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Book Review: *The Invisible Medium*

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Peter M. Lewis and Jerry Booth. *The Invisible Medium*. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990.

The critical theme presented by the authors of this book is that radio has become an "invisible medium." They blame this condition on its subordination to television in public policy debate, and because of the infrequent attention it receives through critical and scholarly studies. They examine the two predominant models of radio—public service and commercial—and survey alternative radio practice in both Western and Third World countries. Throughout the book, they stress the underestimated potential of radio as a contemporary mass communication instrument and contend that, by meeting needs left unattended by public and commercial radio models, community radio constitutes an important and viable mode of public communication.

Lewis and Booth begin with a discussion of the marginalization of radio. "Within media studies in higher and further education, radio finds a small place in media history, while radio practice almost everywhere concentrates on radio journalism, in most cases unquestioningly reproducing the techniques and assumptions of that genre" (p. 3).

The authors describe two models. The free market commercial model, most closely associated with the United States, is summarized in Chapter 3. The second, the public service model whose origins were in Great Britain, is detailed in Chapter 4. Lewis and Booth provide an historical perspective by illustrating the differences between the two.

The community type of radio, as described by the authors in the later chapters, has emerged in contrast to these two models. The key difference is that while the commercial and public service models treat listeners as objects to be captured for advertisers or improved and informed, community radio treats its listeners as subjects and participants.

The Invisible Medium is recommended as a useful supplement to media courses that emphasizes history and programming. The chapters devoted to the emergence of radio in Britain and the United States are most interesting, and they shed some light on the competition between the two nations. The contribution of a book such as this is that the authors are not satisfied with simply reporting the status quo. They question, from a public policy point of view, the two dominant models. This questioning not only lends historical perspective, but also impacts the future. With the growth of television, cable, satellites, computers, the Internet, etc., what role will radio play? This question seems to be the foundation for this text. The authors question what role governments should play in the future of radio by taking a look at the government's role in the

past. Lewis and Booth seem to suggest that the future could well see community broadcasters accepting the responsibility of the public service obligations as those broadcasters move toward the free market commercial model.

Although the book does not include any photographs or charts, Appendix A provides a useful historical narrative for Britain and the United States. The authors also provide a complete listing of notes and references, plus a bibliography.

The Invisible Medium should be read by those interested not only in where radio has been, but also interested in where radio may be going.