Defending Listeners’ Rights: Labour and Media Reform in Postwar America

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Abstract: Historians have paid relatively little attention to labour’s involvement in radio reform in the United States. Unions criticized the poor quality of programming and the lack of public service. They were also concerned about corporate control of radio and particularly about labour’s lack of access. After briefly examining organized labour’s initial efforts to reform radio, this paper focuses on the key role unions played in the postwar media reform movement, which advocated a “listeners’ rights” approach to broadcasting. This concept, along with a commitment to localism, diversity, and community involvement, was among the key ideas championed by media reformers in postwar America.

Résumé: Les historiens ont porté peu d’attention à l’implication de la main-d’œuvre dans la réforme de la radio aux États-Unis. Les syndicats à cette époque critiquaient la mauvaise qualité de la programmation et le manque de service au public. Ils se souciaient du contrôle que les entreprises exerçaient sur la radio, particulièrement le manque d’accès à la radio que ce contrôle leur imposait. Cet article, après un bref examen des efforts initiaux de la main-d’œuvre pour réformer la radio, se concentre sur le rôle clé joué par les syndicats dans le mouvement de réforme des médias pendant l’après-guerre ; ceux-ci prônéaient une approche de la radiodiffusion qui privilégiait les « droits des auditeurs ». En plus de ce concept, les notions d’engagement vis-à-vis de la localité, la diversité et la participation de la communauté comptaient parmi les idées clés appuyées par les réformateurs des médias dans l’après-guerre aux États-Unis.

Keywords: Broadcasting; History; Media

In the years after World War II, a wide-ranging reform movement subjected radio to a barrage of criticism and raised fundamental questions about the American broadcasting system. Labour and the left argued that a corporate monopoly, controlling the networks and most of the radio stations in the nation, restrained free speech and limited radio’s political and social diversity. At the same time an array of intellectuals, writers, and media consultants charged that control by advertisers inundated radio with mediocre programming and commercials of dubious taste. All agreed that radio was failing to serve the public interest or to enhance democ-
racy. While never challenging the commercial structure of the radio industry, reformers demanded that broadcasters better serve the public interest and fought for diversity in ownership of stations and for listeners’ rights. Demands for reform emanated from a variety of individuals and groups spanning the political spectrum. Reformers ran the gamut from public intellectuals and members of the Federal Communications Commission to leftist elements of the cultural or popular front, including groups like the Voice of Freedom Committee and the People’s Radio Foundation. Organized labour was also a key player in this loose coalition of postwar reformers that fought unchecked commercialism, promoted public service, and sought to make radio more representative and democratic.

With the exception of Nathan Godfried (1997) and Robert McChesney (1993), historians have paid relatively little attention to labour’s efforts to reform American radio. In the twenties, like many community groups, labour was intrigued by this new medium of communication. Members began urging their unions to use radio to reach workers and the broader public. Radio potentially gave labour the chance to bypass the commercial press, which ignored workers except during strikes or dramatic conflict. Even then, the public was fed a distorted image of labour that emphasized violence and corruption. The most significant result of this early interest was the establishment in the mid-1920s of a small non-profit, labour-owned station in Chicago, WCFL, and of a socialist-owned station in New York, WEVD, which had close ties to unions. Godfried and McChesney have explored the role that these fledgling labour broadcasters played during the early thirties in an unsuccessful fight for public control of radio.

If the corporate, advertiser-centred and network-based radio system survived intact, there remained considerable dissatisfaction with the status quo in broadcasting during the thirties and forties. Intellectuals worried about the impact of mass culture and corporate power. Organized labour had more concrete and immediate concerns related to access and censorship. Revitalized and reinvigorated, the Depression-era labour movement sought to use radio as a tool for organizing and union building, but it was often unable to fully take advantage of broadcasting. Beginning in the late thirties and continuing through the war years, new industrial unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) fought a multipronged and ultimately successful campaign that began to open the airwaves to labour. This campaign put labour at the forefront of the movement for listeners’ rights. This concept, along with a commitment to localism, diversity, and community involvement, was among the key ideas championed by media reformers in postwar America. This paper begins by briefly examining labour’s initial wartime media reform efforts and then focuses on the more ambitious postwar campaign.

The American system of broadcasting
While Canada developed a mixed broadcasting system, part public and part private, American radio became a thoroughly commercial enterprise dominated by national networks and with relatively minimal government regulation. It did not begin that way. In the early twenties, radio was very much a local phenomenon, with hundreds of mostly small stations, many of which were owned by churches,
universities, and other groups interested in public service. Business, however, realized that there were profits to be made in radio through advertising and that a network of radio stations could provide advertisers with a national audience. By the end of the decade, two major commercial networks—the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System—had begun operations. Shows produced in New York City and transmitted throughout the nation began supplanting local programming. Government regulation accelerated this trend. The *Radio Act of 1927* required stations to operate “in the public interest, convenience, or necessity” and established the Federal Radio Commission (McChesney, p. 18). Under the sway of the large commercial broadcasters, it forced most small non-profit and educational stations off the air. As early as 1931, the larger network-affiliated stations had 76% of the power in the United States and the bulk of the advertising revenue (McChesney, 1993; Vipond, 1992).

