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Gettelfinger, Hunter

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Static in the Radiosphere: Radio and the Public Good, Broadcasting Power and the

Battle for the Airwaves

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Music

by

Hunter W. Gettelfinger

Committee in charge:

Professor David Novak, Chair

Professor Tim Cooley

Professor Richard Flacks

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The thesis of Hunter W. Gettelfinger is approved.

Tim Cooley

Richard Flacks

David Novak, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

Static in the Radiosphere: Radio and the Public Good, Broadcasting Power and the Battle
for the Airwaves

by

Hunter W. Gettelfinger

The future of radio broadcasting is uncertain. To better understand what the future of radio may hold, this paper explores the complex history of American radio broadcasting as a continuous struggle over media power. Utilizing the idea of “static” as a metaphor for the ideological and practical tension in American radio history, this paper argues that this history is characterized by the contradiction between radio as a facilitator of liberatory democratic communication versus its use as a means for capitalist homogenization and control. Drawing from theoretical frameworks established by Marx, Foucault, McLuhan, Adorno and others, this paper analyzes important texts in radio studies to craft a narrative that traces important historical moments in which the battle of the airwaves was fought. From the early technological innovation of pioneering inventors to governmental intervention and the enclosure of the radio commons. From wartime propaganda and anti-communist blacklisting

to the FM revolution and counter cultural radio movements. From Reagan-era deregulation and the Telecommunications Act of 1996 to the Free Radio Movement and Low-Power FM.

The history of American radio broadcasting is a history in which radio broadcasting as a resource for the public good is continually fought for and challenged.

Anyone who has spent time listening to the radio is undoubtedly familiar with the sound of static. The fuzzy, crackling, jumbled, random, constantly morphing 'shshshshsh' of radio static is the product of electromagnetic interference: unwanted radio waves stemming from natural and man-made processes (lightning storms, solar radiation, electronic devices, etc.). Static is a sonic manifestation that can consume our listening experience and force us to change stations or shut off the radio in frustration. However, radio static can represent more than just an aural phenomenon. It can also be a metaphor for various practical and ideological elements of radio as a media apparatus.

- Epigraph by Author

Note from the Author: The Personal is Political

In the Spring of 2017, armed with little more than a Sony Handycam, 2001 Toyota Corolla and my best friend Hattie Belle, I embarked from my hometown of San Diego, California on a cross-country road trip determined to learn about the state of American music. My plan was to document local music scenes in all the towns and cities I passed through as I made my way to East Tennessee and the Appalachian Mountains where many of my ancestors are from. The trip ended up being a formative experience for my life, as I documented local musicians, performances, cityscapes, urban environments and natural ecosystems in cities and places like Tuscon, Hueco Tanks, Marfa, Lafayette, New Orleans, Knoxville, Nashville, Memphis, Clarksville and many others. One of the most profound aspects of my trip was tuning into all the different little local radio stations in each town and city that I visited. These radio stations were local culture in aural form; a sonic realm adding an invisible acoustic element to the notion of place. Experiencing these cities and towns through local radio transmissions gave me a unique insight into local issues, events and musicians from the mouths of local people. I began to realize just how important these small stations were to the fabric of everyday musical experiences.

When I moved back to Santa Barbara, CA later that year, I began tuning into KCSB with extra appreciation. I had always loved listening to KCSB as I cruised highway 1, but I began to realize how much KCSB was adding to the cultural sphere of a small city like Santa Barbara where alternative and underrepresented media dissemination can be hard to come by. One day, when a voice on KCSB announced that the station was holding an orientation for potential new programmers, I decided to see what was going on. For the past seven years, I have been programming a weekly radio show on KCSB - FM in Santa Barbara. With each show, I gain a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the role that alternative media outlets play in constructing a more diverse and resilient public sphere. My experiences with community radio over the last seven years can largely be summed up by the old indie media adage: don't hate the media, be the media. My journey with local community radio has been about the shift from consumer to producer, exemplifying the power of alternative media to alter the sense of self for those who produce it, forming a more active and engaged musical citizen. My experiences as a community radio DJ have also taught me that the future of radio is uncertain and that this future is worth fighting for. Radio has always been an unruly media capable of challenging dominant power structures: nonetheless, its history also shows how it can be an arm of fascist domination and a context of corporate homogenization. This paper is about this tension in the form of radio, and the ideological power struggle over radio broadcasting.

Introduction

On May 1st, 2025, The President of the United States Donald Trump signed an executive order titled “Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media.” This order specifically called for the Corporation for Public Broadcasters (CPB) to stop funding National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). This executive order was a clear attempt to censure public media outlets that were committed to creating a more informed and educated public sphere. It was also a direct attack on media outlets that had been critical of the President's policies and political motives. This order signified President Trump's direct attempt to drag the realm of radio broadcasting into his dubious political web of influence, while simultaneously reasserting through negation the importance of radio broadcasting to a functioning democracy. Wireless radio broadcasting is a vital and important structure in the American free press. It is a pillar of the mediated circulation of information and ideas in American society and it has a major role in the production of educational and liberatory media. However, it also has the power and ability for mass control and the reproduction of prejudice and inequality.

In July 2025, with a vote of 216-213, the United States Congress passed the Recissions Act of 2025. This bill rescinded over one billion dollars in funding for CPB, effectively cutting off all federal funding for NPR, PBS and hundreds of other public television and radio broadcasting stations. In response to these funding cuts, the CPB, which has supported public broadcasting in the U.S. since 1967, announced it would be shutting down. The CPB President and CEO Patricia Harrison justified this decision stating that the

“CPB’s final act would be to protect the integrity of the public media system and the democratic values by dissolving, rather than allowing the organization to remain defunded and vulnerable to additional attacks.”¹ While this act of dissolution may be seen as caving in to threats from a fascistic regime, it also represents a savvy attempt to shield the organization from being co-opted by parties that do not represent the democratic support of public broadcasting that the organization has striven to uphold. While the situation is in many ways quite dire, head of CPB’s board of directors Rudy Calvert offered words of encouragement stating that “even at this moment, I am convinced that public media will survive, and that a new Congress will address public media’s role in our country because it is critical to our children’s education, our history, culture and democracy to do so.”²

In March of 2026, Federal Judge Randolph Moss ruled that Trump's Executive order from last May was unlawful on the grounds of the first amendment, stating that “it is difficult to conceive of clearer evidence that a government action is targeted at viewpoints that the president does not like and seeks to squelch.”³ While this ruling will likely have minimal impact on the federal funding of public media in the immediate future, it sets an important legal precedent moving forward about the government's ability to manipulate funding in public broadcasting. As NPR CEO Katherine Maher notes “[this] ruling is a decisive affirmation of the rights of a free and independent press.”⁴ Whatever your thoughts on the federal funding of public broadcasting may be, it is clear that we are experiencing an unsettling moment in the regulation and control of radio broadcasting. The defunding of public media institutions and the shutdown of the CPB is a powerful example of the current power struggle happening in wireless communication. Radio broadcasting, with its ability to transmit information, ideas, art and culture from one transmission point to millions of

receivers in the blink of an eye has revolutionized communication over the last hundred plus years. While its future is uncertain, it is also clear that broadcasting as a site of ideological struggle is not new, and that the history of broadcasting in the United States is rife with the tension between liberatory democratic values and conservative and oppressive control.

The history of radio broadcasting in the United States is a history of struggle over media power. An oscillation of media potentialities fought between inventors, broadcasting corporations, governmental regulators, advertisers, workers, presidents, artists, deejays, musicians, militaries, amateur tinkerers, and so many others. Yet the impacts of this struggle seldom rise to the surface. Instead, they bubble up from below, through channels that often seem disconnected or superfluous. While the fight for media power is not solely relegated to the realm of radio, radio broadcasting as a foundational pillar of wireless electronic communication media has accentuated these issues in ways that are still being heard today. While the dichotomy represented in a narrative of radio power is at times reductive, and its binary construction is worthy of critique, it also remains a useful articulation rooted in historical understandings of radio and media. This paper analyzes this struggle over radio power through an examination of radio studies literature through different eras of American radio history, arguing that the tension surrounding the control of the airwaves is a foundational element for understanding radio scholarship and history. Thus, this paper analyzes key historical constructions through which this battle has been fought, in order to better understand the ramifications and place of radio broadcasting today.

