

Amos, Andy, 'n' the APSA: Political Scientists, the Public and the Origin of Commercial Broadcasting

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In recent years, many have called for political science to engage more strongly with the public. In his 2004 APSA presidential address, Robert Putnam declared that "attending to the concerns of our fellow citizens is... an obligation as fundamental as our pursuit of scientific truth." Other scholars (and other APSA presidents) have echoed this theme. APSA committees on inequality, and on civic education and engagement, have recently striven to make their work more accessible and more "relevant."

There is a strange omission in these debates. In calling for political science to have a "stronger public presence" (in Putnam's words), scholars have ignored the historical period when the public presence of political science was at its zenith.

This paper looks at a nearly forgotten episode in the early history of radio. From 1932 to 1936, the APSA sponsored a nationwide radio program on NBC. Entitled "You and Your Government," it was run by some of the most famous scholars in the discipline's history, including Charles A. Beard and Charles Merriam. Incredibly, the show aired on Tuesday nights after Amos 'n' Andy--guaranteeing a lead-in audience of tens of millions. Six percent of the APSA's membership--and nearly all of its leading lights--were featured in the most prominent time slot in broadcast history.

At the start of the broadcasts, the committee organizing the broadcasts declared that they were "the greatest single opportunity directly to effect citizenship in the United States that has ever been offered." The program signified "the opening of the door of wider usefulness for the political scientist." Yet a few years later, when NBC cancelled the program, these same political scientists had changed their tune, calling broadcasting "a positive menace to culture and democracy."

The political scientists blamed the network and the public, while ignoring or excusing their own errors. Seven decades later, as political scientists again try to make themselves useful to the public, some of these same errors look likely to be repeated.

[Click here](#) for a .pdf file of the conference paper. The full citation follows:

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