Even as the networks consolidated control, there continued to be opposition to commercial broadcasting in the United States. In the early 1930s, civic, educational, religious, farm, and labour groups argued that radio was too powerful a medium to be completely controlled by private interests and that a significant portion of the spectrum should be reserved for non-profit and educational broadcasters. The struggle to re-structure American broadcasting ended unsuccessfully with the passage of the *Communications Act of 1934*. Commercial broadcasters retained control of radio. However, the industry was regulated by a new governmental body, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC issued stations short-term licences and could deny renewal if there was evidence of violation of federal regulations. Stations were required to present a balanced, well-rounded schedule of programming, representing a variety of political viewpoints. Throughout much of the thirties, the FCC wielded its authority with a light touch, rejecting few licence renewals and maintaining cordial relations with broadcasters (McChesney, 1993).

**Labour censorship**

During much of the twentieth century, workers had difficulty using the mass media to challenge the dominant corporate political ideology. The networks tended to promote the status quo and ignore or censor non-mainstream political opinions (McChesney, 1993). Fearful of alienating potential advertisers or listeners, they shied away from selling time for programs or subjects that they deemed controversial or in poor taste. Under network standards, controversial issues from politics to religion to social and economic questions were technically confined to unsponsored time slots that the networks designated for discussion of issues of public importance. To varying degrees local stations adhered to network policies on controversial issues. As a result, unable to buy time and with little free time available, advocates of dissident political or social views, such as socialists, pacifists, communists, or advocates of birth control were often denied access to the airwaves (Craig, 2000; Godfried, 1997).

During the thirties, labour suffered from the broadcasters’ restriction on freedom of speech. Consistent with their policy on controversial issues, the net-
works never sold time to unions. Instead, occasionally they allotted free time for speeches by prominent labour leaders. With only two small radio stations, WCFL in Chicago and WEVD in New York, committed to broadcasting labour issues, unions had to rely for airtime on local commercial stations (Godfried, 1997). At times the microphones of unaffiliated, smaller stations were open to unions, and indeed radio helped fuel the explosive growth of organized labour in thirties. Still many of stations hesitated to serve as a platform for organized labour (Fones-Wolf, 2000; Kassner to ACLU, 1937). As the CIO organizing drive intensified in the late thirties and more unions sought access to radio, denial of airtime became a more significant issue. For instance, in 1937, while the United Auto Workers (UAW) could broadcast from Detroit over WJBK, neither the Flint sit-down strikers nor striking steelworkers in Youngstown could buy airtime at local radio stations (Vorse, 1938). The inequities that labour faced in broadcasting especially angered the CIO. According to UAW President R. J. Thomas, radio stations gave “free reign to notorious demagogues and unscrupulous foes” of unions, while the auto workers often had “difficulty in purchasing an adequate amount of time from the large stations” (Thomas, 1940, p. 50).

The NAB code
Airtime for labour became even more limited after 1939 when the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) adopted a new voluntary code of ethics that barred member stations from selling time for the discussion of controversial issues with the exception of political broadcasts. As part of their public duty, broadcasters were to provide free time to representatives of opposing points of view. According to the NAB, the goal was to promote balanced discussion of public issues and to prevent the most economically powerful from controlling the airwaves (Taishoff 1939a, 1939b). The broadcasters’ association deemed class issues inherently controversial, and in line with existing network policy, it instructed member stations to refuse to sell time to labour. In some locales, the code virtually barred labour from the air. The broadcasters denied that they were biased against labour unions (Smead, 1959). But the new NAB code manual exposed the reasons for classifying labour as controversial. Acknowledging that business provided the bulk of advertising revenue, it advised that employers frowned “on those stations, especially in smaller communities, which open their facilities to labour unions” (National Association of Broadcasters, 1939, p. 15). As a result, during most of the war years, labour was increasingly denied access to the air.

An outraged CIO fumed that labour did not get a fair break over the air, which it charged was monopolized by big business interests. Moreover, it argued that the media as a whole was biased, reactionary, and anti-labour. For industrial unionists, access to radio was critical because the “thinking of the American people on labour, social and political issues is influenced more than almost anything else by what they read in the papers or hear on the air.” (De Caux, p. 4). The CIO argued that the Communications Act required stations to present a balanced,
well-rounded schedule of programming and that stations must be neutral and present both sides of public issues (Goodman, 1945).

The CIO’s assault on the NAB code
The CIO initiated a multipronged assault on the NAB code, which it viewed as one of the main barriers to labour’s access to radio. Urging unions to assert their right to the airwaves, the CIO’s publicity department helped affiliates challenge the code by lodging protests over denial of airtime with the NAB Code Compliance Committee (Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1941). Unions also took their complaints to the FCC. In November 1941, for example, striking department store workers in San Francisco complained that the city’s radio stations refused to sell time to their union to present labour’s side of the conflict to the public. Union secretary-treasurer Larry Vail asked the Commission “if stations sell time to the Employers are they obliged to do the same for us?” (Vail to FCC, 1941). Key members of the FCC were concerned about labour’s plight. In fact, during the early forties, relations between the FCC and broadcasters were tense, as the regulators battled owners over the issue of monopoly control of the industry. FCC chairman James Lawrence Fly, a dedicated New Dealer, was suspicious of business monopolies, believing that they increased economic inequality and undermined democracy. He was determined that control of broadcasting should not gravitate into the hands of a small segment of society. In 1943, in the midst of negotiations over NBC’s sale of its Blue network, Fly poked the first hole in the NAB code. The new ABC network needed the FCC’s approval for the transfer of licences, and Fly used the public hearings to obtain a promise from the new owners to offer access to organized labour (Barnouw, 1968).

