

LOCALISM IN AMERICAN MEDIA, 1920-1934

by

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(Begin abstract here – must follow dissertation formatting, not exceed 350 words, be signed by your advisor. Do not number these pages as they are not part of the diss.)

Contents

List of Archival Sources **iii**

Acknowledgements **iv**

Introduction – Localism as Myth and Reality in American Political Thought and Media Policy **1**
Localism in Media Scholarship..... 7
Contributions of this Study 13
Literature Review 20
Theory and Methodology 26
Chapter Organization 38
Conclusion 42

Chapter One – Localism and the National Class, 1900-1934:
Democratic Ideals, Cultural Distinction **44**
Part I: Pre-Twentieth-Century Localism 47
 Ia. Localism and Nationalism in the Early Republic 53
 Ib. Localism and Nationalism After the Civil War 62
Part II: The Twentieth Century—The National Class Emerges 66
 Ia. Localism and Distinction I: Positive Localism 73
 Ib. Localism and Distinction II: Negative Localism 80
Part III: Positive and Negative Localism in the Modernizing Project 104
 IIIa. Radio in the National-Class Project 112
 IIIb. The National Class and its Discontents 123
Conclusion 130

Chapter Two – Establishing the Regulatory Context: Politics, Economics, and the Local-National Divide **134**
Part I: Tensions Shaping Radio Policy in the 1920s and 1930s 136
 Ia. Content Control, Private Control 137
 Ib. Economic Viability and the Radio Trust 148
 Ic. National Desires, Regional Differences 155
Part II: Localist Discourses, National Radio 161
 Ia. The Emergence of "Local" and "National" Stations 161
 Ib. "Local" and "National" Become Official Policy Categories 175
 Ic. Coda: A Note on Regionalism 187
Conclusion 195

Chapter Three – Localism in American Media Policy, 1920-1934:	
Modernizing the Local Through Media Regulation	197
<i>Part I: Modernization Through Content Control</i>	201
<i>Ia. Controlling Content Through the Trusteeship Model</i>	202
<i>Ib. Controlling Content Through Program Standards</i>	211
<i>Ic. Controlling Content Through "Community"</i>	218
<i>Part II: Modernization Through Economic Management</i>	224
<i>Ia. Local-National Tensions in Industry Economics</i>	225
<i>Ib. Modernization and Professionalization</i>	230
<i>Ic. Regulating Competition</i>	236
<i>Conclusion</i>	246
Chapter Four – National Radio and Local Resistance:	
The Networks and Localism	248
<i>Part I: The Struggle to Make "National" Radio National</i>	251
<i>Ia. Using Localism to Defend Chain Broadcasting</i>	253
<i>Ib. National-Local Tensions Within the Networks</i>	263
<i>Part II: The Struggle to Make "Local" Culture National</i>	279
<i>Ia. Localizing the National and Nationalizing the Local</i>	285
<i>Ib. Aesthetic Localism, Translocal Localism</i>	289
<i>Conclusion</i>	302
Chapter Five – The Traditional Local Middle Class and Local Radio, Or:	
How the Local Became an -Ism	304
<i>Part I: Audiences, Citizens, and Local Radio</i>	305
<i>Ia. Localism, Nationalism, and Listener Desire</i>	305
<i>Ib. Civic Radio, Civic Boosterism</i>	310
<i>Part II: Local Stations and the Uses of Localism</i>	322
<i>Ia. Local Radio and the Politics of Localism</i>	322
<i>Ib. Local Radio and the Economics of Localism</i>	335
<i>Ic. Affirmative Localism, Market Localism, and the Great Depression</i>	343
<i>Conclusion</i>	348
Conclusion	354
Bibliography	367

