

Book Review

Eleanor Patterson, *Bootlegging the Airwaves: Alternative Histories of Radio and Television Distribution*. University of Illinois Press, 2024.

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People born before the reign of streaming platforms likely remember making a mixtape of their favourite radio programs or recording a beloved TV series on VHS. These recordings could then be shared with loved ones—or, sometimes, with like-minded strangers. Eleanor Patterson's *Bootlegging the Airwaves: Alternative Histories of Radio and Television Distribution* explores such affective yet often overlooked histories of radio and television bootlegging. Bootlegging, Patterson explains, refers to “the productive act of making a recording” of media objects, “unsanctioned by the companies that produced them” (3). Bootlegging, furthermore, also refers to the ways in which these unsanctioned recordings are then distributed “via specific actors and processes” (3).

In her cultural and historical study of bootlegging, Patterson effectively argues that on-demand and replay culture, which permeates today's media environment, is a continuation of longstanding practices that existed before the digital. Studying bootlegging, she further proposes, provides insight into how broadcast content continues to be a part of our media ecosystem even after its scheduled air date, thus disrupting the widespread narrative of radio and television as always-already ephemeral and immaterial. Bootlegging, instead, enables broadcast content to be dissected, remade, and controlled. Essential to this study is also Patterson's framing of bootlegging as both a *distribution* practice and a *fan* practice. As such, Patterson insists that bootlegging is first and foremost a form of “embodied distributive labor” (149), as she traces how such informal economies of media distribution are intimately linked to the physical and emotional labour of those who create and circulate bootlegged broadcast content.

The archive and its absences shape *Bootlegging the Airwaves*—as it often

does with cultural histories and, especially, histories of broadcasting, where archival material is haphazard and hard to find. Patterson, indeed, acknowledges the difficulty of documenting and keeping track of grassroots cultural practices like bootlegging. Her book, therefore, underlines the necessity of resorting to creative and imaginative research methods to account for neglected broadcasting histories which are often unavailable in official and institutional archives. In particular, *Bootlegging the Airwaves* draws heavily from material created and collected by fan communities, such as fanzines, classifieds, and community forums, which the author supplements through interviews. Thus, Patterson posits, the same affective investments that led to recording and trading broadcast materials also led to their preservation.

As she meticulously documents her archival process throughout the book, Patterson provides her readers with crucial advice on how to do broadcasting history from below, turning the book into an essential theoretical and methodological resource for radio and TV historians. This book is all the more beneficial in contexts where national television archives, for instance, do not exist, such as in Canada, where I am currently located, and where media historians often have to resort to illicit broadcasting records and fan-produced material to write television histories. Furthermore, by mobilizing histories from “the bottom up,” in this case histories that emerged from communities of radio and television fans and collectors, Patterson is also pushing against dominant academic narratives that overwhelmingly focus on broadcast networks. In making a case against what she calls “institutional determinism,” Patterson encourages scholars in the field to further look at “the messy, muddled heterogeneous nature” of broadcasting histories (9). For instance, the book disrupts established scholarly understandings of television as a private family activity by accounting for the many ways in which bootlegging led to communal experiences of television viewing. Patterson’s simultaneous reflection on how identity politics shaped bootlegging practices likewise leads her to interrogate and complicate assumptions about how gender, sexuality, and race intersect with the associated practices of watching, trading, and collecting broadcast content. Patterson brilliantly concludes that such practices, therefore, are contingent on context, content, and community (78). Thus, Patterson’s book is a superb example of how to write broadcasting histories outside the purview of the networks.

Bootlegging the Airwaves is organized around four case studies which shed light on bootlegging and its regional, national, and transnational contexts from the 1960s to the 1990s. These four case studies are framed by Patterson’s excellent introduction and by a contextual chapter that looks back to the Progressive Era to investigate the concomitant development of home entertainment and recording technologies. Patterson’s well-researched first chapter traces the advent of technologies like the phonograph, the kinoscope, the film camera, and, eventually, wireless radio, and how they “rearticulated popular culture as a media commodity experience” (43) and responded to “the urge to make the ephemeral into a fixed record” (30). These developments, the author shows, led white, upper-middle-class individuals and families to start recording and collecting popular cultural objects. By introducing these older developments before turning to the selected case studies, this

preamble aptly illustrates how bootlegging is not a recent phenomenon, but one that actually precedes the book's temporal framing. As such, this chapter offers detailed and compelling examples of historical antecedents that support the book's overall arguments.

The second chapter, which constitutes the first main case study of the book, continues the discussion initiated in chapter one by looking at the development of fan subcultures dedicated to sharing and trading recordings from the classic era of network radio in the United States following the introduction of magnetic tape. While radio fans began connecting with each other in the 1950s and early 1960s, Patterson explains, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the formation of an informal network of "Old-Time-Radio" (OTR) fan communities, as "radio bootlegging became more systematically organized and structured through clubs, fanzines, and conventions" (58). This chapter offers a rich and detailed overview of the various communities and platforms that were created around collecting and trading OTR recordings, while accounting for how the period in which these network formations were situated informed the meaning of the material that was being collected and traded. Looking at OTR fanzines and zooming in on the 1920s minstrel radio show *Amos 'n' Andy*, Patterson outlines the lively debates that occurred within OTR communities around the program's racist content and showcases how these debates were deeply informed by the context of the post-Civil Rights era within which OTR fans were situated. In so doing, the author skilfully articulates another one of the book's key premises by providing an example of how bootlegged materials can be reinterpreted in light of contemporary politics as they circulate beyond their original context.