With the code partially breached, in the spring of 1944, as part of its mobilization for the fall election, the CIO’s Political Action Committee (PAC) intensified its efforts to open the airwaves to labour. It issued a radio handbook with instructions on how to secure airtime. PAC also set up a monitoring system using a recently developed content analysis technique to keep track of what national commentators were saying about labour and PAC. Volunteer listeners analyzed 33 of the most popular network news and comment shows. The monitors’ survey of network programs broadcast in the fall of 1944 found that for every positive item broadcast on labour there were six negative items. PAC used this evidence to pressure stations to give labour equal time on programs that had featured anti-labour broadcasts (Fones-Wolf, 2000). To make its case, PAC pointed to the FCC’s 1941 “Mayflower decision,” which stated that stations were obliged to present all “sides of important public questions fairly and objectively, and without bias” (Smead, 1959, p. 57).

In the summer of 1945, the FCC dealt the final blow to the NAB code. Since 1939, unions had filed numerous protests with the FCC over denial of airtime. The UAW was the most aggressive union in demanding labour’s access to broadcasting, and it was a UAW complaint that led the FCC to rule officially on the legality of the code. In June 1943, UAW Local 927 of Columbus, Ohio, which represented 15,000 workers at the Curtiss-Wright aircraft plant, bought a weekly
half-hour program on WHKC. At that time, the aircraft company had been sponsoring a commercial half-hour weekly program on WHKC for more than a year. Citing the NAB code, the station repeatedly censored the UAW program. Rather than just complaining, the UAW petitioned the FCC to cancel WHKC’s licence on the grounds that it failed to operate in the public interest. Prior to the FCC’s hearing on the renewal, the CIO sent the FCC thousands of petitions signed by Ohio workers and sympathetic citizens supporting the principle of freedom of the air (Fones-Wolf, 2000). With this concerted effort to overturn WHKC’s licence, the UAW became one of the first citizen organizations to intercede in the licensing process. Previously only third parties with technical or economic grievances such as signal interference were represented in the licensing process. Immediately, labour had a significant impact on the case. During the WHKC hearing, although the UAW had no legal standing, friendly commissioners permitted the auto workers to participate. UAW representatives were involved in “cross-examining, calling witnesses, and presenting exhibits and expert testimony,” and the union provided the “settlement language that the Commission adopted almost verbatim” (Toro, 2000, pp. 113, 115). The FCC’s decision attacked the code, declaring that radio was “to be an instrument of free speech” and that the operation of any station “under the extreme principles that no time shall be sold for the discussion of controversial issues” was “inconsistent with the concept of public interest as established by the Communication Act” (Smead, p. 50). The FCC’s ruling in the auto workers’ case firmly established that stations had a duty to cover controversial issues and to provide time for all points of view. The WHKC case established another important precedent: the FCC began to review a station’s overall programming when determining if a station operator was serving the public interest (Toro, 2000). A chastised NAB amended the code, opening up the option of selling time for controversial issues. Some stations, however, continued to refuse time to unions, especially during strikes or electoral campaigns. After the WHKC decision, labour could count on the FCC to more actively intercede on its behalf (Fones-Wolf, 2000).

Postwar reformers and listeners’ rights
The CIO’s victory in its long struggle to open the airwaves to organized labour showed the potential of reform groups to democratize radio. In fact it served as the catalyst for a much broader campaign to reform broadcasting in the immediate postwar era. A loose coalition of reformers sought to reduce corporate influence over broadcasting. Labour and the left were key elements of this reform movement, with the CIO leading the way. Leftist reformers included progressives, socialists, and communists, many of whom backed labour, civil rights, and international causes associated with the Popular Front of the thirties. Some of the more moderate reformers simply wanted to hear fewer commercials and higher-quality programming. Others feared the monopolization of the media and sought changes in the broadcasting system to make radio more representative and democratic. Among these reformers were advocates of a “listeners’ rights” approach to broadcasting. In 1924, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover was among the first to
use the term “listeners’ rights,” contending that radio was “a public medium, and its use must be for the public benefit” (Toro, p. 14). While Hoover saw no conflict between the interests of broadcasters and listeners, postwar liberal social-reform groups linked the concept to a “broad economic and social critique of the structure of corporate broadcasting that focused on the problems of concentrated private power.” (Toro, p. 14) They became the leading advocates of a “‘listeners’ rights’ approach to broadcasting that put a listener’s freedom to hear a diversity of voices on par with the broadcast speaker’s right to speak” (Toro, 2000, p. 14). Advocates of listeners’ rights believed that citizen participation was critical to ensure the operation of a democratic broadcasting system that provided access to minority views.

Radio’s critics

By the end of World War II, many of the concerns that labour had voiced about business control over the mass media meshed with a swelling critique of radio. A chorus of voices damned American broadcasting. Intellectuals, writers, media consultants, and politicians charged that radio had become a handmaiden to advertisers, and that as a result, the air was full of tasteless and often dishonest commercials and most programming was mediocre (Wang, 2002). Critics also worried that sponsors had too much ideological control over the content of radio news. Most stations and networks allowed sponsors to choose their own news analyst or commentator, giving big business tremendous influence over what Americans heard about national and world issues (Howe, 1943).