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Introduction

Localism as Myth and Reality in American Political Thought and Media Policy

Joey Durel finally got fed up. As the parish president of Lafayette, Louisiana, he had waited over a decade for the regional phone company in his area, Bell South, to deliver on its promise to wire Lafayette with fiber-optic cable. Fiber-optic, Durel knew, would allow the parish to receive truly high-speed internet, providing an increasingly important service to citizens as well as a competitive advantage to Lafayette in attracting good businesses and jobs. If Bell South refused to wire the parish, perhaps the parish could install the cable itself? With Durel's backing, a citizens committee looked into the problem and recommended a bond issue to finance construction of a local fiber-optic network. A heated campaign followed in which citizens created their own ads for and against the bond issue, running them on the internet and Acadiana Open Channel, the local public access television station. When the vote was tallied in July, 2005, the parish passed the measure by sixty-two percent. Said Durel afterwards, "The reason we got the vote ... was price and pride. People are going to save money, and people are proud in this community and they are proud of being a progressive community. And so, I think that's what won the vote for us."¹

The wiring of Lafayette illustrates several important points about the role of the "local" in American society. First, despite widespread fears about the McDonaldization of American life and the ways in which corporate capitalism works to make every town like every other town, Lafayette demonstrates that local distinctiveness and local identities ("they are proud of being a progressive community") can still be mobilized to achieve political change. Second, despite

¹ Joey Durel, qtd. in *Moyers on America*, "The Net @ Risk," PBS, original airdate 18 October 2006.

widespread promises that new media technologies will erase boundaries, bridge distance, and make locality irrelevant, the case exemplifies some of the ways that place and geography, including the local, still powerfully influence our positionality in a complex world. Finally, even in light of a significant body of scholarly work that usefully questions the very idea of "local community"—work that explores the limits, inclusions, exclusions, class dimensions, racial and gender assumptions, and nostalgia for pre-modern life that the concept implies—the local remains important as a political, economic, and cultural entity within which and through which our social lives are structured.

Drawing on this continued importance of the local in our lives, then, "localism" is a principle that, as used by contemporary media activists and political observers, seeks to foster geographically based local identities and local public spheres. Advocates of media localism in the U.S., for example, champion local public-affairs coverage, local-origination programming, the public's access to local television and radio, and other structures designed to interpellate, empower, and enrich citizens as members of a local polity and local society. They do so, however, within the context of a media system dominated by national and transnational commercial programming and translocal corporate control. Although the broadcasting system is nominally built on a structure of geographically based local licenses, the space for localism in television and radio, as well as a consensus on the relevance of localism in the age of the internet, appears less stable than ever. Furthermore, this is not just an issue for media scholars and practitioners, but for all political activists and observers across the board, since localism in media is intricately connected to the idea of local public spheres, the organization and powers of different political jurisdictions, and meaningful citizen participation in the democratic process. For anyone concerned with the possibility of democratic self-rule, regardless of political

persuasion, questions of localism cannot be ignored. In the context of contemporary America, such questions include: Can meaningful localism survive in U.S. media? *Should* it survive, and would it matter if it did? If so, how can we improve the effectiveness of the rhetoric and structures that seek to foster local identities and local public spheres?

This project offers some historically-informed ways of looking at these issues. In this study, I seek to better understand the philosophy of localism both as a democratic political concept with a long history in American thought, and as a principle of media policy since the emergence of broadcasting. Perhaps at the moment of encounter—that is, at the intersection of American political thought and media policy—some clues about the nature, effects, and uses of localism may be gleaned. Perhaps, too, a better understanding of the broader media system and the nature of the public sphere may be gained as well. Radio participated in the economic, political, and cultural reorganization of the nation in the twentieth century: remapping spatial relationships, redistributing political and cultural power, and restructuring social networks. As such, radio made visible local-national tensions and other ruptures of modernization, making it a productive site for understanding American history. With that in mind, this study closely examines discourses and structures of localism at the emergence of the radio age between 1920, when broadcasting proper is generally acknowledged to have begun as a popular phenomenon, and 1934, when the broadcasting system that had developed during the 1920s was legislatively ratified and, if not fixed in concrete once and for all, certainly consolidated along established models. My research questions are as follows: What was the status of localism as a political and cultural concept when broadcasting emerged? In what ways did policymakers and regulators seek to incorporate localism into the media system, and with what goals in mind? How did broadcasters use discourses and structures of localism to manage radio, and with what

consequences for the industry and American life? Finally, how did citizens use localism to negotiate twentieth-century modernization and its threats to their economic and social power?

