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Introduction

At the Border of U.S.–French Broadcasting

It was a broadcaster's nightmare. In spring 1953, Simon J. Copans, the seasoned announcer for the Voice of America (VOA) radio network in Paris, fumbled for words. Fortunately, the problem did not occur in front of a microphone, but in front of a typewriter, as he struggled to complete a restricted memo to the U.S. State Department summarizing the condition of U.S.–French broadcasting. “It is very difficult,” Copans admitted, “to list separately what the French radio does for the [VOA] and what the [VOA] does for the French radio.”¹ The state of affairs defied easy description partly because it contradicted the definition of international broadcasting as one nation-state transmitting programs to another. Since the end of World War II, Copans had watched a procession of French and U.S. radio producers, announcers, technicians, and talent stream through the Roosevelt Studios, built near the Champs-Élysées by the United States Army. The VOA shared the studios with Radiodiffusion française (RDF), French national broadcasting. U.S.–French radio represented a curious mechanism of Cold War geopolitics in which the making and distribution of national radio programs had parted company with clearly identifiable sovereign origins and control.

To begin to understand Copans's quandary when separating the work of the VOA from the RDF, one need only switch on the radio. On any given evening in Paris, he could hear the national newscast, *Ce soir en France* (France Tonight). It blanketed metropolitan France, Europe, and French North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia). To achieve such wide coverage, however, the RDF required a discreetly furnished power boost from the multinational transmitters of the VOA. With an all-band receiver, Copans could also hear the VOA's daily French-language program *Ici New York* (This Is New York), broadcast directly to France via shortwave. (French law prohibited foreign

powers from broadcasting on French soil.) If only an AM set was available, the VOA's *Ici New York* was courteously relayed on the RDF's national *Chaîne Parisienne*. The RDF also broadcast popular music programs hosted by Copans with acknowledgment to the VOA. Finally, on *Paris-Inter*, a one-station "network" serving greater metropolitan Paris, Copans and others could enjoy French popular and classical music and talk programs produced in English by the French Broadcasting System in North America (FBS), a unit of the RDF staffed by U.S. and French nationals in Paris and New York and supported with funds from the French and U.S. governments. FBS programs circulated on hundreds of U.S. radio stations from coast to coast, along with other types of RDF-produced content.²

The arrangements producing such a scramble of content, producers, production locales, target audiences, and distribution methods resisted precise assignment of national responsibility because they often bypassed official diplomatic and legal agreements. The understandings between French broadcasting and the U.S. State Department were obscure by design and rarely, if ever, publicized. Some were classified. To a historian, such arrangements and the programs that resulted provoke numerous questions: Who was speaking to whom via U.S.–French radio, and to what end or ends? Why had the sovereign boundaries between France and the United States grown so indistinct in the field of broadcasting? Above all, who stood to gain (or lose) through such arrangements, and what consequences did this entanglement have for U.S. and French sovereignty and cultural expression in the twentieth century?

Decades before satellite television and the Internet, radio broadcasting, the world's first instantaneous mass medium, catalyzed new processes of cultural production, consumption, and distributed communication on an international, even global, scale.³ Between 1931, when regular U.S.–French transatlantic broadcasting began, and 1974, when France dissolved its public broadcast monopoly, the United States and France shaped international radio into a multifaceted cultural and political medium. Over time, broadcasting contributed to the accelerating pace of the transatlantic circulation of information, ideas, and cultural expression, and to the aesthetic embodiments of such material.⁴ Transatlantic radio constituted a field in which modern U.S.–French relations could be instituted and transacted through the production, circulation, and consumption of forms of cultural capital.⁵

During the 1920s and 1930s, U.S.–French transatlantic encounters produced contrasting models of radio's technical and cultural usage that shaped the future of broadcast interaction.⁶ The U.S. techno-aesthetic ideal stressed power, abundance, and high-speed execution; it could be quantified in kilowatts (kW), stations, transmitters, and program hours. The French techno-

aesthetic emphasized quality, scarcity, and deliberate pacing; it prized the artistic and aesthetic merits of a program, valorized the disciplining effect of making do with finite resources, and celebrated deliberation over speedy results. These archetypes served as shorthand for U.S.–French radio producers, boosters, listeners, and critics assessing one another’s interrelated cultural and technical capacities in a new communications environment. They marked a complicated tension that resurfaced in different forms as U.S.–French broadcasting developed over the span of the twentieth century.⁷

Like the electrical telegraph, suboceanic cable, and the telephone, France and the United States developed international radio communications with an eye toward expressing power, expanding influence, and exercising and preserving control.⁸ Challenges of modernization, world war, and cultural diplomacy spurred such development further. By the early Cold War, however, the conditions arising in U.S.–French broadcasting marked what many believed was a brazen U.S. intrusion into French and global affairs. The European Recovery Plan (i.e., the Marshall Plan, 1948–51), masked ulterior motives to skeptics. In exchange for foreign aid, France found itself struggling to manage not only its sovereign diplomatic affairs, but also wave upon wave of commercial forms of “Americanization” that threatened French cultural production and identity from food customs to cinema. Members of the French Left complained especially that France’s alignment with the United States came at too high a price to national sovereignty and cultural self-determination.⁹