Unions were among radio’s strongest critics. Although labour had greater access to radio after the favourable WHKC decision, some unions still had problems gaining airtime. Radio stations in some communities continued censoring or refused to sell time to unions. During the 1946 campaign, for instance, stations across the nation refused to broadcast a series of political announcements by CIO groups, contending they were controversial. Airtime during strikes or organizing campaigns also proved contentious. In the midst of the 1946 General Motors strike, for instance, stations in Anderson, Indiana, and Bay City, Michigan, refused the UAW time (CIO, 1946; Labor Unions Gripe, 1946; Six CIO Unions, 1946).

Labour was also concerned about the influence of business on program content, contending that too often advertisers called the tune. CIO secretary-treasurer James Carey denounced the soap operas and the excessive number of commercials that made American radio a joke before the rest of the world. Labour felt even more strongly about the anti-union propaganda that it believed business injected into radio programming. Even fictional programs created unflattering images of unions (Education on the Air, 1947; Carson, 1946).

Labour also saw danger in the patterns of ownership in the broadcasting industry. According to the CIO, a corporate monopoly consisting of a small group of manufacturers, bankers, and the nation’s six main newspaper chains owned or controlled 568 of the 912 radio stations operating in 1944, including the vast majority of the most powerful stations. The CIO News accused these “moneymasters” of letting loose “their mechanized hounds of the press and radio . . . after
the American working people and their unions” (Free Press for the Rich, 1947, p. 5). Thus, it was no coincidence that newspapers denounced labour during strikes and that unions struggled for access to the airwaves.

**The FCC and postwar media reform**

Most postwar reformers, including labour, never questioned the existing commercial basis of radio but rather looked to the FCC to lessen broadcasting abuses. While there were strong conservative elements within the Commission responsive to industry demands, the reform movement had friends in the FCC. Indeed, in the mid-forties, some members of the FCC were at the forefront of the campaign to reform radio. During World War II, Chairman James L. Fly and Commissioner Clifton Durr had been strong advocates of the public interest in broadcasting and critical of unregulated corporate powers. Fly was an early advocate of the concept of the freedom to listen. Upon Fly’s retirement, Durr emerged as the strongest voice for reform on the Commission and encouraged citizen participation. In the fall of 1945, he and the FCC’s new chairman, Paul Porter (another New Dealer), urged radio listeners to help shape the content of programming by writing to station operators, to the Commission, and to Congress. Durr called for a democratic radio system that was regulated by the people and for the public benefit (Dissent by Durr, 1945; Education on the Air, 1947).

The FCC led the battle against excess commercialism. During the summer of 1945, the FCC surveyed radio programming, and in March 1946 it issued a report, Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees (1947), known more popularly as the “Blue Book.” It was a ground-breaking document that represented the Commission’s first systematic effort to regulate program content. Arguing that too many broadcasters had virtually given control of their stations to advertisers, the report documented the abuses that radio’s critics had been discussing for years and laid out new criteria for evaluating stations. These guidelines were meant to increase airtime given to non-profit educational, civic, religious, agricultural, and labour organizations, as well as to guarantee the broadcasting of programs serving minority tastes and interests. An insistence on live local programs was designed to reduce network control over broadcasting and to provide an opportunity for community participation in radio (Socolow, 2002).

**Attack on liberal commentators**

After World War II, an attack on liberal commentators helped mobilize another group of reformers. During the war, the expansion of news commentary had enabled a host of liberal commentators to find homes on the airwaves. Commentary by Frank Kingdon, Robert St. John, William L. Shirer, Raymond Swing, and John Vandercook had helped offset the big-business, anti-labour messages of conservative commentators. In part due to the political chill from the emerging domestic Cold War, as early as the fall of 1945, networks and local independent radio stations began pushing out liberal and leftist commentators or pressuring them to “tone down” coverage of progressive causes (Oliver, 1947). Variety characterized it as a “quiet but effective campaign to drive from the airwaves every
radio gabber ever-so-slightly left of center” (Fadeout of Liberal Gabbers, 1946, 29). The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), angry at being “slandered, maligned, and ridiculed by certain commentators,” led the charge against the progressives (U.S. House of Representatives, 1946, p. 13). In the fall of 1945, claiming that it had received letters from listeners complaining of communist views, HUAC requested the scripts of seven mostly New York–based commentators with the intention of holding hearings on their political ideology (“House Group Sifts Talks,” 1945).

Fallout from HUAC’s attack came quickly. Johannes Steel, also one of the HUAC’s targets, warned that “liberal commentators like myself are being subpoenaed in a pressure campaign which is designed to intimidate radio stations and get us off the air” (American Thought Police, 1947, p. 8). Within a year, broadcasters dropped Steel, a 10-year broadcast veteran, and Frank Kingdon, who had recently become chairman of the National Citizens Political Action Committee (NCPAC), the CIO’s organization to mobilize liberals outside the ranks of labour (Complex Series of Moves, 1946). NBC dismissed liberals John Vandercook, Robert St. John, Don Hollenbeck, and Don Goddard (Oliver, 1947). And in March 1947, giving in to “Wall Street and allied pressure,” CBS cancelled William Shirer’s contract (Mower, 1947, p. 9). By 1948, aside from liberal Elmer Davis on ABC, the only commentators heard more than once a week on network prime time were conservatives H.V. Kaltenborn, Earl Godwin, Fulton Lewis, Henry J. Taylor and Gabriel Heatter (Seipmann, 1946).