Broadcasting media has a central position in the contemporary culture wars dominating American society today, and this project analyzes this tension from a number of theoretical and critical perspectives. Drawing from Karl Marx's ideas about ideological

control in a capitalist society, this project understands the power of radio media as concentrated in the means of its production.⁵ Access to and control over radio's technological and legal parameters structure ideas about what radio is, whom it should serve and how it should function. This power has been centralized through both governmental regulators like the FCC and corporate networks such as RCA, NBC and CBS, as well as decentralized in grassroots technological and experimental practice that spreads media power to voices outside of traditional institutional contexts. The ability to control the means of radio production, be that in the regulatory power, station ownership, or access to the airwaves, are vital to constructing the discursive formations that construct radio in its public and private uses.

Drawing from Foucault's idea of discursive formations, this project understands radio not as a fixed or stable object, but as a discourse constituted by the power structures in which it is embedded. Radio as discourse is about the network of statements that constitute radio as socially significant. These statements encompass everything that has ever been said, not just about radio, but the technological dissemination of knowledge throughout history. Radio discourses then should not be understood merely as "groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak."⁶ This means that objects like 'radio' and even the natural properties which it harnesses are not 'things', but rather something constituted by the rules of discursive practice itself.

This project also sees radio power as embedded in a particular set of technological capabilities. Drawing from Marshall McLuhan's idea that technological media forms are extensions of the human body,⁷ this project understands that radio's unique technological

abilities give it a particular place in American society and culture. Radio extends the reach of the human voice and countless singers from Frank Sinatra to Hank Williams to Ulm Kalthum harnessed radio technology to spread their music, their voice and their influence. Radio also extends the capability of the human ear, creating a unique cultural practice of “tuning in” to sounds near and far. It is in these “extensions of man” that radio alters social formations. Drawing from McLuhan’s idea that the “medium is the message,”⁸ this paper sees that radio power is not only embedded in the content that it broadcasts, but rather in the ways that it exists as a technological form.

Expanding on McCluhan's idea that radio power is concentrated not in its content but rather in its technological form, this paper draws from Theodore Adorno’s *Social Critique of Radio Music* which posits that radio is a technological media form that atomizes the listener, isolating them from historical networks of communal engagement. The radio listener then becomes more susceptible to the ideological control of a radio voice imbued with socio-cultural authority. For Adorno, radio facilitated standardized modes of production and content that allowed for access to pervasive forms of music that created a regression in listening practices. Adorno argued that through radio music becomes part of an endless cycle of technological reproduction that is separated from its cultural context and turned into a commodity.⁹

The commodification of art through radio broadcasting has been the product of what Horkheimer and Adorno called the “culture industry”: a breakdown in the purpose of enlightenment rationality, through which mass mediated popular culture “is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together.”¹⁰ For Horkheimer and Adorno,

the culture industry “confines itself to standardization and mass production” in which cultural expression and sociological actors are reduced to spreadsheets of quantifiable and controllable characteristics.¹¹ It is through mass mediated technologies like the phonograph and radio and their production of culture that the last vestiges of pre-capitalist associations are erased, eroding the critical capacity of the public sphere.¹² Drawing from Jurgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, this paper understands the public sphere as an important social space through which socio-cultural power structures are critiqued, while simultaneously acknowledging that radio has been instrumental in the "refeudalization" of the public sphere, where critical debate has been usurped by displays of power.¹³

However resonant Adorno’s and others’ critiques of radio's totalizing influence, this paper also draws on scholarly arguments that see radio media within a lineage of technological infrastructures that create the possibility to alter society in a more egalitarian direction. Following Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, this paper argues that even as technological reproduction diminishes the ‘aura’ of an original work of art by disconnecting it from its “here and now,” it also serves to destabilize traditional power structures by detaching art from a “parasitic subservience to ritual.”¹⁴ Benjamin argues that “to a degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility. From a photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.”¹⁵ The politicization of art through technological reproduction has allowed

for power structures to be more easily critiqued and help foster musical production more disconnected from the confines of traditional hierarchies. Undoubtedly radio has brought music to the people, helping foster an array of diverse musical expressions previously unfathomable. Radio has also been instrumental in bridging the gap between high and low cultures. For example, Timothy Taylor notes in his chapter “The Role of Opera in the Rise of Radio in the United States” how radio brought music forms like opera that were traditionally inaccessible to large portions of the population into the American household for mass audiences.¹⁶ Radio was also essential in cementing and legitimizing popular music in American society.

While radio has been theorized as a means of top-down ideological domination, this paper also draws from scholars who understand its reception as a site in which power dynamics become more kaleidoscopic. Stuart Hall understands communication technologies like radio as a circuit through which messages are encoded and decoded by different mediated positions. While certain meanings are encoded into mediated signifiers, these meanings do not necessarily directly translate to how they are received, and the process through which meaning is decoded by audiences or listeners is as important to the construction of meaning in mediated objects as the intended meanings of the producer.¹⁷ As Elena Razlogova notes in her book *The Listeners Voice*, radio listeners have historically been very instrumental in shaping how radio would develop, what kind of content would be produced and how radio technology would be understood in American society.¹⁸ This relates to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus as a form of strategic negotiation in which “it is necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the

mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies.”¹⁹ Bourdieu’s theories of negotiation allow for an understanding of radio as something that can structure American consciousness, through things like regimented programming or hitmaking top-40, while also allowing for the presence of individual agency within and outside those particular confines.

It is in this paradigm of negotiation that this paper understands mediated circulation as an imperfect system. Drawing from Jonathan Sterne’s work with Shannon and Weavers’ *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*, I argue that radio media as characterized by noise as much as signal, by static as much as broadcast. For Shannon and Weaver there is no such thing as a pure circuit and within any system there is always the presence of noise, static or disruption. As information systems grow so too does the potential for noise as “the greater number of possible messages in a system, the greater chance for error - with increased information comes increased noise.”²⁰ As the cultural sphere of radio grew throughout the twentieth century, it became subject to increasing forms of disruption. This disruption came in the form of popular music, black cultural expression, counter-culture ideologies, radio pirates and activists and a myriad of other cultural forms that disrupted the intent of radio hegemony.

As Susan Douglas notes in her book *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, “radio today seems so trapped in the amber of corporate control that it is easy to forget how much of radio technology and programming came from the bottom up, pioneered by outsiders or rebels who wanted something more, or something different, from the box than corporate America was providing.”²¹ The outsiders of the electromagnetic spectrum and radio rebels who helped shape one of the most impactful media structures in American history were themselves part of a longer lineage of resistance to the dominance of western

societies through the control of information. Yet today, Americans largely take for granted the pain-staking hours of individual and collective resistance to the institutional and corporate control of mass media that has occurred over the past centuries.

While conventional historical narratives of radio media primarily tell the tales of battles lost, an unconventional narrative may tell otherwise. The media landscape today could be very different if it was not for the contestations of active citizens over the decades. Despite the history of power struggle over radio broadcasting in the U.S., radio media and its dominance by corporate interests and capitalist propaganda seem almost natural, unquestioned by the average listener. As Michelle Hilmes notes in her book *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting*, “contrary to historical accounts that depict the basic structures and institutions of American broadcasting as natural and shaped by consensus, every step to hammer out broadcast regulation was a bitter struggle, pitting small broadcasters against huge corporations, educational stations against commercial rivals, and increasingly activist federal government regulators against the economic interests of big business.”²² However, this struggle was not just instrumental in constructing the institution of American radio broadcasting: it is also a foundational history with larger ramifications for the issues of mass mediation affecting American society today.

Radio is encapsulated in a tension between its ability to facilitate communal connection and a diversity of circulation for the public good and its record for establishing the paradigms of mass mediated conformity and ideological control. On the one hand, radio technology and wireless communication have allowed for the spread of information in previously unfathomable ways, dislocating knowledge from traditional power structures and creating new assemblages of connectivity. The rise and development of radio technology and

wireless communication have led us into the information age, where vast amounts of information are available to millions of people at the swipe of a finger, creating increased access for historically marginalized groups to the production and reception of credible news, public affairs and cultural arts sources. This increased access has led to a more informed public sphere and transparent power dynamics. No longer can knowledge hide behind the gates of the palace or educational institutions only accessible to a small percentage of well-connected groups.

