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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Column Editor's Note: Ahh, spring: how wonderful it is awakening to air that feels fresher; skies that seem bluer, and grass that is greener and softer under your feet. Public radio host **Garrison Keillor** spoke of the onset of the season in the April Fool's Day edition of *A Prairie Home Companion* — "it has arrived!" Of course, *A Prairie Home Companion* would not exist were it not for the **Corporation for Public Broadcasting** and the public radio network. **Jack Mitchell** has written an engaging work regarding the inception and growth of the medium entitled **Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio**.

Interestingly, public radio's predecessor, educational radio, began producing in the first half of the twentieth century a program called *School of the Air*, through which programs for public school use were broadcast. Happy reading, everyone! — **DV**

Mitchell, Jack. *Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. 0275983528. 248 pages. \$39.95.

Reviewed by **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston)
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Jack Mitchell, public radio veteran, offers unparalleled insight into public broadcasting in his book *Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio*. Part history and part autobiography, **Mitchell's** book forewarns readers of the unavoidable biases in his writing; someone with a symbiotic relationship with public radio, whose values shaped and were shaped by it, understandably might have a difficult time separating subjectivity and objectivity. In essence, **Mitchell** is the Adam of **National Public Radio**. He was **NPR's** first employee. He "did the first **NPR** newscast, wrote its first strategic plan, wrote its first stan-

dards and practices document, and served as the first permanent producer of **NPR's** seminal program, "All Things Considered" (x). So it is only fitting that someone so intimate with the development of the **Corporation for Public Broadcasting** and the birth and growth of **NPR** should record his corporate knowledge. **Mitchell's** account is divided into 13 chapters which are parceled into three sections: "Dreams," "Reality," and "Critics." A summative conclusion, notes, bibliography, and index are included.

In the first chapter, "The Progressives," **Mitchell** explores the historical footings of publicly-supported, not-for-profit news media. He likens the birth of listener-supported media to the progressives of the early twentieth century, recalling **John Dewey's** stance that the media should champion democracy. Fast forward a few years and you land in **Mitchell's** second chapter, "Pioneers," in which he outlines the birth of the **British Broadcasting Corporation** and the struggles to create a similar non-commercial system in the United States through university broadcasting, Pacific stations, and educational radio. **Mitchell's** third chapter, "Public Radio," narrates the medium's narrow escape from landing on Washington, D.C.'s cutting room floor. At this point, **Mitchell's** writing morphs from interesting to passionate as he pays homage to the forefathers of the **Corporation for Public Broadcasting** — broadcasting, not merely television — and their thankless and unrecognized efforts to get public radio off the ground. "Purposes," the fourth chapter, recaps the quest for a mission and vision for **NPR** and the drive to steer away from elitist notions of "the best" programming (in the same spirit that it is "best" to eat spinach because it nutritious and "good for you").

Chapters five through 11 probe six of **NPR's** mainstays and other

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work, and your environment. Contemplative practices allow us to develop a capacity for deep concentration, usually in silence, to quiet the mind in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life. This state of calm centeredness provides effective stress reduction and can also help address issues of meaning, values, and spirit. Contemplative practices can help people develop greater empathy and communication skills, improve focus and concentration, reduce stress and enhance creativity."

Together, these efforts by scholars, organizations, and many private individuals (who are turning to gardening, yoga, and other contemplative pursuits in droves) suggest a growing realization that we need new practices to cope with a new environment, and that mindfulness or related contemplative practices are the place to begin. The good news is that this is not just your problem; it's our problem — it's a problem that we must solve as individuals, yes, but also as a society. So while I like to say (somewhat facetiously) that one of the best things about eresource management is that it drove me to meditation, it is not in jest that I say I hope others will also feel inspired to take back their moments — after all, moments are all we really have — and use mindfulness practices to find peace and clarity amid the incessant stream of information enveloping us. I hope we will all join the work that has begun to transform our lives so they are as healthy and effective as possible, so we feel rejuvenated and vitalized by the challenges in our work and the vast potential of technology, rather than worn out by its demands.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank **Diane Grover**, Electronic Collections Coordinator at **University of Washington Libraries**, for inspiring this article through a conversation I had with her in July 2005 about how focusing on only one thing at a time, and taking aggressive control and discipline in one's use of email, improves one's ability to manage eresources.

2. Zen can be translated from the Japanese as "contemplation" or "enlightenment" but is also the Japanese name for a branch of Mahayana Buddhism that was originally practiced in China. (If you have the radical trust required of readers of a collaborative, user-created encyclopedia, see the explanation in wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zen>.) It should be considered a philosophy, way of life, or practice, as much or more than as a religion, for Zen and other forms of Buddhism do not involve worshipping a god; Zen does not address the question at all.

The phrase "Zen and the art of..." was first used in a title of a book in 1953 in **Eugen Herrigel's Zen in the Art of Archery**, but was popularized more broadly by a book that is ironically not directly about Zen: **Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance** (1974).