The attack on liberals touched off a wave of protest. A number of legislators immediately denounced HUAC’s demand for scripts. Representative Hugh DeLacey, a Washington Democrat, characterized the Committee as “Congressional thought police” who threatened commentators with government surveillance and placed their thoughts “under House arrest” (American Thought Police, 1947, p. 8). Many Americans took their concerns about the disappearance of liberals directly to the FCC. In September 1946, M. J. Bablich of West Allis, Wisconsin, wrote concerning the dismissals of Vandercook and St. John, both of whom worried about the chilling influence of big business on the media. Bablich believed that the commentators were fired because of their “defense of the common citizens’ interests and attacks on big business” (M. J. Bablich to FCC, 1946). In late October 1945, delegates from 20 national and local educational, fraternal, civic, political, and union organizations concerned about civil liberties met in New York City to form a “Mobilization Against Thought Police in the U.S.A.” Led by acclaimed radio writer Norman Corwin, the group denounced HUAC’s attack on freedom of speech in broadcasting (“Gabbers vs. Dies Fight, 1945,” p. 35).

Labour also defended liberal commentators. CIO president Philip Murray asserted that although the CIO had been the victim of biased radio commentary, it was “unalterably opposed to attempts to censor or gag radio broadcasts” (Campaign is on to Defeat Woods bill, 1945, p. 18). When a New York station ended Frank Kingdon’s daily commentary, the CIO’s Political Action Committee, NCPAC, and the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Pro-
fessions sent a joint protest to the FCC against this “crusade to keep liberal commentary from the people” (“Crusade Against Liberals,” 1946, p. 22).

Voice of Freedom
In the spring of 1947, this same concern about defending political and social diversity on the airwaves led a group of writers, intellectuals, and artists to form the Voice of Freedom (VOF) Committee. Most were leftists involved in a variety of progressive causes, and all were incensed over the curtailment of free speech over the radio. The VOF saw itself as a watchdog on behalf of democracy in the media and an advocate of listeners’ rights. It fought for balanced coverage of the news, higher-quality programming, and racial equality in broadcasting, urging the removal of racist stereotypes and the hiring of more African-Americans (“Liberal Gabbers,” 1947). The organization sponsored rallies and meetings, lobbied the networks and the FCC, and participated in hearings in Washington related to broadcast legislation. With PAC’s World War II monitoring system as a model, it set up a network of “listening posts” to monitor commentators’ broadcasts for balanced coverage. By 1950, listening posts had grown from a few hundred in New York City to a web of 3,000 monitors spread across the nation. When they heard what they believed was misinformation or bias, monitors sent letters of protest or made calls to the commentator or the station (Monitors Storm WOR, 1948). A New Jersey monitor, for instance, wrote to Fulton Lewis, Jr., asking, “Why do you enjoy spreading fear in all your broadcasts?” Instead of balance, “you almost always try to frighten your listeners with the ‘red herring’” (“Something Fishy,” 1948, p. 3).

FM: A second chance
While reformers hoped that the more vigorous FCC oversight outlined by the Blue Book and the efforts of groups like the Voice of Freedom might improve significantly the existing AM broadcasting system, many envisioned FM as a second chance to create a more democratic and diverse broadcasting medium. One of the key battles in the campaign for a more democratic media involved the distribution of FM licences. This new broadcasting system could potentially break the monopoly control over radio of advertisers and networks and open station ownership to previously excluded groups. As the war drew to a close, expectations for FM’s future were bright. FM’s proponents anticipated that this new broadcasting system would make possible a large number of small independent stations, which could be developed at relatively low cost, opening station ownership to groups such as small businesses, veterans, unions, churches, and colleges, all largely excluded from AM (Fuller, 1944; “Radio’s Second Chance,” 1945).

The possibilities of FM broadcasting caught the imagination of the labour movement and the left. Unionists believed that labour-owned FM stations could provide the public with high-quality programming and enable labour to bypass the big commercial interests controlling radio (Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1944). Labour jumped into FM. In December 1944 the UAW applied for FM licences for non-commercial stations in six major cities. Similarly during 1945 the
International Ladies’ Garment Workers (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACWA) applied for licences in multiple locations, promising that their stations would emphasize public service. (ILGWU Applies for Four FM Stations, 1945). The National Maritime Union, the United Electrical Workers, and the Fur Workers joined the ILGWU and the ACWA in exploring FM broadcasting, as did the Chicago Federation of Labor and many other labour bodies (Labor Unions Request 16 FM Stations, 1945).

Community groups, often with close ties to labour and the left, also hoped to get in on the ground floor of FM. Among leftist organizations applying for licences in New York City were the People’s Radio Foundation and the Debs Memorial Foundation; in Washington D.C., the Potomac Cooperative Federation; in Los Angeles, the Hollywood Community Radio Group; and in Berkeley, California, the Pacifica Foundation. The People’s Radio Foundation (PRF) included fraternal and community groups and nine New York City locals with ties to the Communist Party. The PRF planned to promote a network of community-operated radio stations, owned by progressive organizations, in which labour would play an integral role. In New York City, the PRF was part of a pool of 18 competitors fighting for just five licences in 1946. All these progressive groups endorsed the goals of the Blue Book and promised a high standard of public service with minimal commercialism. They pledged to provide innovative programming that encouraged the development of local talent, reached out to minorities, and responded to the needs and interests of the local community (Konecky, 1948).