On the other hand, the parameters of mass communication technology developed through radio broadcasting have created the parameters for a technologically-enabled mass ideological influence. Local and regional cultural spheres have given way to centralized, nationalized and globalized agendas, destabilizing local economies and ways of life. Access to information has become a curse as much as a gift, spreading harmful and biased disinformation that perpetuates inequality. Music and arts have become big business, and the culture industry has enabled corporate commercialism to invade every aspect of American society. The regulation and control of the broadcast spectrum is continually consolidated into a handful corporate interests and idiosyncratic individuals have become stereotyped demographics through which to draw out listeners, ratings, engagement and advertising dollars. When a singular voice can reach millions of people relatively instantaneously, the question of whose voice is being amplified and disseminated becomes paramount, and we know that throughout American history the institutionalization of media dissemination is predominantly harbored in specific and narrow realms.

The Emergence of Radio: Technological Invention, Amateurism and Experimentation

The early period of radio broadcasting history was preceded by an era of technological innovation and experimentation that harnessed the earth's natural properties, transforming the chaos of the earth's electrical and magnetic fields into a communication network of unfathomable magnitude. While this development was structured in official channels like universities and professional laboratories, it was also spurred by the practices and ingenuity of average American citizens. These amateur radio experimenters were vital to the development of early radio broadcasting infrastructure, and the decentralized channels through which they worked correlated directly to an understanding of radio technology that was democratic in character: a resource created by the common folk for the benefit of the common folk. The emergence of radio and wireless technology represents an important origin point in the battle for the airwaves. That radio broadcasting was developed through a wildly democratic experimental process, where the earth's chaotic natural processes were harnessed by scientific innovation, situates radio as a media pre-disposed for an unruly character.

In the 1860s, Scottish Physicist and Mathematician James Clerk Maxwell laid groundwork for the mathematical theories of the electromagnetic field, positing that “accelerated changes in electric and magnetic forces sent waves spreading through space at a definite speed” and that “an electric spark could provide such a necessary quick change in current.”²³ This theory was put to the test and eventually proven in the 1880s by German Physicist Heinrich Hertz, but it was Guillermo Marconi who dazzled the world at the 1899 America's Cup with his demonstration of wireless telegraphy. Seven years later inventor

Reginald Fessenden, spurred by his invention of “continuous wave” technology, produced the first radio broadcast on Christmas Eve, 1906, transmitting the human voice and music for the first time. With the self-proclaimed ‘Father of Radio’ Lee De Forest's (contested) invention of the Audion Tube (an early prototype of vacuum tube technology) that same year, the effective power of radio broadcasting was greatly enhanced. However, it was the invention of the crystal radio set, a low-power and inexpensive device that could detect radio waves, that ushered in a wave of access and amateurism that propelled radio into the twentieth century.

While the practical scientific foundation of radio may have begun with Hertz's successful demonstration of electromagnetic waves in 1887–1888, the transition of this technology into a social medium was driven not primarily by professional technical experts but by a diverse group of amateur tinkerers who reimagined radio as an open frontier. As corporate interests failed to capitalize on Marconi's invention in the early twentieth century, amateur radio practitioners took it upon themselves to construct the parameters through which radio would enter the popular consciousness. Hilmes explains that in early twentieth century radio history “the term amateur refers to the growing group of technologically adept tinkerers—young and old, male and female, from all ethnic and class backgrounds—who became fascinated with the possibilities of this new technology and determined to experiment on their own.”²⁴ This fascination with the possibility of what radio technology could be created a unique cultural moment that established radio as a medium of decentralized experimentation, where unique communal ingenuity became paramount.

The tinkerers used whatever materials they could get their hands on: everything from discarded bottles, tomato cans, umbrella ribs, metal bed post rings, Model T ignition coils, quaker oat boxes wrapped in wire, old telephone headsets, rolling pins, tobacco tins and

whatever else these tinkerers could scrounge up. These amateurs pushed wireless broadcasting into the future, seeing how far and wide their signals could reach. With these technical practices and experimentation driving radio infrastructure forward, the amateur radio tinkerers emerged as a legitimate subculture with periodicals like *Modern Electronics* and organizations such as Wireless Association of America. More importantly, however, were the small and local radio clubs popping up in towns and cities across the country. These organizations, and the communities of amateur radio enthusiasts that they supported, fostered technological progress and understanding, but also an ideology about the democratic control of the ether. Hilmes explains how “these organized amateurs defined and fought for their vision of radio, what they began to call citizen radio. Establishing an important argument that the airwaves belonged not to any private interest but to the public, to the citizens, they envisioned radio as a minimally controlled, open-access, two-way medium that would allow citizens to communicate freely, under voluntary codes of behavior that would be enforced by the community.”²⁵

This vision of radio communication as a communal resource controlled and operated by a community of radio citizens would be the dominant discourse for more than a decade. This period established radio and wireless communication as a public good, with the access to broadcasting and the harnessing of the electromagnetic spectrum open to anyone who was interested. Yet, this idealistic vision of radio would soon be challenged and forced to the margins of radio history. With the number of active broadcasters growing exponentially, “from about 150 in 1905 to around 600 in 1910 to more than 10,000 in 1914,” so too did a fear and anxiety of an unruly, unseen and out-of-control group of unregulated broadcasters.²⁶ As Hilmes notes, “it took a concerted effort on the part of big business and government,

feeding on the elite public's fear of the masses, to change that vision to the highly centralized, one-way, restricted-access system that is broadcasting.”²⁷ While the development of a highly structured and regulated radio industry would transform the understanding of radio in American society, the romantic ideals of early tinkerers have never fully disappeared. The conceptualization of radio as a public resource remains embedded in American radio legislation in large part to the foundation established by early amateur radio enthusiasts who brought the technology into the mainstream.

Enclosure of the Radio Commons: Regulation, Militarization, Networks and Commercialism

The utopian vision of the ether as a democratic communication sphere posited by many amateur radio practitioners in the early twentieth century took an irreversible hit in 1912 when an ‘unsinkable ship’ collided with an iceberg about 400 miles south of Newfoundland, Canada. When the Titanic sank, the importance of radio technology and the dangers of an unregulated ether came to the forefront of American society. Douglas notes how “people realized that proper use of the ether could have saved everyone's life, a conception of the airwaves began to take hold: that they were a communal resource, something in which all people had a stake, a realm that had to be protected and managed for the common good.”²⁸ However well-intentioned the public perception around the need for the regulation of radio broadcasting was in this era, it also allowed for regulatory bodies disconnected from the average American citizen to establish control of the airwaves and usher in an era of media broadcasting dominated by corporate capitalist interests.

The first definitive legislation and a decisive point in the enclosure of the radio commons was the Radio Act of 1912. This act established that all broadcasters would henceforth be required to obtain a license to broadcast. While this meant that broadcasting frequencies would not be “owned,” and obtaining the renewal of a broadcasting license would be predicated on proof of broadcasting for the ‘public good’, broadcasting licenses would henceforth make certain broadcasters (amateur) illegal and others (commercial) increasingly privileged. Notably, the Radio Act of 1912 also banished amateur unaffiliated broadcasters to the seemingly useless low end of the spectrum and forced strict content parameters on what they could and could not broadcast. As Douglas notes, “the Radio Act of 1912 represents a watershed in wireless history, the point after which individual exploration of vast tracts of the ether would diminish and corporate management and exploitation, in close collaboration with the state, would increase.”²⁹

The era of unregulated amateur experimentation took a further hit with the onset of WWI only a few years later, as all private broadcasting was banned, and the government took over almost all aspects of radio infrastructure and communication. The economy rapidly consolidated around the war effort and American industries became highly regulated. The military and the government enacted increased control, and information became central to this authority as “dissidents were rounded up in the middle of the night, to be imprisoned or deported without trial. Men and women were arrested simply for speaking out against the war. The mail was censored. Radical newspapers were banned.”³⁰ Radio communication was crucial for the war effort, particularly ‘ship to ship’ and ‘ship to shore’ communication for the Navy. However, a lack of institutional and technical expertise meant that the government and the military had to turn to the tinkerers for their practical knowledge and real-world

experience. As Walker notes, “the hams were militarized, and the military was invaded by hams.”³¹ The absorption of amateur radio practitioners into a highly controlled and militarized broadcasting sector signified a radical shift in the positionality of radio’s pioneers for democratic use, offering a cultural signification that reinforced the ideology of centralized control of radio broadcasting. With the end of WWI, radio broadcasting would take on a whole new role in American society as the technological capabilities of radio -- which had exponentially increased due to the war -- allowed radio broadcasting to establish a major role in American society.