"Radio collectors were the forerunner of the tape-trading protocols that would come to define much of television bootlegging in the 1980s" (57), Patterson explains in chapter two, thus setting the stage for her discussion of television in the following sections. *Bootlegging the Airwaves*' third chapter investigates how women, who were part of fan communities dedicated to American buddy-cop television shows in the 1970s and 1980s, used trading and collecting to articulate female pleasure. Focusing on the popular TV show *Starsky & Hutch* (ABC, 1975–79), Patterson draws on the rich textual material traces left by fans to investigate women's active engagement with the program through the practice of bootlegging. Through close analysis of various fanzines, the author successfully showcases how female viewers, for instance, used videorecording technology and its playback abilities to imbue *Starsky & Hutch* with queer meaning by speculating about the homoerotic relationship between the two titular characters (86).

Patterson continues to explore the affective engagements of television fans in the next two chapters of the book. In chapter five, *Bootlegging the Airwaves* takes its readers to Australia to draw attention to the global circulation of bootlegged media. Mobilizing the popular series, *Star Trek (The Original Series)*, (Paramount, 1966–69 and *The Next Generation*, Paramount, 1987–91), as its object of study, the chapter looks at how bootlegging across borders increased access to a series whose distribution in Australia was limited by the country's technological infrastructure as well as syndication and licensing rights. In what may be one of the book's most

captivating chapters, Patterson shows, for instance, how some well-connected fans acquired and transported bootlegged 16mm copies of *The Original Series* episodes to screen them at a time when *The Original Series* broadcasts were haphazard, and videotape recorders were not widely adopted in Australia (108–13). With the later popularization of the VCR, *Bootlegging the Airwaves* demonstrates how *Star Trek* fan clubs began organizing viewings of bootlegged VHS tapes, many of them imported from the United States, in meetings and Sci-fi conventions across the country. This chapter's impressive weaving of technological history with social, cultural, and economic history truly showcases the lengths through which fans' distributive labour was "a necessary tool to overcome Australia's geographic and sociocultural position on the periphery of the global media industries" (122).

The last case study of the book brings the readers back to the United States with a discussion of televised wrestling fandoms, who, too, responded to the limited access to wrestling content nationally by circulating recordings of and information about regional wrestling matches to other parts of the country. In addition, Patterson's fascinating chapter gives evidence of a nationwide network of wrestling fans whose identity as fans and wrestling experts was shaped by bootlegging practices. In this chapter, Patterson draws heavily from the archives of *The Wrestling Observer* to show how the magazine became a (trans)national forum for televised wrestling fans in the 1980s and 1990s. Patterson's thorough research process in this chapter is remarkable and further highlights the tremendous work done by fan communities to distribute and preserve media objects that they cared deeply about.

Although each case study casts a light on "small, concrete examples of bootlegging radio and television that challenges dominant narratives of broadcast distribution in the twentieth century" (15), there are echoes and resonances throughout the book, as the case studies clearly respond to and interact with one another—through discussions of bootlegging's ability to impact the interpretation of broadcast media objects over time, collecting and trading as a tool for community and identity building, or the expansion of the geographic reach of broadcast content via tape sharing. Furthermore, the author takes time and care to connect the past she documents with the present by reminding us that many of the distributing and viewing practices of the past mirror and even anticipate behaviours and forms of engagement which we tend to attribute solely to the digital (97, 122). *Bootlegging the Airwaves*' conclusion emphasizes how the histories Patterson lays out in the book "remind us how the practice of bootlegging and tape trading radio and television have shaped our current media landscape" (153), while pointing to the limitations of streaming services and their illusion of user control and unlimited access to content.

Bootlegging the Airwaves is an incredible contribution to the fields of television and radio studies, which will no doubt encourage future historical scholarship to further take into account everyday practices of engaging with broadcast content. In addition to being an excellent addendum to radio and television studies, *Bootlegging the Airwaves* will undoubtedly become an invaluable teaching resource for undergraduate and graduate cultural and media studies courses, as it provides an outstanding overview of the state of broadcast studies in the U.S. In this book,

indeed, the author is in active conversation with many other experts in these fields, thereby giving students an opportunity to engage with a variety of critical viewpoints on the topics of television, radio, and fan cultures. Its transnational scope is also much appreciated, as it serves as a call to further decentre broadcasting histories away from the United States and toward other broadcasting contexts. At the same time, Patterson's engaging and accessible scholarship will no doubt be a resource for fans themselves to think through their media-collecting practices. More than simply being "alternative," the histories of radio and television distribution outlined in the book are both vital and invigorating. They are a testament to the exceptionally important cultural work performed by everyday people, and a hopeful reminder that there is a breadth of topics that have yet to be explored in the scholarship to expand our understanding of broadcast histories and their meanings.