**FM allocation plan**

Labour and the left joined in a frenzied race for FM as networks, AM stations, newspapers, and small businesses scrambled for stations, submitting hundreds of applications for licences to the FCC. FM allocation policy would determine to what extent the new spectrum would fulfill the hopes of reformers. Under Chairman James Fly’s leadership, the FCC initially encouraged diversity of ownership, setting aside every fifth channel for non-profit educational broadcasting and limiting the number of stations granted to any one interest to six. AM station owners who acquired FM licences were also prohibited from totally duplicating their AM programming. Moreover, the rules gave an advantage to those applicants who offered a service distinct from any already available to the community (Immediate Action, 1945). After Fly left the FCC in early 1945, Clifton Durr continued to push for ownership diversity, urging that the FCC give preference to newcomers who demonstrated a sense of public responsibility and a commitment to “new concepts” in broadcasting (ACLU, p. 70). With expectations running high that FM would offer a fresh start for radio, in August 1945 reformers were disappointed when the FCC, yielding to intense industry pressure, backed away from its commitment to protecting FM development and promoting diversity of ownership (Seipmann, 1946).

Working with the CIO, the National Citizens PAC immediately launched a drive to “protect the people’s right to the air” (Immediate Action, 1945, p. 8). It circulated 100,000 copies of an eight-page analysis of the FCC plan. Of the hun-
hundreds of FM applications currently on file, noted NCPAC, all but a few were from existing broadcasting stations or newspapers that had already failed “to fulfill their pledge of public service” (*Immediate Action*, 1945, p. 5). The report included a petition urging the FCC to grant no more than one quarter of available FM channels to existing standard broadcast stations and newspapers, with the remainder to go to groups that had been previously excluded from radio (*Immediate Action*, 1945). The liberal–labour coalition gained a powerful ally when the Senate Small Business Committee headed by liberal Iowa Democrat Glen H. Taylor took up their cause. In the spring of 1946, it reported that the FCC had subverted hopes for a democratically controlled FM system by allocating 70% of FM grants to AM broadcasters or newspapers and urged the Commission to relax regulations to permit those of limited means to enter the FM field (FCC Policy, 1946; *What Future for FM?*, 1946).

Throughout the spring and early summer of 1946, Taylor’s committee, the CIO-PAC, and other labour, liberal, veteran, and farm organizations pressured the FCC to hold some FM channels in abeyance. In July, despite fierce opposition from networks and the National Association of Broadcasters, the Commission again reversed course, announcing its intention to promote an equitable distribution of FM frequencies by reserving for a year every fifth FM channel for late-comers. Although a far cry from NCPAC’s original demand that three quarters of all licences be allocated to newcomers, the decision was a victory, albeit a small one, for radio reformers (“FM Set-Aside,” 1946; FCC Adopts “Reservoir Rule,” 1946; FM Reservoir Set by FCC, 1946).

**Citizen participation in radio licensing**

Winning a slightly improved FM allocation plan was only part of the battle for a democratic media. How the plan was implemented was of even greater significance. FCC licensing and renewal decisions in both the FM and AM spectrums would determine who had access to the air. After the war ended, the FCC plunged into a licensing frenzy. It opened up FM and also began issuing licences for hundreds of new AM stations, made possible by a decision reducing the required bandwidth distance between stations. Adding to its work, the FCC had the ongoing business of renewing licences for established stations, which the Blue Book made more complex (Douglas, 1999).

In the midst of this activity, advocates of “listeners’ rights” began urging citizens to become more involved in the regulatory process. NCPAC called for well-publicized hearings in local communities on all licence applications, both new and renewals, to facilitate public participation. Essentially it was calling for greater community control over radio. The CIO’s campaign to protect the “people’s right to the air” put labour at the forefront of the movement for listeners’ rights (*Immediate Action*, 1945, p. 8). Emphasizing the people’s ownership of the airwaves and encouraged by the WHKC decision, unions were already attempting to intervene in the licence renewal of stations that had censored or denied unions access. This level of interest in community involvement in licensing was unparalleled.
Such activism divided the FCC. There were strong pro-industry elements within the Commission. Still, the FCC’s liberal supporters of radio reform—Paul A. Porter, Paul A. Walker, and Clifford Durr—exercised influence over FCC policy until the latter part of the forties (Salmond, 1990; Toro, 2000). Moreover, the Blue Book encouraged listeners to exert their rights, advocating the formation of listener councils to “convey . . . the wishes of the vast but not generally articulate radio audience” (Federal Communications Commission, 1947, p. 55). Pushed by Durr and applauded by NCPAC, the FCC promoted public participation in the regulatory process by moving some licensing hearings out of Washington, D.C., and into local communities. In the first quarter of 1946, despite a backlog of more than 1,000 pending applications, the FCC scheduled hearings for new stations in 53 cities throughout the nation. This was a major shift in FCC policy, which previously had excluded listeners from the process (Frank, 1946; Toro, 2000).

The CIO-PAC and NCPAC publicized the hearing schedule and encouraged local participation, contending that communities could secure pledges from station operators for high-quality programming and open access to civic, farm, labour, and progressive groups. With these promises on the public record, if a station failed to fulfill its promises, citizens could seek redress from the FCC. The CIO and NCPAC urged citizen groups to pay close attention to applications from corporations operating stations in other cities. “If the stations they now operate are not of the type you want in your community, oppose their invasion of your city” (Frank, 1946, p. 1). UAW radio director Allen Sayler emphasized the importance of labour’s participation, advising that labour’s voice at these hearings might mean the “difference between reactionary and progressive radio service” in local communities (Summary of Proceedings, 1946, p. 1).