This book studies the users and developers of U.S.–French broadcasting to illuminate the complexity of international broadcasting and reveal its consequences for cultural affairs and geopolitics. It acknowledges the persistent appeal of the “Americanization” versus “remaining French” binary and the critical framework of cultural imperialism in assessing U.S.–French history.¹⁰ These models are only so useful, however, in answering the question of what U.S. broadcasting did for France and what France did for U.S. broadcasting. This book resists the overhasty conclusion that the seeming amalgamation of U.S.–French broadcasting that Simon Copans observed signaled encapsulation of French media culture by U.S. power. Radio’s transatlantic production and distribution generated a form of cultural flow in which accommodation as well as resistance could be entertained, and in which appropriation of dominant messages about the United States and France was entirely possible.¹¹ To be sure, U.S.–French radio exchanges popularized fables and idealized representations of states, cultures, and peoples that could be informative and entertaining, but also prejudiced and misleading. Nonetheless, radio’s aesthetic properties supported active listening and interpretation. Without transatlantic interdependencies, French-influenced perspectives would not

have found their way to U.S. radio listeners as they did. French listeners would not have learned to listen to the United States in fresh and new capacities.¹²

International broadcasting has suffered marginalized status in media and communications history.¹³ It tends to be treated theoretically and institutionally as a modular add-on to broadcasting and studied as a specialized service rather than a dynamic constituent of the character of the broadcast medium.¹⁴ Remediating the isolated condition of international broadcasting is important because of radio's remarkable contributions to everyday life and nation-state formation within and across national borders. Scholars have charted the discursive formation of radio nations, national audiences, and radio publics and counterpublics. They have explored the medium as an aesthetic domain, as well as an embodiment of social and political power that embraced disaggregated populations, but also sometimes excluded groups from the symbolic nations it constituted. International outreach, in-flow, exchange, and cooperative production were processes of broadcasting from its earliest days, but the implications for the formation of national broadcast cultures and radio nations remains understudied by the field. How did historical processes unfolding simultaneously within and across nation-state borders affect how radio and national identity grew up together?¹⁵

Across the Waves argues that treating international connectivity as central rather than peripheral to the rise of modern broadcasting can shed light on the formation of radio nations, that is, nationally bounded broadcast cultures. Viewing broadcasting both within and outside the nation-state frame makes cross-border phenomena easier to recognize. It becomes possible to model national broadcast systems as something more than rigid political economic structures and artificially bounded cultural systems, but as dynamic elements of regional, international, continental, intercontinental, and global cultural and technological networks. Bringing international broadcasting in from the margins makes it easier to appreciate radio's linkages to antecedent and subsequent instantaneous, cross-border communication technologies associated with the circulation of cultural actors and products, the promotion of cosmopolitanism, new modes of political regulation, new features of geopolitical competition and presence, and the creation of technological infrastructure and use protocols that have connected the planet with and without wires.¹⁶

This book draws from U.S. and French manuscript and archival collections, primary and secondary documents, newly discovered recordings, and program scripts. It borrows insights from sound studies and science and technology studies to investigate how broadcasting, sound, and listening helped constitute a mass-mediated geopolitics.¹⁷ In addition to thinking about

transatlantic broadcasting as a field of interaction, this book takes up the technological development of U.S.–French broadcasting as a “mode of politics” whose development unfolded in conjunction with, but not simply determined by, parallel historical forces.¹⁸ Finally, it considers the mutability of radio as essential to contextualized historical analysis. Technological innovations, such as directional antennae systems, mobile radio trucks, sound-on-disc transcription recordings, wax nets, reel-to-reel magnetic tapes, and bicycle networks transformed the nature of radio and its potential impact.

Part 1 of this book examines the rise of U.S.–French broadcasting through case studies of international shortwave broadcast projects from the mid-1920s to the end of World War II. It follows the successes and setbacks of transatlantic interconnection and the effects of the European political crisis, World War II, and the German Occupation of France on U.S.–French program production and exchange. Part 2 shifts to post-Liberation France, the Marshall Plan era, and the conditions of enterprise and entanglement that characterized changes in U.S.–French broadcasting as a broad manifestation of Cold War geopolitics. It focuses on French broadcasting in the United States, and includes close analysis of English-language radio programs produced in Paris in the late 1940s and 1950s, and their dramatic evolution by the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The history of U.S.–French broadcasting demonstrates how instant communication between continents and across oceans on a mass scale shook up conventional understanding of national borders, spaces, and cultures. The shake-up continues. Alongside contemporary long-distance media and communication tools, radio remains a hardy medium that can be produced and consumed easily and inexpensively. In France, where household penetration of television did not reach 50 percent until the mid-1960s, the passion for radio and sound media persists as it does in the United States.¹⁹ Understanding radio’s historical importance to these two allied but starkly different societies can help us more clearly apprehend the roots, structure, and implications of international and global media in the modern world.