My argument in the following chapters is that localism in American media before 1934 was not a simple or straightforward effort to foster pre-constituted, already operational geographically based local identities and public spheres. Instead, localism—both in the media and in American political thought—constituted a key battleground of largely class-based conflicts over economic and cultural changes in U.S. society. In other words, localism became a central part of ongoing national struggles over how and on whose terms the modernization of America's economy, culture, technological infrastructure, and social networks would occur. These class struggles were complex; although much attention has been paid to a rural-urban divide in the 1920s, it was not simply the case that rural and small-town folk celebrated local community (what Tönnies called *Gemeinschaft*) while city folk celebrated the more anonymous but expansive social structures of urban life (*Gesellschaft*).² Rather, all social classes situationally embraced and rejected discourses and structures of localism and the local community as it fit their needs; my purpose is to identify the regularities and patterns that emerged in these contests, and trace their consequences for the media system and for the political and cultural development of the United States.

The tensions over modernization that were played out in and through discourses and structures of localism influenced every area of the early broadcast industry. These tensions shaped how a common-sense classification of stations developed in public discussion, producing the idea of "local" and "national" stations long before any policymakers organized broadcast

² Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*, trans. and ed. Charles P. Loomis (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957).

service into those categories. They affected how regulators, especially the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), made policy decisions, using localism to achieve a modern, professional, and national radio service. They shaped how network employees articulated their national mission, tried to balance local and national interests, and made business decisions that profoundly affected the growth of networks and the programs they offered. Finally, they opened up spaces for individual localities to advance their interests within a modernizing America, participating in radio's spatial, political, economic, and cultural reorganization of the nation. Viewing early radio history through the lens of localism not only allows the re-examination of localism as a principle of politics and media policy, but also sheds light on the development of American media throughout the twentieth century.

My study arrives at a particularly crucial time for discussions of localism in the media and public life, with two large issues dominating the debate. The first is the ongoing struggle over media consolidation, as the Federal Communications Commission repeatedly attempts to lift ownership caps on radio and television stations, increasing the number of media outlets that may be controlled by one company in a given market. In the wake of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, ever more broadcast stations have been consolidated under ever fewer corporate umbrellas, resulting in less programming originating in and targeted to specific localities.³ Everyone's favorite example of this is Clear Channel, owner of some twelve hundred radio stations around the country that it programs nationally from centralized locations. Various studies seem to bear out the contention that ownership does seem to make a difference in the

³ See for example Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

amount of local news and public affairs coverage available in a given market.⁴ To the extent that broadcasting could or should function as a local public sphere, then, this reduction of space for the circulation of local identity, culture, and public affairs appears to severely impinge on local diversity and curtail the efficiency and effectiveness of local political action.⁵

The second issue dominating current discussions of localism is the rise of new media technologies, most notably the internet. Although the internet, like the telegraph and radio before it, promises to obliterate distances, transcend local limitations, and bring people together nationally and even globally, one of the more interesting avenues of academic exploration in the past few years has been the degree to which locality continues to structure our media system and cultural life. One of the hardest fought media battles of the decade concerns the right of local communities to have a say in their own futures in the broadband world, for instance by determining their infrastructural needs and priorities. Two examples (in addition to the Lafayette case) are laws in Pennsylvania and elsewhere that restrict local wireless initiatives, and attempts by AT&T and Verizon to reverse the decades-old policy of local cable franchising. In the case