Mirroring the American economy as a whole, the radio industry came out of WWI with a momentum that roared through the 1920’s, ushering in a new era of increased government regulation, networked commercial capitalist control and diminishing returns for amateur experimenters. The sales of personal radio receivers were booming and so was the desire to broadcast. At this time all radio stations were broadcasting at the same frequency and the broadcast spectrum was considered by many to be full, overcrowded and chaotic. When a U.S. district court ruled in 1926 that Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover did not actually have legal authority to assign and regulate wavelength allocation, all hell broke loose. Stations jumped wavelengths freely and with abandon, creating a wild west scenario on the airwaves. Electromagnetic chaos combined with unenforceable regulatory efforts is the socio-cultural and legal context that led to the Radio Act of 1927 and the establishment of radio’s first official regulatory body: the Federal Radio Commission (FRC).

The Radio Act of 1927 codified several important parameters that became embedded into the American radio broadcasting system. One was that radio broadcasting would be a restricted and regulated enterprise. The chaotic unregulated era was over, and the bill gave

the FRC the legal jurisdiction to allocate frequencies to different broadcasters. Another was that the radio broadcasting would serve the ‘public interest’. Serving the public interest and ability to define it became the agreement that allowed for the commercial network dominance of radio broadcasting. The years 1927 and 1928 were at the height of a stock market boom, a pre-depression era socio-cultural moment, where commercial interests could be disguised as public interest. After all, the economy was booming and recently formed radio networks like NBC were able to offer clearer productions of formative broadcasts to more of the nation simultaneously. This is the rhetoric that allowed advertising dollars, rather than public funding, to take over. As Hilmes puts it, “commercial profit drove the economy, advertising drove commercial profits, and the result was good for everyone. Thus, in the FRC’s reasoning, even though it was true that commercial broadcasters employed advertising to make a profit, which was a selfish, private concern, the side product was a service that benefited all Americans.”³² Of course, this statement begs the question as to who is included in the category of “all Americans,” and whom, in the early twentieth century, was left out?

Despite the codification of a legal framework which favored the commercial network dominance of the American radio broadcasting system, the battle over the airwaves continued, with debate over how to best serve the ‘public interest’ at the center. In a period where Canada completely overhauled its commercial system in favor of a public funded system similar to the BBC, the commercial system in America eventually won out. An important ideological shift that allowed this to occur was pushed by the FRC’s framing of the American public’s relationship to radio as one from user to listener. As Robert McChesney notes in his book *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928–1935* “the FRC argued that broadcasters were not

licensed to serve users, but rather to serve listeners.”³³ Hilmes takes this point further, stating that “the FRC saw its goal as restricting access to the airwaves to a privileged few, in order that the listeners, now defined as a passive mass rather than as active broadcasters, might have the best service.... In effect, it disbarred the general public from the category of ‘user’ and created a two-tiered vision of the public: those elite few who were entitled to use the airwaves (to broadcast, to obtain station licenses) and all the rest of us, who were entitled only to passively listen in to their offerings.”³⁴ This radical shift in the conceptualization of the American public marked a turning point that attempted to erase an important lineage in the history of American radio in which radio was constructed and developed as a tool to be wielded by the American people. Rather than as a dynamic means of democratic communication, radio became something to be programmed, disseminated and consumed.

With the American public being conceived of as a mass entity of consumption, rather than an intricate part of radio media production, now firmly entrenched in broadcasting's regulatory body, the groundwork had been set for the capitalist exploitation of the electromagnetic spectrum. When Roosevelt signed into law the Communication Act of 1934, “it codified into a lasting body of regulations—still in force today, despite some major revisions—that made advertising based commercial network broadcasting the backbone of the American system.”³⁵ This act established the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) which has remained the primary regulatory structure in broadcasting for the past ninety plus years. Major radio networks like NBC and CBS began to dominate radio programming that was overwhelmingly produced directly by advertisers. “Consolidation occurred as broadcasting practices became highly profitable and standardized. By 1938, almost 40 percent of the stations on the air were owned by or affiliated with either NBC or

CBS; for the powerful clear channel stations, that proportion was 28 out of 30.”³⁶ Yet, despite the dominance of monopolistic networks and their commercial support, which has dominated radio broadcasting to this day, radio media has remained a contested site through various eras and iterations.

Radio and World War II: The Public/Private Collusion, Journalistic Integrity and the Multicultural American Aesthetic

World War II marked another intense period of ideological consolidation in the broadcasting industry. This was a period in which the importance of radio journalism and the effectiveness of radio communication came to the fore and reinforced an emergent multicultural aesthetic of American culture. While the prevalence of film footage of WWII instills visual imagery in the mind of the historian, it is important to note that WWII was “first and foremost, a radio war that millions listened to and imagined.”³⁷ Radio broadcasting during WWII fundamentally changed the way the American people experienced armed conflict and global relations by offering a sonic connection to the militarized suffering that was otherwise disconnected from the American public. It was also a primary means through which Americans constructed an anti-fascist sentiment, as radio brought the crazed happenings of Hitler’s regime into the American home and made “the blind, head-in-sand isolationist view of foreign affairs... no longer tenable.”³⁸ However it also marked a collusion between the public and private sectors of radio broadcasting. Whereas previously government regulators had, at least in theory, been the primary means for checking corporate consolidation of radio broadcasting power, ensuring that broadcasters were operating in the ‘public interest’, WWII

created the justification for a melding of these two sectors that has been difficult to segregate ever since.

Rather than the government-controlled radio infrastructure that dominated WWI, the second world war relied on the cooperation between radio industry (networks and advertisers) and a governmental propaganda machine with intense interest in controlling the narrative around WWII. The government-constructed wartime agenda was filtered out to the American people through the already established network system and “it was, therefore, the advertisers and writers who packaged and sold the war to the American people.”³⁹ This allowed the radio industry to carry on through the war without missing a beat. Rather than being disrupted by the war, the major radio networks strengthened their grip on the hearts and minds of the American people by being the dominant way in which the American people experienced the tragedies as they unfolded.

While the mass mediation of the American broadcasting system, developed in large part by the network's concentration of capitalist investment, kept Americans informed and educated about what was happening around the world, it also meant that hard-hitting journalism was subsidiary to the fear of alienating the consumer. Objective reporting became secondary to the concerns of the capitalist machine and cringe-worthy product placements interspersed news of death and destruction. WWII highlighted a broadcasting system where journalistic integrity free from abhorrent politicization remained something to be desired. Yet this period also saw resistance and opposition to the whitewashing effects of the commingling of advertising dollars, network broadcasting interests and government wartime propaganda. Many journalists, writers and broadcasting workers questioned the relationship between the entertainment values of the industry and the duty to inform. Hilmes notes how

this conflict came to head in 1943 when “a group of prominent writers in the OWI's Publications and Graphics Bureau resigned in protest claiming that ‘the activities of the OWI on the home front were dominated by high-pressure promoters who preferred slick salesmanship to honest information.’ ”⁴⁰

WWII also created the necessity of the construction of an anti-fascist and multi-cultural understanding of American culture. Radio broadcasting was at the forefront of this construction of a national identity for Americans that stood in opposition to the intolerance and atrocities of the enemy. This allowed for “increased opportunities for marginalized and oppressed groups to demand the ability to speak for themselves, to address the inequities and antidemocratic aspects of American life.”⁴¹ For the first time, programs that explicitly addressed the history of racism and prejudice in the United States reached a broad public on the airwaves. Though these first efforts were cautious and hampered by oppositional views, they provided a vital forum for the momentum that would lead to civil rights reforms after the war.

Radio and the Rise of the Televisual: Continuation of Network Dominance, Blacklisting and the Need for Diverse Media Systems

After WWII, American broadcasting took a swift turn into the era of television. As television became the broadcasting medium of the future, radio's centrality in the American home would begin to decline. However, regardless of how secondary radio would become, in many ways it also became an even more influential media form in American society in the coming decades. Yet radio's coming era of reinvention was preceded by a period of intense

constriction in radio broadcasting as a culture of fear and persecution pervaded the industry. The consolidation of radio broadcasting power into a centralized system of network broadcasters dependent on an advertising industrial complex made the broadcasting sector particularly susceptible to fascistic rhetoric disguised as anti-communism, resulting in a conservative turn in radio content and exemplifying the need for a more diverse broadcasting system.

