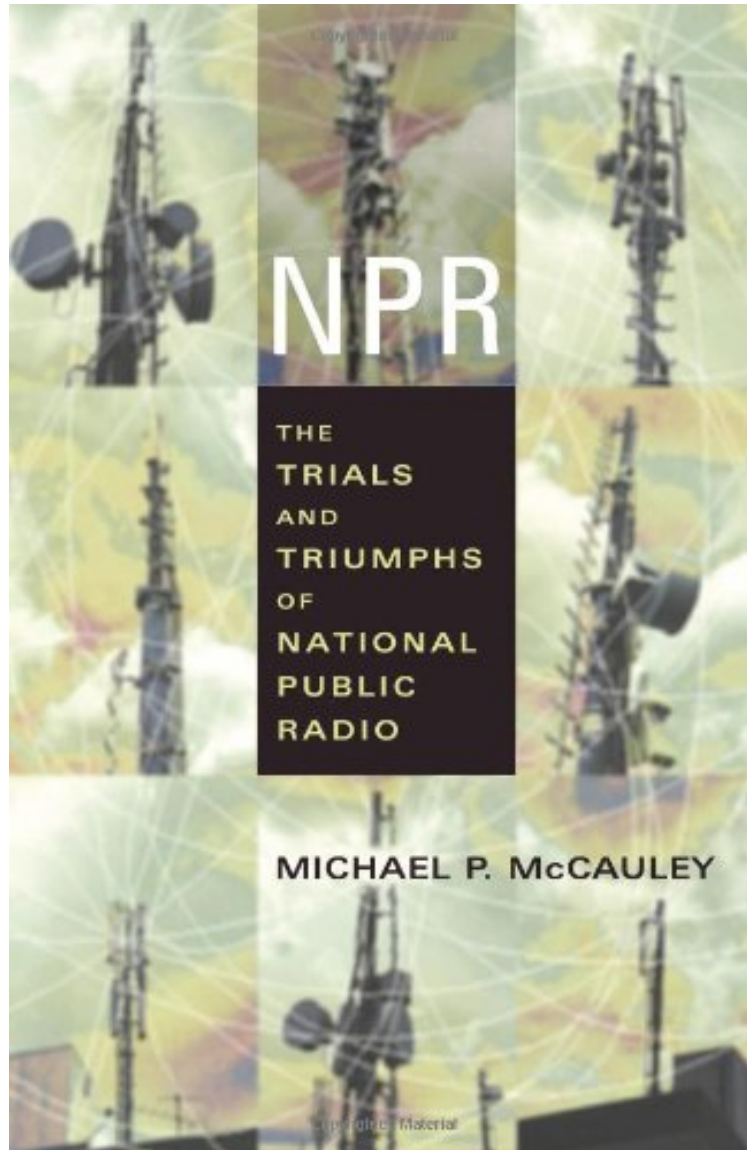


(Read now) NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio

## NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio

*Michael McCauley*

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**Michael McCauley : NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Well researched history, lack of critical facultyBy Z. StieglerFirst, the good: McCauley's research is admirable, and if what you're looking for is a history of NPR as a network/institution, this book excels in that respect.However, I take issue with McCauley's general approach. From its