⁴ A study done before the 1996 Telecommunications Act found mixed indicators, suggesting more local news but of a more sensationalistic variety rather than the public affairs coverage the media activists argue for; see ; Karen L. Slattery and Ernest A. Hakanen, "The Expression of Localism: Local TV News Coverage in the New Video Marketplace," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 403-414. Since then, several studies have demonstrated a correlation between local ownership and local public-affairs content, including one by the FCC. See for example Federal Communications Commission, "Do Local Owners Deliver More Localism? Some Evidence From Local Broadcast News," 17 June 2004. http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-267448A1.pdf (25 October 2006); Ronald Bishop and Ernest A. Hakanen, "In the Public Interest? The State of Local Television Programming Fifteen Years After Deregulation," *The Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (July 2002): 261+. ProQuest Research Library. 15 August 2004; Nina Huntemann, "Corporate Interference: The Commercialization and Concentration of Radio post the 1996 Telecommunications Act," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 23, no. 4 (1999): 390-407; Todd Chambers, "Radio Programming Diversity in the Era of Consolidation," *Journal of Radio Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 33-45; Although the exact relationship between ownership and content remains elusive, Kevin Howley has recently questioned the metrics by which diversity and localism are measured, arguing that the "Diversity Index" studies conducted by advocates of deregulation—i.e. those that count the number of media outlets in a given market—do not effectively capture the multitude of factors influencing this relationship. Kevin Howley, "Diversity, Localism and the Public Interest: The Politics of Assessing Media Performance," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 1, no. 1 (2005): 103–106.

⁵ For a clear and concise review of this issue, see Robert L. Hilliard and Michael C. Keith, *The Quieted Voice: The Rise and Demise of Localism in American Radio* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

of local franchising, one of the risks is that these companies will "cherry-pick" their customers, building out their networks only to more affluent neighborhoods; the resulting exacerbation of the class- and race-based digital divide would raise new challenges to the idea of local community and the ability of all citizens to participate in local public spheres. New media technologies also raise new questions and possibilities for local democratic action. While the attempt to construct "online town squares" and promote local citizen internet journalism have met with mixed results, such experiments have prompted further examination of the idea of localism itself and its role in the twenty-first century.

These two discussions intersect frequently in ways that demonstrate the continued relevance of localism in American media and politics. Despite ongoing marginalization of the local, then, scholars in a wide range of fields agree that place still matters in various spheres of public.⁶ This study hopes to contribute to our understanding of localism as an important feature of both our history and our future.

Localism in Media Scholarship

Two basic assertions about localism in American media run throughout broadcast scholarship. The first is that localism is a foundational concept, a "basic principle of broadcast policy in the United States."⁷ As media scholar Gregory Newton wrote, "Localism, the bedrock

⁶ See for example Michael Curtin, "Media Capital: Towards the Study of Spatial Flows," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 203-229; Richard L. Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Jack L. Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Telecommunications and the City: Electronic Spaces, Urban Places* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁷ David M. Silverman and David N. Tobenkin, "The FCC's Main Studio Rule: Achieving Little for Localism at a Great Cost to Broadcasters," *Federal Communications Law Journal* 53 (2000-2001): 471. HeinOnline (11 February 2005).

obligation of licensees to identify and program for the needs and interests of the audience in the community they are licensed to serve ... has been at the foundation of U.S. policy from the beginning."⁸ Another scholar added, "Since the inception of federal radio and television regulation, efforts to achieve local service and to resolve associated problems have been central to regulatory policy."⁹ The second basic assertion is that the reason localism is a bedrock concept is primarily nostalgia for pre-modern life. Those regulators who put localism at the foundation of U.S. policy were "[viewing] the broadcaster in the mythic haze of the small-town Jeffersonian town square."¹⁰ Wrote one scholar, "Rhetoric of the period reflected utopian notions of radio as a tool to enhance local democracy, through which citizens might become informed of public affairs, to enable them to carry out their civic duties."¹¹

This study raises doubt about both of those widespread assertions. Regarding the first claim, the implementation of local licensing and local service obligations did not occur until sixteen years after the first federal radio legislation and eight years into the broadcasting era; the official creation of "local" stations did not occur until another eighteen months after that. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, no member of the Radio Division of Commerce or the Federal Radio Commission ever even used the word "localism" in an official capacity.¹² Nor is this mere quibbling over timing and word choice: as I discuss in Chapter Two, by the time

⁸ Gregory David Newton, "Localism Considered...and Reconsidered" (Ph. D. diss., Indiana University, 2001), 10-11.

⁹ Tom A. Collins, "The Local Service Concept in Broadcasting: An Evaluation and Recommendation for Change," *Iowa Law Review* 65 (1979-1980): 554-5. HeinOnline (10 February 2005).

¹⁰ Robert Britt Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of American Telecommunications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 194.

