

"PUBLIC ACCESS" VS. "PUBLIC CONTROL" IN THE AMERICAN MEDIA REFORM MOVEMENT

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"Rethinking Access," the theme of the 1994 Euricom Colloquium, inevitably entails re-examining "public access" as the conceptual framework for extending a free, critical and potentially oppositional public sphere.¹ The term access implies citizen use of electronic media operated by commercial or governmental entities. In contrast, the notion of public control suggests a greater degree of popular dominion over electronic channels of communication. This article provides an overview of the tension between the ideals of public access and public control in the American media reform movement, and reflects on the implications of that divide for media activists today.

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The Public Origins of American Broadcasting

The myth of a commercial system of advertiser-supported network broadcasting emerging inevitably in the United States during the inter-war period has been challenged by a group of revisionist historians — Erik Barnouw, Susan Douglas, Eugene E. Leach, Robert W. McChesney, David Paul Nord and Werner J. Severin, among others. Indeed, it has been said that "the early history of public radio is, in fact, the early history of radio itself" (Carnegie Commission 1979, 186). As with future communication technologies, amateurs and educators played a leading role in the development of radio before the medium's commercial potential was fully understood.

The discovery that cheap crystals could serve as detectors of radio waves launched the amateur boom around 1907, democratising the wireless. These tinkers advanced radio technology and provided the foundation for the first generation of radio listeners and professionals. For Barnouw (1966, 27), the importance of the ham movement prior to WW-I was not only technical: "Equally important was the bond it provided for a growing brotherhood, scattered far and wide, that already numbered thousands; a host of experimenters, of every age and status...." The desire to use the wireless in a democratic, participatory fashion was at odds with Marconi's corporate

