



# Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s

*David Goodman*

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The history of American radio broadcasting has often been written as a lament for lost possibilities, a tale of what might have been. One now familiar landmark in that account is the story of how American commercial broadcasters, in the passage of the 1934 Communications Act, won a great victory over reformers who wanted frequencies set aside for non-commercial use. It is generally agreed that the defeat of the radio reformers was decisive and permanent, and that the best hopes for a public radio in the United States had been thwarted by 1934. In *Radio's Civic Ambition*, however, author David Goodman focuses not on the lost possibilities and defeated reformers, but on what did happen as the beginning of another chapter in the story of the struggle over the meaning and purpose of American broadcasting. Commercial broadcasters paid a considerable price for their victory: in the years after 1934, American broadcasters always had to be seen to be providing public service as well as entertainment. An impressive range of programs, from imaginatively conceived classical music broadcasts to lively multi-opinion radio forums, was designed to promote civic engagement and individualization. By the later 1930s, political leaders, key social science and communications intellectuals, the Federal Communications Commission, and many articulate and educated ordinary Americans, increasingly expected commercial broadcasters in the US to perform a range of ambitious civic functions, including encouraging local community, strengthening democracy, fostering talent, and producing tolerance for other points of view.

A new look at the history of commercial radio broadcasting in America, *Radio's Civic Ambition* will appeal to students and scholars in communications and radio studies, music history, media studies, and American history.

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