¹¹ Alan G. Stavitsky, "The Changing Conception of Localism in U.S. Public Radio," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 19.

¹² Nor do the words "local community," "local service," or similar phrases appear in the Radio Act of 1927.

even the most nominal gesture toward what we today call localism was introduced into official policy, several durable features of the media system that worked to the disadvantage of local radio were already well established.

Regarding the second assertion, there is in fact almost no evidence that policymakers were harboring nostalgic fantasies about small-town life: there was no "mythic haze," no "utopian notions." One could make the case that Congress was interested in fostering local radio, but for practical economic and political reasons, not due to a nostalgic longing for pre-modern life. As for most early regulators, including Herbert Hoover and the members of the Federal Radio Commission, the record shows they were primarily invested in national, not local, radio: their public pronouncements were full of praise for the important national speeches and great artists that radio would disseminate throughout America, and full of wonder for broadcasting's ability to unite the diverse sections of the country into one homogenous whole. They gave little indication that they were particularly invested in the enhancement of local democracy, the preservation of local identities, or other such "utopian" notions. Mythic ideas about localism are values that have been subsequently attributed to early radio regulators by later generations, not something that they cared much about themselves at the time. In other words, we have been working with the historical fiction that *they* were working with a historical fiction.

That said, there is much "localism" in the U.S. media system. Permission to transmit, which was originally granted to individual licensees, gradually came to be (and still is) based on a system of geographically based "local" licenses. Furthermore, a legislative requirement for broadcasters to serve their community is embedded in the Radio Act of 1927 and the

Communications Act of 1934.¹³ In contrast to national broadcasting systems like the BBC, where independently operated local stations were forbidden by law, the U.S. system is undoubtedly based on localism in that narrow sense. But the historical record reveals a more contingent, ambiguous, and at times even hostile attitude toward localism as a policy from the 1920s until well after the 1934 Act—a wrinkle that complicates the claim that "efforts to achieve local service ... have been central to regulatory policy" from the beginning. And when Newton writes, "Beginning with the 1927 Radio Act, Congress and the appropriate regulatory agency have attempted to provide (or at least encourage) diversity through 'local service,'"¹⁴ the effect is doubly misleading, since, on the one hand, that phrase appears nowhere in the 1927 Act, and on the other hand, to the extent that the FRC did expect "local service" from licensees, program diversity was not necessarily their objective.

There appears, in other words, to be a tension between localism as part of radio's infrastructure (how spectrum is allocated, how content is delivered, etc.), and localism as part of radio's social role (what it is supposed to do, what its cultural function should be, etc.). A 1924 speech by Herbert Hoover illustrates this tension, identifying the importance of the local station from a technical standpoint, but pushing for national radio from a cultural standpoint:

[R]adio fans [should] receive an even more vital contact with our national life; that is, to receive constantly improving programs of entertainment, larger participation in the discussion of public questions, in vital events and important news. Every radio fan knows that regular and positive service can only be received over his local stations. Some fans have instruments that are fine enough to listen in on distant stations, but static and other conditions make this other service irregular, and of no importance as a national question. Therefore from a

¹³ The Radio Act of 1927 is officially known as Public Law 632, 69th Congress, 23 February 1927; the Communications Act of 1934 is Public Law 416, 73d Congress 19 June 1934. Both are reprinted in *Documents of American Broadcasting*, ed. Frank J. Kahn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).

¹⁴ Newton, "Localism Considered," 10.

national point of view, we must rely upon the local station and in order that we should have a national service we must have interconnection of these different broadcasting stations.¹⁵

Hoover did not deny the possibility or importance of local programming and local stations, but his overriding concern was the establishment of a *national* system, and he saw the local station primarily as a means to that national end. There is therefore a significant disconnect between, on the one hand, the practical, nationally-minded words and actions of early regulators, and on the other hand the hazy, localist Jeffersonian pipe dream that later scholars have assumed these regulators must have been indulging.