first pages, it is clear that he is a cheerleader for NPR. Which is fine - a lot of people love NPR, and I'm not of the belief that scholars should mask their passions. However, McCauley's love of the network produces a rather biased narrative. There is an overwhelming lack of critical views in the book. While McCauley occasionally raises criticisms that circulate about NPR, he quickly dismisses them with little reasoning or support. This is perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the book. I'm not asking for McCauley to advocate such criticisms, but I at least expect a project such as this to address them thoroughly, even if to construct a well reasoned counterclaim. In this respect, McCauley inadequately addresses NPR's alleged catering to elite, upper middle class audiences, acceptance of corporate underwriting and address/inclusion of minority audiences and programming. (In the book's final chapter, McCauley essentially argues for the ghettoization of minority audiences by creating entirely new NPR networks, which he concedes is financially unreasonable.) There is also no address over the highly controversial position NPR took against the LPFM license beginning in 1999. Thus, the book paints a rather rosy picture of NPR without really investigating the issues. But as I said, it does provide a concise institutional history, and that is the source of this book's value.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Had me going until the end...By Professional Strong Man McCauley's book started off strong with a detailed documentation of NPR's first 25-30 years. Without focusing too much on the personalities behind the stories, he does a very good job discussing the network's ups and downs - the portion on "Project Independence" is the best I've ever seen on the topic. The book is a relatively easy read as the other commenter mentioned (130 pages with about 45 pages of bibliographic information), plus McCauley's writing style is neither too "academic" or pedestrian. That said, the final chapter ("A civilized voice") seemed out of place. For me, it was a rambling clunker compared to chapters 1-4, which were written neatly and cleanly. McCauley offers some suggestions for NPR to survive in the next several decades, but goes from one point to another while not really providing any depth or detail in his suggestions. The particular bone I have to pick is with HD Radio technology. McCauley pays it very little lip service earlier in the book and then never brings it up again. Why? Why not use HD's multiple channels to help put diverse messages and content out there for NPR to possibly gather larger audiences? While I am not a huge advocate of HD Radio technology (I think it has some very exclusionary features), anyone who denies its existence and eventual prominence isn't paying attention. The other problem I have with chapter 5 is McCauley's seemingly "oh well" attitude toward using public radio as a tool for diversity. Rather than challenge the status quo of NPR programming and operations, McCauley concludes with Bruce Hornsby wrap up ("that's just the way it is"). After all, since the majority of NPR's listeners (and the ones who donate the most) are college educated, why even try to reach those who are not? I guess this hit a sore spot with me since I have a strong tendency to argue that radio has the potential to be the most democratic form of mass media in the world - especially more so than the internet. The problem is that NPR (and PRI for that matter) squelch the democratic potential of radio by sticking with only one or two specific audiences and then saying, "someone else will play that format". Call me naive, but that just doesn't wash for me, especially in the public radio environment. Bring back the checkerboard!

At the end of the day, McCauley did an excellent job of bringing NPR's history to life, without gazing so much at the "stars". To his credit as well, McCauley doesn't spend too much time staring at his belly button in this book, pontificating via the stereotypical academic tome-style of writing. This is still a very good book for the documented history alone, and should be read by anyone who is interested in NPR and/or conducting hard-core public radio research.

0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Extremely well-researched and documented study (if coming up short on making a strong case) By Samuel C. Excise the last 35 pp., which are footnotes and sources, and what remains is a rather compressed study of a major network and its history. Regular listeners of NPR will resonate with McCauley's references to specific programs and announcers (including photos) throughout the years as well as be reminded of the controversies, obstacles, challenges, political attacks that have dogged a public network whose goal of being "a civilized voice in a civilized community"--a clear alternative to the commercial media--will strike many as a resounding success. Others may find such a stated goal as overly modest, especially for a network that also acts as an impartial, unbiased "window" unto the world at large and at home--offering information and entertainment that is far more diverse and universal than what the word "civilized" has (unfortunately) come to signify in modern "populist" America. And, of course, some on the fringes will be determined to see the book as more "leftist propaganda" from a liberal voice among the insidious forces that presumably control the media (fortunately, the absurdity of that last statement is recognized by most thoughtful Americans for what it is). I may be more than a little Pollyannaish with that statement. During their respective post-election press conferences on Nov. 3, our contrite President said he planned to work for consensus, assuring the American people: "I do believe there is hope for civility; I also believe there is hope for progress." The vindictive Senate minority leader, on the other hand, said: "The American people have made their wishes clear. Our top priority for the next two years should be to deny President Obama a 2nd term. The people we elected tried to dismantle the free market. We will stop the liberal onslaught." While the President indicated he would "sit down with the Congressional leaders" to address problems like the deficit, jobs and taxes on the middle class, the Senate minority leader said flatly they would work harder to ensure taxes are be raised on nobody and that if the administration wants cooperation, "it will have to move in our direction." Going up against that kind of righteousness, power of manipulation (for example, selling the 9/11 and Iraq connection as "truth"), and unlimited corporate coffers, it would

