHS.
34 Herman Hettinger, *A Decade of Radio Advertising* (Chicago, 1933), 24.
35 E. Wheeler, Don't Sell the Steak . . . Sell the Sizzle! *Radio Showmanship*, September 1940, 6.
36 Hubbell Robinson, What the Radio Audience Wants, in: Neville O'Neill (ed.), *The Advertising Agency Looks at Radio* (New York, 1932), 48.
37 Angus, The Importance of Stars, 12.
38 Arthur Sinsheimer, Custom Blocks the Road to Radio Progress, *Advertising & Selling*, November 8, 1934, 32.
39 J. Wren, Why Some Radio Programs Fail, *Advertising & Selling*, February 5, 1930, 23.
40 L. Ames Brown, Radio Broadcasting as an Advertising Medium, in: Neville O'Neill (ed.), *The Advertising Agency Looks at Radio* (New York, 1932), 11.
41 Radio–If the Stars Were Czars, *Printers' Ink Monthly*, October 1934, 16.
42 Radio–If the Stars Were Czars, 46.
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47 Warren Dygert, *Radio as an Advertising Medium* (New York, 1939), 14.
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49 JWT Staff Meeting Minutes, February 2, 1932, 4, J. Walter Thompson Papers, HCSAMH.

50 Mark Woods, Reminiscences, 1951, 65, OHRO.
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52 Wakeman, *Hucksters*, 25.
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66 Weaver, *Best Seat in the House*, 164.
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79 Harrington, Can an Advertising Agency, 51.
80 Development of the Packager.
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84 Christopher Sterling and John Kittross, *Stay Tuned* (Belmont, CA, 1978), 334.
85 Charles Brower, *Me, and Other Advertising Geniuses* (Garden City, NY, 1974), 213.
86 In the United Kingdom, regulators of early commercial television insisted on avoiding the US model of integration of advertising and program by requiring separable advertisements and programs. Burton Paulu, *Television and Radio in the United Kingdom* (Minneapolis, 1981), 63.
87 The phrase was so important to Jack Benny that in a legal settlement with one of his former writers, the writer was enjoined from using 'Jello again' in future work. Jack Benny Papers, Box 98, Harry Conn File, UCLA.
88 For example, note how the narrator transitions from the program text of *Ma Perkins* to a commercial for Oxydol laundry soap: 'And so Ma Perkins has a change of heart at last. She realizes what mothers have found since the world began. You can't run other people's affairs for 'em, you can't make them do what you think is best. You've just got to help them. And speaking of help, there's no household job that needs outside help more than washing clothes.' *Ma Perkins*, 12 December 1933 broadcast.
89 Susan Douglas, *Listening In: radio and the American imagination* (New York: Random House, 1999), 121.
90 Bill Bernbach and Bob Levenson, *Bill Bernbach's Book: a history of advertising that changed the history of advertising* (New York, 1987).
91 Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station*, 301.

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