What everyone can agree on is that, for a supposedly bedrock concept, localism has had a disappointing career. In particular, locally originated content has usually been marginalized within the commercial system in favor of network and syndicated programming. In part as a result of these misconceptions about the role of localism in early radio, then, scholars have asked the obvious question: Why didn't localism do what it was supposed to do, i.e. foster local identities and public spheres through a licensee's program service? Different explanations have been offered for this "weakness in conception and implementation."¹⁶ Regarding its weakness in conception, some broadcast historians argue that localism was simply an unfortunate error born of parochialism on the part of early regulators: "Although the perception of need for service to localities in the late 1920s was certainly more understandable and realistic than today, the conclusion that the need was great was not compelled."¹⁷ Or perhaps it really was the product of

¹⁵ Herbert Hoover, "Radio Problems--Address Before California Radio Exposition, San Francisco," 16 August 1924, 8. Hoover Papers: Box 490, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1924 April-September."

¹⁶ Collins, "The Local Service Concept in Broadcasting," 572.

¹⁷ Ibid.

wishful thinking for days gone by, a policy grounded in wispy nostalgia: "[L]ocalism ... was anachronistic from its earliest moments ... a social fantasy."¹⁸ For its weakness in implementation, scholars often blame regulators who merely "preach[ed] the desirability of localism while constructing no supports for the policy in regulatory practice."¹⁹ Perhaps the problem was a certain toothlessness in the policy: "While supporting localism in principle, ... the federal government has never aggressively enforced it in practice."²⁰ Media policy analysts like Robert Horwitz and Don Le Duc go so far as to suggest that greater enforcement of localism would have simply been impossible given the economic power of various national broadcasting interests; as Horwitz writes, "To truly uphold localism would have inevitably undermined how the industry actually functioned."²¹ Whether localism in U.S. media policy was just a bad mistake, the product of delusional thinking, or a victim of regulatory hypocrisy and the power of large commercial broadcasters, scholars agree that its subsequent marginalization flowed from one of two sources: either regulators were corrupt, weak, and/or incompetent, or localism was an unworkable or possibly even silly idea to begin with.

If we accept this previous scholarship as the final word, the result is bad news all around. Localism as a policy value in U.S. media continues to suffer the stigma of being an unrealistic and impractical concept, allowing regulators, legislators, and the media industry to dismiss calls

¹⁸ Chris Anderson and Michael Curtin, "Mapping the Ethereal City: Chicago Television, the FCC, and the Politics of Place," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 16, no. 3-4 (1999): 293-4.

¹⁹ Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform*, 129.

²⁰ Anderson and Curtin, "Mapping the Ethereal City," 289.

²¹ Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform*, 129. See also Don R. Le Duc, *Cable Television and the FCC: A Crisis in Media Control* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973).

for more localism in the system.²² At the same time, regulators—most notably the much-derided Federal Radio Commission—get a bad historical rap as dreamers, hacks, or industry lackeys, making it too easy to give up on the possibilities of effective federal regulation. Notably, advocates of media deregulation have drawn sustenance from both of these (mis)perceptions. But the problems with our current understanding of localism in American media history go even deeper. As the previous paragraph illustrates, approaches to media policy—how it works, the forces that shape it—remains stunted by, in essence, coming down too heavily on one side or the other of an imagined political economy-cultural history divide. That is, one either grants the industry too much autonomy from cultural forces by arguing that that's just the way industry works, or one grants too much influence to culture by arguing that policymakers suffered a kind of false consciousness about the recoverability of face-to-face community that led them to implement impractical policies. Rather than asking why localism didn't do what we imagine it was supposed to do, then, this study asks a different question: what exactly was localism in American media and politics supposed to do and why?

Contributions of this Study

By moving away from assumptions about localism to a close historical analysis of the role that discourses and structures of localism actually played in early radio history, this study is able to make several significant contributions to the literature.