Across the nation, unionists responded to the call to participate in the regulatory process. Industrial unionists from Berks County, Pennsylvania, asked to testify at the hearing regarding the licensing of a new station in Reading, and the Meadville Textile Workers local opposed Dr. H. C. Winslow’s application for a new radio station on the grounds that it was “derogatory to the best interests of the community” (Slowie to Pearson, 1946). The Michigan CIO Council opposed the Fort Industry Company’s application to purchase Detroit station WJBK, asserting that the company already had three FM licences, two television licences, and at least seven AM stations. To August Scholle, president of the Michigan CIO Council, this was “a monopolistic development to which we object” (Michigan CIO Council, 1947, p. 1). Moreover, according to the CIO, the other stations operated by the company violated the FCC Blue Book prohibitions against excessive commercialism.

Unions also began to intervene more aggressively in the renewal of station licences. In Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Newspaper Guild and Textile Workers locals presented petitions in support of station WBAX, which labour applauded for readily providing access to unions and other community groups (Carey to Slowie, 1946). More routinely, unionists used the licence renewal process as a weapon against stations that refused labour time or censored scripts. Billboard
observed that labour’s new aggressiveness in the licensing process was “an important milestone, indicating a new trend in the control of media of culture, information, and education dissemination” (CIO Requests FCC Hearing, 1946).

In the latter part of the forties, groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Jewish Congress (AJC), and the Voice of Freedom joined the CIO in adopting a listeners’ rights approach to broadcast reform. The NAACP urged members to aggressively combat racism on the air with complaints to the FCC, and the AJC intervened in several high-profile cases against stations that the organization contended had demonstrated a history of anti-Semitism. In New York City, for instance, during the FM hearing for five available channels, the AJC presented statistical evidence, modelled after the kind of evidence generated by the UAW in the WHKC case, against one of the applicants, the Daily News, contending that the newspaper had exhibited consistent bias and hostility against Jews and African-Americans. In justifying its intervention, the AJC argued that the “freedom to listen is indeed the indispensable counterpart of the freedom to speak” (Toro, 2000, p. 130). Although the Commission eventually ignored the AJC’s evidence, it ultimately refused to award a licence to the Daily News, previously considered the front-runner (Toro, 2000).

**Impact of radio reform**

In the years immediately after World War II, radio reformers felt optimistic about their progress in improving broadcasting. The FCC appeared ready to enforce Blue Book programming standards. Industry observers believed initially that the Blue Book exerted significant influence on station operations. Pushed by the FCC and by increasing indignation throughout the nation, elements of the radio industry seemed to be adhering to the Blue Book’s plea for reduced commercialism (Smead, 1959). Anecdotal evidence suggested that stations paid more attention to public service and opened their microphones to civic groups (Radio Listeners be Damned, 1947). Moreover, reformers found evidence in FCC licensing decisions that their protests were having some influence. FM allocation decisions announced late in 1946 gave preference to newcomers over established broadcasters and to applicants most closely connected with the local community (FCC Favoring Non Radio Towns, 1946). Labour benefited from the Commission’s receptivity to newcomers; the UAW, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the ILGWU won licences in 12 cities. The Commission also initially seemed to be advancing the concept of listeners’ rights by scheduling hearings in local communities (Toro, 2000).

Although the FCC never denied a licence renewal based on union complaints, it remained receptive to union complaints about access. Secretary T. J. Slowie followed up on many union grievances, reminding stations about the WHKC ruling (Slowie to WGAL, 1946). Often, the Commission quietly settled the differences between unions and broadcasters “out of court.” During the 1950 Chrysler strike, the FCC publicly rapped the knuckles of Detroit station WWJ for refusing to sell or grant time to the UAW to present its side of the strike. It advised the station,
which was owned by the anti-union Detroit Evening News, that its conduct was “not in accord” with FCC policy (For Second Time in a Week, 1950, p. 28). Often the threat of FCC intervention was enough to open the airwaves.

**Broadcasters fight back**

All this was evidence to broadcasters that the reformers posed a real threat to their control over the media. While some acknowledged radio’s shortcomings, most viewed the Blue Book as a fundamental attack on radio’s freedom. Broadcasting dismissed the “shrieks of over-commercialism” as coming from the American Civil Liberties Union, various college forums, and “the anti-radio labor unions” who “would see radio Government-controlled for political or economic reasons” (PR Job Ahead, 1947, p. 46). At a minimum, the Blue Book seemed to portend stepped-up government involvement in programming decisions. The increased interest of labour and the left in the media especially worried broadcasters. Rumours swept the industry that labour and leftist organizations were plotting to capture American broadcasting, particularly FM. Broadcasting characterized NCPAC’s campaign to limit existing stations and newspapers to one quarter of available FM channels as an effort to throw existing broadcasters out of business (“Is This the U.S. A. or __,” 1945).