In many ways radio was the direct precursor to television, establishing many of the broadcasting paradigms that television would adopt. This was at least partly due to the television licensing freeze implemented between 1948-1952. Similar to the era of spectrum disarray seen in the radio broadcasting sector of the 1920s, frequency interference was a huge problem in the early stages of television's development. This prompted the FCC to pause issuance of any new television broadcasting licenses, effectively handing control of the televisual media system to the same broadcasting networks and advertisers that were already driving the ship. Hilmes explains how:

During the freeze years, those in possession of station licenses were able to consolidate their control of the TV market and to benefit immensely from their monopoly over revenues during this early but rapidly profitable period. Who were the major pre-freeze owners? Why, the radio powers, of course. With stations in large urban areas and little competition for network affiliation in most markets (where two stations usually split the competition) the major networks CBS and NBC were able to gain a secure foothold in the new medium by the time the freeze was lifted in 1952.⁴²

While this point may seem more important to the future of television than to radio, it exemplifies the consolidation of broadcasting as a whole as America entered the 1950's. With the traditional radio media powers firmly entrenched in the future of radio and television broadcasting, this bottleneck of broadcasting power made it ripe for attack. As the

Red Scare, McCarthyism and blacklisting practices swept through the entertainment industry in the early 1950s, the broadcasting sector with its ability to reach and influence millions of people became a central mark. As Erik Barnouw notes in his book *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States 1933-1953*, “the visibility of the broadcasting industry, and the economic and political tensions surrounding it, made it an apt target.”⁴³

In 1950, the publication of *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* swept through the industry. While blacklisting practices of this era are predominantly associated with Hollywood and the film industry in the historical memory, “Red Channels” clearly stated in its introduction that “the Cominform and the Communist Party USA now rely more on radio and TV than on the press and motion pictures as ‘belts’ to transmit pro-Sovietism to the American public.”⁴⁴ While this rhetoric was on some levels ideological propaganda devised to channel public ire towards the broadcasting sector, it also aptly articulates the influence that broadcasting had on American society at the time. Regardless of the level to which it was shaping American consciousness, the allocation of Red Scare tactics towards the production of radio and television meant broadcasting was under attack by a conservative movement bent on controlling the dissemination of information. As the 1950’s progressed, “the McCarthy mushroom grew like a monstrous thing, feeding on various matters that had prepared the soil,” however the list of identified communist conspirators in broadcasting

was enough to bring gasps. Advance hints from Counterattack and columnists had made the industry expect revelations of insidious underground activity. What they received was a list of 151 of the most talented and admired people in the industry- mostly writers, directors, performers. They were people who had helped to make radio an honored medium, had

played a prominent role in its wartime use, and had been articulators of American war aims. In short, it was a roll of honor.⁴⁵

To many in the radio industry, this list appeared to be a joke. Friends and colleagues who were widely trusted and respected made up the bulk of the list. The accusations were hearsay at best, and the atrocious crimes they were accused of committing included such nefarious activities as that they “opposed Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini, tried to help war refugees, combated race discrimination, campaigned against poll taxes and other voting barriers, opposed censorship, criticized the House committee on un- American activities, hoped for peace, and favored efforts toward better U. S.- Soviet relations.”⁴⁶ Yet however ridiculous the accusations were, the ramifications on American culture and broadcasting media were serious. As a result, many of the best radio performers, producers and directors were blacklisted from the industry and advertisers, networks and personalities feared retaliation from a vocal minority of fascistic public and private actors operating under the guise of anti-communism. Not only were many great radio people barred from the industry never to return, but the content of radio became enmeshed in the fear of the times. Broadcasts avoided any and all topics that could potentially be construed as controversial, a practice that seeped into broadcast media so deeply that it can still be felt in commercial media today.

While the cultural ramifications of the Red Scare were not limited to the realm of radio broadcasting, it is clear that the decades of continuing consolidation of broadcasting power leading up to the 1950s had left the industry vulnerable to attack by a vocal minority of angry power-hungry individuals. If a large corporation like General Foods is the main sponsor for a bulk of radio programs on major networks, then all one had to do was instill the fear of capitalist retribution into one CEO to send shivers down a media system that affects

millions of people. The Red Scare's effects on radio broadcasting are a prime example of how mass media like radio can amplify the voices of a vocal minority. A diverse media system is a more resilient media system, and a lack of diversity in broadcasting power made the entire system vulnerable to a political craze being pushed by a minority of subject positions. However, radio broadcasting has proven throughout its history to be a form of media with a particular set of technological parameters that allow its reinvention and resistance to centralizing forces. As the 1950s progressed and the bias of Senator McCarthy was exposed and the Red Scare waned, another shift driven by radio broadcasting technology was brewing in American society that would help facilitate one of the largest cultural shifts of the twentieth century.

Radio in Post-War America: Transistor Technology, Black Cultural Expression and the Rise of the DJ

While radio broadcasting in the post-war era was dominated by the major networks, advertising companies and the conservative culture of the time, it was also the bastion for a growing youth movement and a site of cultural rebellion. "What we see after the rise of television is the devolution of radio, a reversal of the centralization that gripped the industry in the 1930s and '40s. Hundreds of stations disaffiliated from the networks, finding their audiences and their advertising revenues in local markets."⁴⁷ Part of this was aided by remnants of New Deal policies, spearheaded by FDR who sought to disrupt the media conglomerates stacked against him, that pushed back against the consolidation of radio station ownership. As FCC policies promoted the empowerment of regional and local

broadcasts, and the networks' attention and big business resources began sliding star performers and cultural authority more and more into television, radio again became a site of experimentation. This was linked again, like earlier forms of radio experimentation, to technological innovation that had large ramifications for American Culture.

By the mid 1950s, transistor radio technology had begun to reposition the radio in American culture. Radio was thought to be a dying media form in the wake of television's meteoric rise, yet the ratings, listeners and sales continued to grow. One of the keys was portability. Compared to tube powered radio sets, the transistor was tiny. As Douglas notes, "the transistor performed most of the functions of the electron tube but was much smaller and required a fraction of the power to operate. It was about the size of a kernel of corn."⁴⁸ Spurred by the developments of radar technology refined by the military during WWII, transistor technology harkened back to the pre audio tube era of crystal technology long forgotten by the mainstream. Labeled simply 'the transistor', this lightweight, solid-state, semiconductor technology gave radio the ability to displace the patriarchal formation of the American household as the central pillar of radio listening.

Radio listening, once a communal activity policed by family politics, became more individualized and taste centered. As Douglas explains "the invention of the transistor in 1947 meant that by the mid-1950s increasing numbers of Americans were participating in what the industry called 'out-of-home' listening. At work, in the car, on the beach, people—especially the young—brought radio with them and used it to stake out their social space."⁴⁹ Rather than centralized radio programming designed to target the American audience as a whole, stations began diversifying, focusing on target audiences and specializing in particular niches. As competition with Japanese manufacturing made the price more affordable,

lightweight and more easily situated within the automobile, transistor radios became the perfect media for a growing teenage rebellion against the conservative mainstream.

At the heart of this radio-driven rebellion was black music. As the radio became less connected to centralized authority and more connected to regional and local styles, a form of racial mixing and hybridity began to take place over the airwaves. As Douglas notes, transistors “had particular qualities at the time that made it an agent of desegregation. Radio—more than films, television, advertising, or magazines in the 1950s—was the media outlet where cultural and industrial battles over how much influence black culture was going to have on white culture were staged and fought.”⁵⁰ The transistor radio allowed white teenagers to escape the mundane doldrums of mainstream suburbia and tune in to the exotic sounds of urban black culture. This rebellion was driven in large part by a pervasive cultural conformity that offered little to a growing market of young people who had more freedom and power than any youth generation had previously experienced. Black music has often been an important outlet of social transgression in American society, and “once again, this time in the form of rhythm and blues and then rock 'n' roll, it was African American music that spoke to the cultural alienation, rebellion, and sexual energy of the younger generation.”⁵¹

The cultural rebellion of the 1950s and 60s that was enabled by the transistor radio and centered on black music’s infiltration to mainstream culture was mediated largely by a new formation of cultural arbiter: the radio DJ. As star performers fled the ‘dying’ medium for more exposure and money on television, the DJ arose as a relatively inexpensive and effective entertainer. The re-allocation of network funds from radio to television meant the expensive live performances that radio music was predicated on were no longer viable.

Musical recording, primarily in the form of 45 and 33 ⅓ vinyl records, became paramount, and it was the DJ who presented this to the public through the radio.