be difficult for some of us as readers to be as civil and well-mannered in our reportage as the author. In fact, in today's political climate it might seem difficult to understate the threats to the survival of NPR. In brief, readers should not expect a conclusive argument on behalf of NPR or a blueprint for public radio's future. The book is meant to inform, not provoke. McCauley measures his language carefully and makes certain that any reportage of events and facts as well as personal claims are fully supportable. Still, like some other reviewers, I would welcome more specifics about NPR's precise connection with its sponsors and benefactors, if only to refute the old and lingering allegations of "liberal bias" or, for that matter, to suggest ways of divorcing the network from such vested interests, be they commercial or political. Still, the book provides exactly what the title promises, which should be sufficient to satisfy the majority of curious readers. If McCauley seems too cautious for some, too hesitant to come out with opinions--ranging from indictments to a list of proposed changes--that extra measure of care--of "civility," if you will--might be seen as a reflection of how NPR has gone about its business since the beginning--whether during the friendliest, most prosperous of times or during years that might be characterized as economically hard and politically fractious. The book provides a calm and rational, civilized and somewhat circumspect history and overview while still casting an undeniably positive light on NPR, its history, its dynamic role in the present, and its potential to be an ever stronger, more vital servant of an expanding national and international community. While keeping the listener abreast of the times, NPR still manages to remain a reliable "media bulwark," standing for abiding truths and values in a digitalized "mediascape" that can change faster than some of us can (or care to) follow.

The people who shaped America's public broadcasting system thought it should be "a civilized voice in a civilized community" a clear alternative to commercial broadcasting. This book tells the story of how NPR has tried to embody this idea. Michael P. McCauley describes NPR's evolution from virtual obscurity in the early 1970s, when it was riddled with difficulties--political battles, unseasoned leadership, funding problems--to a first-rate broadcast organization. The book draws on a wealth of primary evidence, including fifty-seven interviews with people who have been central to the NPR story, and it places the network within the historical context of the wider U.S. radio industry. Since the late 1970s, NPR has worked hard to understand the characteristics of its audience. Because of this, its content is now targeted toward its most loyal listeners--highly educated baby-boomers, for the most part--who help support their local stations through pledges and fund drives.

From Publishers Weekly Any history of a large corporation must cover finances and bureaucracy to some degree, but McCauley's account of NPR's past rarely ventures beyond these subjects. The author, who worked in radio for 15 years and is now a communications professor at the University of Maine, says he wanted to understand what makes NPR appeal to listeners, but rather than offering background on its acclaimed programming or talented journalists, his book is largely taken up with dry accounts of hirings, firings and budget difficulties. Certainly, such considerations are crucial, for NPR has long struggled with them: in the early years, it had to fight for funding from lawmakers and lobbyists who preferred television, and then, just as it was hitting its stride, it fell into a damaging debt crisis. Politicians on both sides of the ideological spectrum are forever finding fault with it, and internal politics have also been complicated, with clashes of philosophy and management style often hindering the network's projects. McCauley interviewed many of the people involved with NPR's evolution, but his writing is short on quotes or anecdotes that would bring NPR to life. The final chapter is more engaging, as he discusses NPR's use of new media, like the Internet and satellite radio, and discusses the network's possible future trajectory. Overall, though, this methodical, often monotonous narrative rarely addresses the substance of NPR's charms and is unlikely to appeal to the listeners who have made it successful. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. In a highly readable work, McCauley offers a well-documented look at the people of NPR. (Johanna Cleary American Journalism) A book worth reading. Recommended. (Choice) [A] valuable contribution to the historiography of radio. (David Dzikowski The Communication ) About the Author Michael P. McCauley, a former radio journalist, is associate professor of communication and journalism at the University of Maine. The lead editor of Public Broadcasting and the Public Interest, he lives in Bangor, Maine. McCauley's meticulous research is presented with a human face.