Broadcasters launched an attack on the reformers that ultimately overwhelmed most of the reform agenda. The primary targets were the Blue Book, the CIO, and leftist groups such as the Voice of Freedom. Exploiting the emerging Cold War, opponents attempted to delegitimize the broadcast reformers, tagging them as communists out to destroy the American broadcasting system. The National Association of Broadcasters led the attack against the Blue Book. As historian Michael Socolow (2002) has observed, the Blue Book touched a nerve, acting as a “catalyst for the most widespread public discussion of advertising and broadcasting in American history” (p. 287). Broadcasters felt threatened by this often extremely critical discussion of radio’s performance. NAB president Justin Miller characterized the Blue Book as an attack against free radio that amounted to censorship and dismissed its advocates as “stooges for the Communists” (Meyer, 1962, 301). The NAB also launched an elaborate grass-roots public relations drive promoting the broadcasting industry’s constructive contributions to American society. The networks began independent efforts to promote free radio, with CBS airing a number of programs defending the commercial basis of American radio in the spring of 1947 (Socolow, 2002).

Led by a new chairman who had little commitment to reform, Charles Denny, and with its members under attack from aHUAC investigation, the FCC backed away from the Blue Book. It renewed the licences of all the stations previously cited in the Blue Book for excessive commercialism, and over Clifford Durr’s strong dissent, it awarded FM grants in Chicago to three AM stations that demonstrated virtually no commitment to public-interest programming. Indeed, the vast majority of FM licences went to existing AM broadcasters (Barnouw, 1968; FCC to Pursue Relaxed Policy, 1947). In January 1947, a disappointed Saul Carson, the New Republic’s radio editor, caustically noted that the FCC might expound very
revolutionary ideology, but the Republican Party and big business had no reason to feel threatened. “If the commission ever mounts the barricades, it will be on the side of the guy with the frock coat” (Carson, 1947, p. 117).

Broadcasters also attacked listeners' councils and the CIO. “Red baiting” was an effective means to undercut groups—such as the Voice of Freedom—that were the most vocal advocates of listeners’ rights. HUAC labelled the VOF a communist front organization, and in 1949, the American Legion denounced the Committee for defending blacklist victims (American Legion, 1949). Broadcasters went after the CIO-PAC as well. During the 1946 election, the CIO used radio as a political weapon, touting it as the most effective way of “reaching millions daily” (PAC Urges Council to Seek Free Time, 1946, p. 30). In early September, PAC launched its air battle for a large voter turnout by distributing 19 records with short “register-vote” announcements sung by Tom Glazer and Pete Seeger. Broadcasting urged radio operators to resist the efforts by labour to “wheedle free time” under the guise of public interest. Pointing out that singers Glazer and Seeger had been cited by HUAC, the trade magazine advised the public and station owners that if they looked closely they would see that PAC’s radio announcements were tinged with red (Radio, CIO Version). The NAB’s supporters in Congress also assisted. In late September 1946, the House Select Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures announced that it was scrutinizing PAC’s air campaign, looking for possible violations of the Communications Act. As a result, during the 1946 electoral campaign, numerous stations refused labour’s political broadcasts, either on paid or free time (PAC Campaign for Free Time, 1946).

**Hopes for FM fade**

Hopes for FM as a second chance for radio also faded. Despite the heady predictions that FM would quickly supplant AM, the new spectrum faced unexpected barriers. The major difficulty was the lack of audience. Reformers charged that AM broadcasters, working closely with set manufacturers, were retarding FM’s development. In June 1946, furious that manufacturers were devoting 90% of their production capacity to old-style AM sets, Senator Glen Taylor and the UAW asked for the Justice Department to investigate the radio industry for possible antitrust violations (Lack of Sets, 1946). The future for FM seemed so grim that in March 1947, 100 applicants withdrew their applications for FM licences (Non-AM FM Hopefuls, 1947). Those on the left wing of the radio reform movement, who had anticipated that FM would open up the airwaves to the entire range of political thought, were especially disappointed. While organized labour’s anti-communist wing, which included the UAW and the ILGWU, had enough political and economic clout that it could not be completely excluded from FM (Fones-Wolf, 2000), organizations with any links to the Communist Party faced a much rockier road in their quest for a radio licence. FCC policies and attacks from anti-communist forces doomed the efforts of much of the left to gain a broader audience by operating FM stations (FCC Handles Its Hottest FM-TV Cases, 1947).
End of radio reform

By the end of 1948, reformers’ hopes for a major transformation in American broadcasting had virtually ended. Increasingly there was little interest within the FCC for regulatory activism. In the face of fierce broadcaster opposition, the Blue Book was fading into memory (Toro, 2000). It would be 20 more years before the FCC, under pressure from the Civil Rights movement, again allowed citizen participation in licensing decisions. Pressure from the left also disappeared as the left wing of the reform movement struggled to survive strident attacks by the increasingly powerful forces of anti-communism. Moreover, FM’s future remained unclear. Several reform and community-oriented stations made it to the air, like Pacifica in Berkeley. Most of the labour stations failed to materialize, although in the late forties and early fifties the garment workers and auto workers briefly operated five FM stations that sought to function democratically and without excessive commercialism. But labour’s experiment with FM was short-lived (Fones-Wolf, 2000). In the fifties and sixties, unions occasionally supported a few media issues (endorising, for instance, the campaign for educational television), but labour was never again a major force in the media reform movement, leaving it to become the province primarily of middle-class liberals (McChesney, 1999).

Today the corporate media in the United States is even more concentrated and undemocratic than ever before, and it continues to ignore or defame workers and organized labour. Given the power of the mass media in shaping ideology, a revitalized labour movement must again become an active player in media reform.

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