The R&B and rock ‘n’ roll DJs created the most racially integrated form of mass media in the United States at the time, and this musical and racial hybridity became a subtle but important undertone of the burgeoning civil rights movement. White DJs like Alan Freed and Wolfman Jack had become big business by the end of the 1950s, and these DJs and their pioneering rock ‘n’ roll broadcasts were a direct homage to lesser-known regional black DJs of the era. Together these DJs reshaped American culture and radio broadcasting by pioneering techniques such as using the broadcasting console as an instrument, speaking over the music and bringing black vernacular speech into the mainstream. Black radio and its DJs laid the foundation for a mass mediated broadcast form that could foster oppositional ideologies to the corporate mainstream. DJ Martha Jean “The Queen” out of Memphis, TN explains how:

We were the mayors back then. At that particular time, you have to understand that you didn't have any black politicians, no black judges, very few black lawyers . . . you didn't have any so-called black leaders. So we were the ones who spoke out. . . . We were shaping the minds and hearts of the people, and we did a good job. We encouraged them to go to school, to get degrees, to be educated. Told them about racial pride. We talked to young girls about not having babies. We kept our communities intact.⁵²

The DJ was the personification of the radio and represented an integration of black music and culture into the mainstream on a level previously unheard. At the heart of the radio experience now sat a figurehead capable of speaking to a generation growing disillusioned with the mundanity of the prosperity they had inherited. At the center of the cultural curiosity that radio helped foster was a larger pushback against a pervasive conservatism that alienated

a whole generation from the power structure into which they were born. Part of this pushback was aimed against racial intolerance, and radio's lack of visual narrative made established color lines easier to thwart. As radio continued into the 1960s to bring rock 'n' roll music to mass audiences, adding artistic fuel to a growing fire of counter-culture sentiments, a new radio space was waiting to be filled, and it just so happened to be especially suited for the music, culture and ideas of this transformative movement.

The Slow Rise of FM: Counter-Cultural Listening, Free Form Radio and Commodification

The story of FM radio is another example in American history where radio technology became a site of conflict and contestation between those with ideological and social power and those seeking it. It is a story of struggle between the haves and the have-nots and back to the haves again. Beginning with the technocratic desire to eliminate radio static, this story moves from the exceptional experimental and brilliance of inventor Edwin Howard Armstrong, to corporate control and suppression by David Sarnoff and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), to a countercultural revolution and the resurrection of a previously insignificant band of the spectrum, to the absorption and co-optation by the mainstream. In other words, the rise of frequency modulation as the dominant practice in American radio broadcasting technology is a complex tale.

The story starts with one of the most powerful and influential men in radio history: long-time leader of the RCA, David Sarnoff. Sometime in the early 1930's David Sarnoff quipped to inventor Edwin Howard Armstrong that he wished "that someone would come up with a little black box to eliminate static."⁵³ In 1933, after years of dedication and ingenuity,

Armstrong informed Sarnoff it was ready. The result was a revolutionary new way to transmit sonic information over radio waves. Rather than encoding information by manipulating the amplitude of the electromagnetic wave, Armstrong had encoded by altering the frequency. The result was like magic, “defying thunder and lightning, FM transmitted a range of sound never before heard, and was virtually static free.”⁵⁴

Armstrong’s invention was miraculous, and yet it would be over thirty years later, with Armstrong dead by suicide, before his technology would get its due. Sarnoff, with the power of the RCA behind him and the FCC under his thumb, squashed the invention and relegated it to the electromagnetic attic. FM radio required a major investment into an entirely new radio system, diminishing the power of the RCA’s dominance of AM technology. By this time, Sarnoff was already fully committed to television and saw that FM broadcasting would further crowd the electromagnetic spectrum. Eventually, in large part due to Sarnoff’s influence over the FCC, FM broadcasting was assigned to an excruciatingly high frequency band, from 88-108 megahertz (MHz), making all existing FM receivers obsolete. This was a heartbreaker for Armstrong, and a setback for FM from which it would not recover until the 1960s. But FM’s time would come, aided by developments in high fidelity stereo recording and by the FCC’s decision to set aside the bottom channels of the FM band, 88-92 MHz, for educational purposes.

FM radio technology languished in obscurity for decades as Armstrong fought tooth and nail to see his invention come to fruition. Armstrong toiled continuously, repeatedly thwarted by Sarnoff and his powerful radio lobby, spending his own personal fortune to develop and promote his superior radio technology. Sterling and Kitross note that:

by 1952, FM's future looked bleak to all but a handful of independent station operators who programmed classical and other music for a small audience of hi-fi buffs. FM was a class service in what was supposed to be a mass medium. Two years later, frustrated by FM's decline and exhausted financially and mentally by constant patent royalty battles with RCA, Edwin Armstrong killed himself, ending his two-decade-long fight for "radio's second chance."⁵⁵

The tragic story of Edwin Howard Armstrong was the result of capitalist suppression by a broadcasting system that had little patience for developing a technology that could improve the function and clarity of radio broadcasts. Armstrong's demise was the result of a cost-benefit analysis, a gamble that could never pay off. When FM broadcasting finally began to gain traction, it did so with an outsider status that appealed to misfit, makeshift, forward-thinking sentiments that were looking for alternative and underground spaces to showcase the music of their generation. As Hilmes notes, "with AM grinding out top-40 and other standardized formats, FM became the place to tune in for something different, off-beat, aimed at the countercultural audience."⁵⁶

The rise of FM was another instance where technological experimentation melded with a cultural outpouring of alterity necessitated by an overly controlled socio-cultural sphere. For Douglas, "it was primarily the emergence of a profoundly anticommercial, anticorporate ethos in the 1960s that caused FM to flower. And it was marked especially by a new passion for listening."⁵⁷ FM broadcasting found its niche in the rock 'n' roll revolution that was sweeping the country and it directly sought to represent and embody everything that commercial AM Top-40 radio wasn't. This was technological, as the clarity of FM broadcasting enmeshed with improving sound reproduction technologies and stereophonic practices. And it was cultural, as "free-form," unscripted and unregulated styles crafted an ideology of highly intentional authenticity. As Douglas notes, "this ethos rested on a

contempt for what had come to be called mass culture: a disdain for the ‘vast wasteland’ of television and for the formulaic, overly commercialized offerings of radio, and a scorn, first on the part of older intellectuals and later on the part of the counterculture, for the predictability and mindlessness of mainstream popular music.”⁵⁸

While the FM band became a harbor for counter-cultural radio programming in the 1960’s, its existence as an anti-mainstream media form was quickly nullified through hegemonic co-optation and standardization. Hilmes notes how “as underground became more popular and pressure built to commercialize access to the hard-to-reach youth market, the same kind of process that had changed early rock ‘n’ roll radio into top 40 began to operate. By the early seventies many underground stations had become highly standardized, playing only top-selling albums with a set rotation frequency, and a new format was born: album-oriented rock.”⁵⁹ This shift was driven in in large part by the adoption of analytical and scientific methodologies that had been cemented by the top-40 model. As FM radio broadcasting increasingly proved its value from an economic perspective, breathing life into a questionable market sector, FM radio was subject to a similar process of commodification that had plagued earlier forms of technological innovation and cultural breakthrough. As Douglas states, “the assembly line had come to FM, breaking down free form programming into its component parts, robbing the disc jockey of autonomy, and making the final product—the show—more predictable. Programming decisions became highly centralized, as fewer and fewer people controlled what music went out over the airwaves.”⁶⁰

Entering the Modern Era: Deregulation, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the Low Power FM Movement

As FM radio broadcasting became the status quo in the 1970s and its revolutionary ethos was absorbed into the mainstream, radio broadcasting underwent a period of deliberate deregulation that established many of the paradigms associated with radio today. As terrestrial radio broadcasting became increasingly peripheral to other forms of broadcast media, narratives that radio had a duty to serve the public interest were challenged and Reagan-era policies sought to use free-market ideologies to govern the airwaves. This eventually culminated in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which created legal precedent for the consolidation of station ownership and the domination of radio broadcasting by a handful of powerful media corporations. Yet as access to radio broadcasting diminished and broadcasting diversity all but vanished, a series of activist oriented initiatives fostered a “free radio movement” that challenged corporate consolidation and sought to establish access to radio broadcasting as a right for communities and individuals.

