



Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America

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Walker, Jesse
[New York University Press, 2001](#)

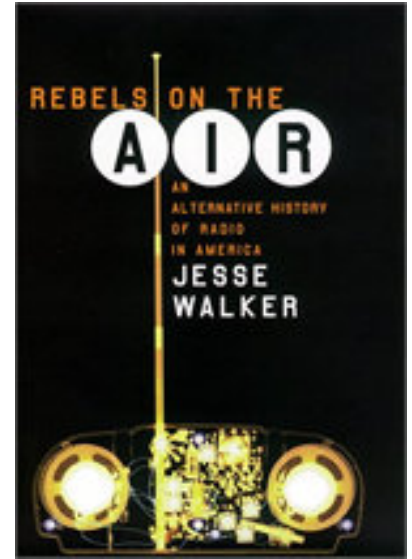
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Reviewed by: [Ted M. Coopman](#), [Rogue Communication](#)

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For those of us at once fascinated and disappointed with the state of radio in America today, *Rebels on the Air* is a must read. It captures the mood of hope and despair and reminds us of the elements that can make radio the most inspired medium. Walker, a journalist and associate editor at [Reason magazine](#), has published in a wide variety of mainstream and alternative publications. In *Rebels*, he takes us on a journey with the DIY pioneers who drove radio's development. He combines his personal connections in the alternative radio community and a command of history with a dry wit and easy writing style to produce fast and insightful reading.

At a little over 300 pages, *Rebels* cannot compete with more weighty tomes by McChesney and Barnouw. But Walker does not attempt to cover every event, an almost impossible task. Yet, he successfully hits all the right points to give us his vision of radio history. He places his focus on "those times and places where innovators have managed to break through . . . constraints and create genuinely diverse, expressive, or immediate radio" (p.11). *Rebels* celebrates the alternative radio tradition in America. The book reminds of us who really put radio on the map and those who continue to produce great radio in the face of industry and institutional consolidation and bland commercialization.

Using anecdotes and a careful analysis of history, Walker takes us from the very early years of radio, through the advent of regulation, the birth of community radio, and finally to the free radio movements of the 1990s. Walker's knowledge of the community broadcasting scene is extensive and matched by his attention to historical detail. With so many interesting characters and so much history to cover, it is easy to get lost. However, Walker is able to bring the reader back from these occasional digressions with an easy style.

Walker makes a well-reasoned argument for his libertarian analysis of radio history. His premise is that radio was developing into a self-regulated and egalitarian enterprise before the U.S. government stepped in and regulated it into the hands of special interests. He builds his case using a variety of sources, some rarely seen in other radio texts.

Walker begins Chapter 1 with a humorous and insightful visit to [uKind radio](#), a (in)famous free radio station in San Marcos, Texas, introducing three basic freedoms he believes should be expanded upon for a freer media landscape. First is the Freedom to Choose--the need for more diversity and media options. Second is the Freedom to Create--the increased ability to make your own media. Third is the Freedom to Escape--the ability to break down the walls between producers and consumers.

In Chapter 2, Walker takes us back to 1909 and introduces us to the true radio pioneers, such the Junior Wireless Club of New York. Walker charts the development of radio and the fight between industry and progressives, highlighting the maneuvering among the military, industry, and government that resulted in the Communications Act of 1934.

Chapter 3 begins in 1940s' America at a cold Sierra Nevada work camp for conscientious objectors. Walker explores the battles over technical standards, localism, and network control from which the roots of the [Pacifica Foundation](#) and community radio developed.

Chapter 4 takes us into the 60s and the community FM building booms fostered by the likes of Lorenzo Milam, Larry Yurdin, and others. Here, Walker charts the evolution of radical formats, radical politics, and just a radical good time in creating what would become modern FM radio.

In Chapter 5, the party is over as the Nixon administration cracks down on dissent effects community radio. People started to realize that they could make money on FM and the band begins to solidify. Events in the 1970s led to the beginnings of consolidation in radio.

Chapter 6 is where Walker discusses the effects of government money on non-commercial radio. He identifies the origins of the [Corporation for Public Broadcasting \(CPB\)](#) and the creation of [National Public Radio \(NPR\)](#). The author examines how the conditions of funding affect the nature of public radio. He finishes the chapter by looking at CPB funding and the [crisis at Pacifica](#) in the 1990s.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 focus on recent developments in radio. Chapter 7 explores the free radio movement abroad. Here Walker discusses famous off-shore broadcasters as well as "mini-FM" operations hidden in Europe's urban cores. In Chapter 8, Walker discusses American radio pirates, RNI, border radio, and the pirate radio sub-culture. Chapter 9 looks at the rise of the micro radio movement in the U.S., including [Free Radio Berkeley](#), the spread of micro radio from the radical left across the political spectrum, and the emergence of a national movement to free the airwaves.

This era is wrapped up in Chapter 10 and the [FCC](#) attempts to thwart the free radio movement and the battles to legalize low power radio. Walker discusses the technical issues, the FCC reversal on micro radio, and the creation of a Low Power Radio Service. Finally, in Chapter 11, Walker takes us into the present and makes his final analysis. Discussing CB radio as a model, satellite and Internet radio, as well as other options, he expresses his hopes for the future of freer radio.

On a practical level, *Rebels on the Air* can serve a variety of roles. Walker's journalistic writing style, humor, and avoidance of jargon makes it a good recreational read for those interested in the subject. Walker's use of primary sources and the level of analysis is sophisticated enough to make this sound additional reading for undergraduate or graduate classes. As a researcher, I found new and intriguing information and insights. Walker's perspective is an important element in a deeper understanding of radio's past, present, and future. This is a rare combination of scholarly and recreational writing and well worth the \$24.95 cover price.

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