

Critical Book Review

The United States, seen and transformed by a TV channel

HILMES, M. (ed.) *NBC: America's Network*. 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 364 p.

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By Concepción Cascajosa Virino, assistant lecturer at the Department of Journalism and Audiovisual Communication at the Carlos III University of Madrid

It is very significant that the first letter in the name of the NBC channel (the National Broadcasting Company) should refer to the concept of nation. The idea of grouping together radio stations from one end of the United States to the other to broadcast in a chain (and thereby constitute a network) was one of the key mechanisms in structuring a still young country, wrapped up in local issues and, at that time, with a certain tendency towards isolationism. The NBC, which was a radio channel when it was founded in 1919 and, as from the forties, a television channel, would reflect the country's tribulations during the convulsive decades to come. If we also add the channel's dominance over TV programming and the fact that, until recently, it has always been associated with the most prestigious products, it seems fully justified for Michele Hilmes to have chosen NBC as the institution that allows us to best examine the history of broadcasting in the United States. Michele Hilmes is a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has emerged over the last two decades as one of the essential authors writing about the history of mass communication. Among her publications, particularly of note are the following: *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (1990) and *Only Connect: A Cultural History of US Broadcasting* (2001), as well as the edition of *The Television History Book* (2003) for the British Film Institute.

NBC: America's Network is along the lines of other research that has adopted an institutional point of view to trace the development of the TV industry, but this book's most relevant contribution is that it focuses on a single company. The main risk of this choice – offering a biased view of a complex industrial fabric – is overcome thanks to two elements. Firstly, due to the representative nature of NBC's contribution to the history of broadcasting in the United States. In this way, establishing an albeit partial identification between both is useful in order to verify that the key to success in US television has been to build stable structures that, by themselves, have driven renewal based on creativity. Secondly, the different essays that go to make up this collective and multidisciplinary work aim to investigate highly diverse aspects of the areas of industry, technology, society, culture and scheduling, but in no case is the aim to establish a traditional history. The milestones, significant exceptions and processes of change that have characterised NBC's history form the main interest of this book.

This analysis is carried out via eighteen essays divided into four chronological stages: the birth of broadcasting between 1919 and 1938, the transitional decades from radio to television between 1938 and 1960, the consolidation of the large network system between 1960 and 1985, and the digital age, from 1985 to the present day. Of particular note in the first section is the contribution by Michele Hilmes herself, dealing with the founding of the channel from the perspective of North American capitalism's particular notion of public service. At this time, the broadcasting of commercial radio programmes was not considered to be incompatible with the production of cultural and civic-based pieces that would bring prestige on the channel and the brands advertising on it. The essays that go to make up this first section analyse NBC's relations with the trade unions

and corporations within the context of the Great Depression, the competition with its rival CBS and the controversial public interest programme *America's Town Meeting of the Air*. Approaches of an institutional nature predominate in the second section of the book, with texts dedicated to governmental actions to control the channel's monopolistic tendencies, relations with advertising agencies, the development of new production models with Hollywood and policies to encourage the integration of Afro-American workers. The most revealing contribution is by David Weinstein, who analyses how NBC ignored the genocide of the Jews in Hitler's Germany with the approval of the channel's president, David Sarnoff, a Jewish émigré. Even after the country had entered the Second World War, the desire to protect the channel from political debate led to content denouncing anti-Semitism being very rare.

The third section of *NBC: America's Network* chooses to look at the representative TV genres, with case studies on the documentary within the context of the Cold War, political satire and children's programming, as well as a look at the gestation of the significant science fiction series *Star Trek*. Within the context of the new social trends in the seventies, in her essay Elana Levine describes NBC's failure to handle the inclusion of women in work, homosexuality and teenage sexuality in its fictional programmes in an adult way. The channel's decline in this period became the perfect context for the Amanda Lotz's essay that starts the last section of the book, on the famous programming strategy of the former producer Grant Tinker with whom NBC, thanks to programmes such as *Hill Street Blues*, became the leading exponent of quality television in the eighties. After other chapters on NBC's position as a leading conglomerate in North American media and the new programming strategies given the challenges of new technologies, Michele Hilmes and Shawn VanCour conclude by highlighting the difficulties of writing the history of the mass media and the possibilities offered for outlining the cultural history of the United States. Without doubt, this last aspect serves as the ideology to the book itself in terms of its content, which analyses the evolution of a country from the point of view of two media, radio and television; media which must necessarily be a reflection of this evolution.