While deregulation of broadcasting technologies had already occurred by the time Reagan was elected in the early 1980s, the control of radio broadcasting underwent a major shift with the appointment of Mark Fowler as Chairman of the FCC in 1981. Douglas states how “his mantra during his tenure as chairman of the FCC was to “eliminate unnecessary rules and regulations.” Specifically, his vision of the FCC was that it serve primarily as a “technical traffic cop,” that otherwise it “get out of the way” to let issues of public service, programming content, equal time for opposing views, and the like be determined by the

marketplace.”⁶¹ Hilmes also notes how, “defining his task as ‘pruning, chopping, slashing, eliminating, burning, and deep-sixing’ a half century of legislation from an agency that he called ‘the last of the New Deal dinosaurs.’ ”⁶² Fowler's reign at the head of the FCC saw policies that repealed requirements for educational programming, removed caps on how many stations a company could own, rescinded Financial Interest and Syndication regulations (which promoted diversity in content production), revoked the Fairness Doctrine, and eliminated “the requirement that licenses be held for three years before transfer of ownership, sparking a boom in station sales and skyrocketing prices.”⁶³

Under Fowler's leadership, the FCC was no longer a regulatory body enforcing codes of conduct on broadcasters. Rather it was an instrument of deregulation, eliminating the rules that had structured American broadcasting for over a century. Yet no matter how influential Fowler's policy shifts were, he remains more famous for his ideological stance, stating that a television was merely a “toaster with pictures.” Fowler's metaphor, whether he believed it or not, implied that broadcasting technologies were no different than any other household appliance. Their place in the American household was ubiquitous and the need for regulation was no longer applicable. Much of the regulations that had governed radio broadcasting throughout the twentieth century were predicated on the idea of “spectrum scarcity”: that the airwaves were a finite resource that should be allocated and regulated for public interest. Yet Fowler rejected this basic principle as outdated, positing instead that free market competition would allow for more investment and higher production value for the broadcasting sector. While Fowler would eventually leave the FCC for the private sector, Hilmes notes how “the deregulatory momentum that he helped to create continued through the eighties and nineties,

leading to the industry-friendly Telecommunications Act of 1996. The principle of Fowler's toaster remains with us still.”⁶⁴

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 was the first major legislative act in the communication sector since 1934. Its ramifications for radio broadcasting were numerous and profound, fundamentally altering one of America's most historic media forms in ways that are still being felt thirty years later. Most notably, the act fostered an era of intense consolidation and homogenization. The congressional act was notoriously the product of back-room deals, free from public scrutiny. As Hilmes notes, “many claim that the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was bought and paid for by the telecommunications industry. The communications industry has always played a lively role in politics, but in 1993 their contributions to ongoing congressional campaigns reached a new high.”⁶⁵ One of the most impactful parts of the act was that it removed almost all regulations limiting station ownership, allowing for the rise of companies to construct growing monopolies over radio broadcasting. In her book *Low Power to the People: Pirates, Protest and Politics in FM Radio Activism* scholar Christina Dunbar-Hester notes how “whereas the pre-1996 national limit was forty stations, by the early twenty-first century, one single company, Clear Channel Communications, had acquired more than twelve hundred radio stations—a 3000 percent increase in only five years.”⁶⁶ The absence of ownership caps and a newfound freedom to sell stations at will created what Douglas called a “feeding frenzy in the radio industry.”⁶⁷ Radio stations began changing hands at a rapid pace and the economic speculation running rampant in the 1980s led to a boom in valuation. This increased market valuation also created a need for profits, which corporate radio sought by cutting production costs and streamlining content creation. As Douglas notes, “a bottom-line mentality has so taken over radio that ... the

interlocking interests of recording companies, Hollywood (with the explosion of the soundtrack CD), and the radio consolidators assure that only musically ‘safe’ songs that are easy to categorize will get airplay.”⁶⁸ Thus mainstream radio broadcasting has entered the modern era, where homogenized content feeds a consolidated corporate system of digital playlists void of artistic integrity.

Yet the modern corporate takeover of radio broadcasting also fostered an opposition movement which sought to re-articulate radio as a media form with a responsibility to the public interest, including the free-radio movement of Black Liberation Radio, Free Radio Berkeley, Prometheus Radio and others have been carving space into the radio spectrum ever since. Douglas explains how “with the 1996 Telecommunications Act sanctioning corporate greed and the squelching of localism and diversity, we are probably in for a long aesthetic drought in the ether. In the face of this consolidation, micropower pirate radio stations have sprouted up around the country, arousing the ire of the FCC, which shut down 320 such stations between September 1997 and October 1998 alone. But corporate control is never complete. And the growth of pirate radio suggests a new insurgency is afoot.”⁶⁹

For many radio scholars, the movement began with Mbanna Kantako in the mid 1980s, whose unlicensed micro-transmitter radio station broadcast Black Liberation Radio from a housing project in Springfield, Illinois. Dunbar-Hester notes how Kantako understood his transmissions as electronic civil disobedience and “a potent means of regaining power and a voice within an oppressive local system.”⁷⁰ Hilmes also credits Kantako, noting how “his 1-watt station covers only a few square blocks, but because of Springfield's highly segregated housing patterns, he can reach three-fourths of the Black community.”⁷¹ Kantako’s radio activism and his battles with the FCC were a direct influence of Stephen

Dunifer and Free Radio Berkeley, whose highly publicized court battles in the late 90s/early 2000s brought the free radio movement to public attention, spurring an activist movement that spread around the country and encompassed an estimated thousand-plus unlicensed broadcasters in the late 1990s.

Central to the Free Radio Movement's ethos was an attempt to re-conceptualize what radio is, how it is understood in the public-sphere, and what the best outlet for its particular technological attributes could be. Radio activists understood radio as a participatory medium, drawing on the ethos of early tinkerers and Bertolt Brecht who conceptualized radio as a two-way medium. Radio activists sought to wrestle the means of production from the ruling elite and establish access to the airwaves as a civil right, and as a particularly local media format. Dunbar-Hester notes how "a widely held conception of media technologies is that their purpose or main use is to transmit or communicate 'information.'"⁷² However, for the radio activists she worked with, this was not necessarily a fundamental aspect of their conception of radio. When fighting for the place of low-powered FM radio stations, these activists "privileged the notions that media technologies promoted empowerment, 'community', pluralism and localism."⁷³ National Public Radio, on the other hand, argued that "the main purpose of communication technologies was to transfer content between a source of content and a listener."⁷⁴ What NPR thought was important about radio was "the potential to serve and cohere communities of interest."⁷⁵ Yet, as Dunbar-Hester notes, this "informational discourse...rests on the notion that what is paramount in electronic communication is the exchange of information" regardless if "that information is divorced from context, from bodies, from space, and from place."⁷⁶ For the low-powered FM radio activist however, radio was not simply another means for the spread of information.

While the spread of information is often viewed as an inherently positive thing, leading to increased knowledge and awareness, there are also many instances where the spread of information has negative impacts on society and culture. Regardless, the spread of information

is not what makes radio special -- there are technological apparatuses in contemporary media with far greater potential for the spreading of information. For low-power FM activists, radio was special because of its ability to create “community based on geography and common interest in a locality...and tended to emphasize the significance of community-level creation, transmission, and reception of information as an ideal for electronic communication.”⁷⁷

Historically, radio was unique in its ability to create communities of common interest from geographically disparate people. This was unique at the time and a part of the ‘magic’ of radio technology. However, as consolidation and homogenization of commercial radio broadcasts hollowed out radio of cultural significance and meaning, local radio became another area of socio-cultural production for challenging the problems of a globalized world.

This is the ideological struggle that led to the passage of the Local Community Radio Act of 2010. This act has allowed radio to thrive as a subcultural media formation thanks to its continued attention to local sentiments and connection to place. Upon the passing of this act, the Chairman of the FCC stated that “low power FM stations are small, but they make a giant contribution to local community programming. This important law eliminates the unnecessary restrictions that kept these local stations off the air in cities and towns across the country.”⁷⁸ This quote exemplifies a pivotal legislative moment in modern radio history, in which radio media takes a significant turn towards a potential future. The future of broadcast

radio is uncertain, and its connection to the local is vital for its continual reassertion of its importance.

Conclusion: Static in the Radiosphere

This paper has attempted to articulate, through an analysis of some of the key texts of American radio scholarship, some of the histories in which radio media has been subjected to the push and pull of various ideological forces. Contemporary American radio continues to be wrapped in states of contradiction, and part of the reason that radio broadcasting remains a contested site in the contemporary American media landscape is because of conflicting narratives around its place in American society today and an uncertainty surrounding its future. Radio media, what exactly it is and what it should be, is ripe with contradiction and what I understand as ideological ‘static’.