Full disclaimer: I am not a Zen Buddhist. I've been studying various Buddhist traditions for a few years, have been meditating daily for about two years, and have a strong interest in mindfulness practices, which have been personally and professionally helpful to me. I hope I have not distorted or mistaken the important ideas of Zen here in this lighthearted attempt to help others find a path through the thickets of **ERM** to a more effective and pleasant worklife.

And finally, this article is not intended to suggest that technology is "bad." It is intended to discuss how to cope with its incessant demands, which come along with its great power and potential.

3. According to **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, a prominent leader, teacher, and writer about mindfulness, mindfulness is "our capacity for awareness and for self-knowing... cultivated by paying attention... this attention is developed and refined through a practice known as mindfulness meditation." The famous Zen Buddhist monk and peace activist **Thich Nhat Hanh** defines mindfulness as "keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality." (p. 11, *Miracle of Mindfulness* — see note number 5).

4. **Richmond, Lewis**: *Work as a Spiritual Practice*, NY: Broadway Books, 1999, pp 33-35.

5. **Kabat-Zinn, John**. *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, NY: Hyperion Books, 2005, pp 146-148. **Kabat-Zinn** wrote the widely-read *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, and is the founding director of the **Stress Reduction Clinic** and the **Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society** at the **Univ. of Massachusetts Medical School**.

6. See for example: **Sharon Salzberg** and **Joseph Goldstein**, *Insight Meditation: A Step by Step Course on How to Meditate*, which offers CDs with guided breathing and walking meditation exercises, a workbook, and study cards, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, c2001; also **Thich Nhat Hanh's The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation, Boston: Beacon Press, c1976.**

7. Skipping email for a while is not a crazy idea I've come up with on my own. **David Levy**, the computer scientist and professor of information at the **University of Washington** (quoted extensively here), told the *Chronicle of Higher Ed* that he "unplug[s] from the Internet one day each week to clear his head." (see note #10 for full reference.)

8. **Richmond**, pp35, 39.

9. See e.g.: **Louv, Richard**. "Nature Deficit," *Orion*. New York: Jul/Aug 2005. Vol. 24, Iss. 4; pg. 70; **McGinnis, Marianne**, "Outdoor time calms hyper kids," *Prevention*. Emmaus: Mar 2005. Vol. 57, Iss. 3; pg. 54; and **Michelle Nijhuis**, "Nature's tonic," *Audubon*. New York: Jan/Feb 2005. Vol. 107, Iss. 1; pg. 11.

10. Quotes are taken from "Shoughton's" summary of **Levy's** LITA closing keynote in the blog on: "Information and the Quality of Life: Environmentalism for the Information Age (take 1)" October 2nd, 2005 at: <http://litablog.org/>. It is relevant to note that the single comment on this blog entry (as of 10/29/05) makes the suggestion that everyone "Make a daily and a weekly space for silence and solitude," and recommends a kind of mindfulness meditative practice.

11. **Young, Jeffrey R.** "Knowing When to Log Off: Wired campuses may be causing 'information overload,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4/22/05. See: <http://chronicle.com/free/v51/i33/33a03401.htm>.

12. See <http://www.contemplativemind.org/>.

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shows that were upshots of them. "*All Things Considered*," **NPR's** flagship program, commands two chapters and over 30 pages. My generation — GenX-ers — have grown up with this daily staple; it is fascinating to read of its growing pains. Its siblings *Morning Edition* and *Weekend Edition* also get air play, as well as *Performance Today*, *Talk of the Nation*, and *Marketplace*.

Mitchell's third section, "Critics," gives equal time to "Critics on the Right" (chapter 12) and "Critics on the Left" (chapter 13). He traces critical lineage from **Nixon** to **Reagan** to **Fred Barnes** and other conservative pundits; he surveys liberal critics from

William Hoynes to the editors of *Mother Jones* to frustrated community builders.

Mitchell's book inspires a great deal of gratitude for the determined movers and shakers, employees, and advocates of **NPR** and the local agencies that make up our country's public radio network. As mentioned above, GenX-ers have grown up with many of the programs that **Mitchell** profiles, making it easy to take for granted the amount of work involved in launching these productions and maintaining momentum. It is easy for us to watch a television series' "special features" on DVD and see directors and producers yammer on about the difficulties of pitching their ideas in Hollywood and the "near misses" the series might have experienced — all with the multi-million dollar backing of a commercial television network.

However, to learn of the trials of radio programming, the same programming that has become the stick by which I (and many others) measure professional journalism, and to realize how much more was at stake with these news staples when considering the life expectancy of a commercial television series, is sobering. It also inspires hope and comfort. To learn such intimate details of public radio's troubles and critics is humanizing, like seeing paparazzi photos of a celebrity making a midnight run to the Circle K for Doritos; it makes "them" — the founders, producers, writers, and broadcasters of public radio — seem like one of "us." And isn't that one of the visions of public radio, to provide insight into diverse populations so that listeners can be unified by discovering their similarities?