Over the past one hundred and forty years of American history, the term ‘radio’ has become a vast sphere of interconnected technological capabilities and social, cultural and historical relationships. Through its ability to modulate, transmit and demodulate information across previously unfathomable spatial distances, radio has cemented itself as a foundational techno-social communication framework for the global twenty-first century. Over the past century, the term radio has largely been defined by its musical, cultural arts and public affairs broadcasting, however, the future of radio broadcasting is uncertain. Contemporary radio listening is often and primarily sequestered to the realm of the automobile and the practicality of a reliable Emergency Alert Network keeps the radio waves accessible, for now. In the contemporary global radio soundscape, radio-broadcasting has become a communal-public

media resource and is therefore at risk to the effects of class warfare which pits communal-public resources against privatization interests of corporate elites. Yet this conflict surrounding radio media is not new, as both the historical and contemporary radio landscapes are characterized by continuing ideological static. It's this static, this tension in the understanding and control of radio media, that keeps radio alive. Like the sound of radio static, radio media is a constantly changing entity. An amorphous figure that refuses a rigid or fixed nature. This tension between a myriad of socio-cultural positions, competing for space in a rapidly changing and increasingly mediated world, creates contradiction between ideologies attempting to define what contemporary radio is.

One such instance of static exists through radio's tendency to create camaraderie through unprecedented ethereal communities, while also engendering feelings of loneliness and isolation for an alienated listener. Daniel Fisher, in the chapter "Radio" in *Keywords in Sound*, notes how radio creates a "claustrophobic copresence of unimaginable numbers of people, of being always and 'everywhere' in reach."⁷⁹ Fisher however also notes that "radio also evoked loneliness and separation for North Americans, its static and hiss could index distance and isolation to make a mass audience feel alone together."⁸⁰ The ending of this quote, "alone together" creates tension and contradiction. It creates a dissonance that reverberates radio's dynamic emotional field. The very act of being together means you are not alone, and yet we all understand the notion of feeling alone in the presence of others. Mass communication technologies like radio have allowed us to be more connected than ever before, yet the modern era has solidified our understanding that we are also more isolated because of this same technology.

Another source of static stems from radio's perceived prevalence, or lack thereof, in physical geographic space. Through its magical form of mediation, radio is often rendered invisible, however radio can also be hyper-spatial, representing sonic marking points for cultural production. Douglas argues that “radio’s invisibility—the fact that it denies sight to its audience—has been absolutely central to its effects on American culture.”⁸¹ In his seminal radio text *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics and American Radio Drama* scholar Neil Verma credits this invisibility as heightening the imagination response of listeners which helps create stronger mental associations, leading to deeper feelings of nostalgia through memory.⁸² Fisher also picks up on this concept of invisibility, referencing Martin Heidegger’s book *Being and Time*. Here Fisher draws on Heidegger’s metaphor of eyeglasses perched on one's nose, where the eyeglasses “disappear in making the distant wall more present. Just so for radio, insofar as it makes far-removed sounds seem themselves closer to hand than the very receiver that brings them near.”⁸³ Fisher examines this invisibility through the concept of re/de-naturalization, referencing Friedrich Kittler’s article “Observations on Public Reception,” which claims radio took on the characteristic of water from the tap, what Fisher calls “a naturalized convenience and absent to consciousness.”⁸⁴ The water is always there, it is ever-present, yet it is also not there, its political and technological infrastructure naturalized and therefore unseen/invisible. Radio has become so ubiquitous in American culture that for many its presence is unquestioned and relegated to the subconscious. However, as internet and digital technologies transform the world, radio has become more site specific, rooted in notions of place, with a physical presence that provides context for and necessitates reflection and provocation. Think about BBC broadcasts from their headquarters in London, Navajo radio on the reservation, or KCSB

broadcasting under Storke Tower. Radio media has become increasingly local, linked to place and space, city and town, emerging from the ether, creating site specific cultural content that affirms radio as a local apparatus.

Historical and temporal media frameworks have also been a source of static within radio. Radio is often theorized as antiquated or of a by-gone era, while subsequently being instrumental in expanding technological horizons of the future. It is media relegated to the past, yet its potency remains prescient in the present moment. Fisher notes that “radio is often described as anachronistic and secondary to online and televisual media. Certainly, this belies its centrality to contemporary western material and media culture, but it also engenders a teleology of media in which radio can be imagined as a backwards phenomena, at both a spatial and temporal remove from the present.”⁸⁵ Here Fisher scrutinizes the perceived subordination of radio to television as something that minimizes the media paradigms that radio solidified and that television merely adopted. Radio is often imagined as an antiquated phenomenon because it focuses on aural rather than visual content. It is perceived as inconsequential in relation to modern media platforms of the digital age, yet this perception overlooks the fact that smartphones are essentially radios, transmitting and receiving electromagnetic waves. Douglas notes, “radio is arguably the most important electronic invention of the century...yet radio as an invention, as a cultural force, is regarded as mattering very little now in the grand scheme of things...It is low-tech, unglamorous, and taken for granted...It’s as if radio fell off the planet after television when, in fact, the reverse is true.”⁸⁶ The idea of radio as anachronistic erases contemporary radio structures in which the power of radio is more applicable now than ever before. The fact that radio has been overlooked and taken for granted by mainstream American society and culture has allowed

various subcultures to harness the power of radio media for a plethora of applications. These alternative radio structures make radio a powerful form of media in the here and now, in the present day. While radio is perceived by many as being of the past, its technological capacity, subcultural adoption, and media circulation paradigms firmly solidify radio as being of the present with a firm claim to a future in media.

Another aspect of ideological static is that radio constructs competing narratives around identity. Radio has been instrumental in the formation of national, gender and racial identities, while simultaneously allowing subaltern groups to challenge homogenized identity constructs. Douglas notes that “while Radio brought America together as a nation in the 1930s and 40s, it also highlighted the country’s ethnic, racial, geographic, and gendered division. And radio hastened the shift away from identifying oneself - and one’s social solidarity with others - on the basis of location and family ties, to identifying oneself on the basis of consumer and taste preferences.”⁸⁷ While radio created a mass-mediated national subject, through events like Roosevelt’s ‘fire-side chats’ and Major League Baseball’s World Series broadcasts, radio also opened the door for the ‘validation of subculture’ through a taste-preference/value judgment system that destabilized identity formations around location, political affiliation, race, gender, and class. While stereotypical masculinity was solidified through the radio by Roosevelt and Tarzan, radio also connected men to socially stigmatized aspects of themselves through musical appreciation, fraternal camaraderie, and emotional release. While patriarchal narratives of female subjectivity were reinforced through the advertisement of household appliances during daytime programming, the infiltration of strong independent female performers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey into a feminine subconscious challenged these normative female roles. Further, this desegregation of

American households via radio broadcasts led to a major increase in the popularity of black expressive culture and performers. While radio did “construct a national norm of whiteness,” it also created envy and desire for what was perceived as a more vibrant, authentic cultural experience.⁸⁸

Finally, radio is marked by an overarching tension between radio as a vital arm of the corporate, capitalist, hegemonic global power structure while also existing as an outlet of alternative media dissemination and representation. As Douglas explains:

There is a rift between the inherent technical properties of radio and the economic system in which it was - and is - embedded. The deeply personal nature of radio communication - the way its sole reliance on sound produces individualized images and reactions, its extension of a precommercial, oral tradition; its cultivation of the imagination - all work in stark contrast to the needs of its managers, who seek homogenized responses, and need a like-minded audience instead of idiosyncratic individuals.⁸⁹

The American radio soundscape is a vast sphere through which unprecedented varieties of voices, cultures, histories, and subjectivities can be presented and represented, yet it remains bounded by an economic framework that has solidified a mediated consumer capitalist ethos that has given advertisement and marketing strategists the keys to the kingdom. This mass-consumer culture developed throughout radio history is contrasted by radio’s connection to a continuation of anti-colonial oral historical practices. These practices feed the imagination and collective memories of the listeners, creating a mediascape that can go beyond the confines of the ocular-centric, in which technological limitations create scripted images that are confined to a narrow field of possibilities. Radio’s comparably vast field of possibilities is bounded instead by corporate-media’s need for control and

domination. Here radio becomes a site of power struggle: it is a form of media central to America's culture and class warfare and a "site for reflection, citation and provocation."⁹⁰

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