The first contribution of this study is to identify different valences and uses of localism that might expand our ways of thinking about what localism is and what it can do. To keep these

²² See for example Silverman and Tobenkin, "The FCC's Main Studio Rule," 471; Roger G. Noll, Merton J. Peck, and John J. McGowan, *Economic Aspects of Television Regulation* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1973), 116-20.

different shadings of localism analytically distinct, I have organized them into different categories—a kind of taxonomy of localism—that I use throughout this work. Foremost among these is "affirmative localism," which is my term for how contemporary media activists tend to think of localism: affirmative efforts to foster geographically based local identities and local public spheres. This is primarily the kind of localism that I have been discussing thus far and it will reappear throughout the study. In the next chapter, I consider "political localism" as a model of the democratic public sphere, tracing the historical trajectory of two modalities of political localism (New England and Jeffersonian) culminating in radio's role in the reorganization of local public spheres. In Chapter Three, I describe the networks' use of a "localist aesthetic," programs that constructed a geographically non-specific, translocal "local" identity for audiences as a way of overcoming resistance to the national economics and cosmopolitan cultural values of early national radio. Finally, in Chapter Four, I discuss "market localism," a way in which local broadcasters constructed and then sold an imagined local community to sponsors and audiences—a project that did not always serve the interests of affirmative localism and could even undermine local identities, economies, and political power. My hope is by breaking down the category of "localism," we can get a better sense of its possible uses and effects.

A second contribution of this study is to call attention to the class-based character of localism as a set of political, social, and cultural discourses. In particular, discourses and structures of localism were used to contest ruptures in the middle class produced by the emerging national corporate economy in the late 1800s and early 1900s. White-collar elites who were deeply invested in the translocal economic structures of consumer capitalism used localism (or more frequently anti-localism) to assert their class status and advance their vision of a "modern" America. At the same time, the traditional middle class, more invested in local economies

through real estate and retail than in the national corporate order, used localism to negotiate modernization on their own terms, for example through discourses of civic boosterism that promoted the local as an economic unit. For both sides of this rupture in the middle class, localism supported the interests of economic and social elites, but in very different realms and to very different ends. I trace this history and attempt to demonstrate its crucial role in the development of U.S. radio and the modernization of the country in general.

In this regard, a third contribution of this study is to suggest how localism became a political project in the first place, i.e. a philosophy of economic and social relations. The word "localism" dates from the early 1800s, but it was rarely used in the above sense of affirmative localism before the 1930s.²³ Prior to that, it had several incarnations. In the late 1800s "localism" was roughly synonymous with provincialism and was something negative, something to be avoided in polite society, as in this 1870s piece of advice for visitors to London from the *Chicago Tribune*: "An essential canon of good breeding is to efface (outwardly, at least) a too prominent provincialism, localism, nationalism, or personalism of any sort."²⁴ An associated meaning was a regional idiomatic expression (e.g. one should not use "vulgar localisms" in polite company) that had equally negative connotations. In the early twentieth century, the word came to refer to a divisive political attitude vis-à-vis the nation; often used synonymously with "sectionalism," it meant selfishly putting one's local interests ahead of the national interest. In the run-up to World War I, for example, as Midwestern and Western politicians tried to block national defense preparations, localism became tantamount to treason in the more heated rhetoric of the day. Even as late as 1925, during an effort to restore Saratoga and other battlefields, W.

²³ Oxford English Dictionary Online, <http://dictionary.oed.com> (30 October 2006).

²⁴ "Dress In London," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (22 July 1877): 5. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

Pierrepont White chided uncooperative representatives from New York: "If you want to get national recognition, if you want to be a national element you must think in national terms. ... We are here asking the State of New York to rise above localisms."²⁵

A more positive use of the word "localism" to mean a political project of fostering local identities and public spheres emerged only in the 1930s. This new sense of the word, I argue, was primarily a defensive response to the nationalizing trends of the previous decades. While the construction of imagined local communities and the assertion of local cultures and interests has long been an important feature of American political and cultural life, such projects gained enough of a new sense of urgency in the early 1930s to require a new label, and that process of defending the local against the national is worth investigating. Michele Hilmes has noted that the local is a site of relative disempowerment in American society,²⁶ but it was not always that way—in the absence of strong centralizing and nationalizing institutions in the early republic, the local was a site of significantly more power and influence in individuals' lives. In other words, to become a site of relative disempowerment, the local had to first be disempowered. This process began in earnest in the late 1800s, but the 1920s was the key decade in which that disempowerment occurred, at first economically and culturally, and then politically. Broadcasting was critical to this process as cosmopolitan elites used radio as a tool of modernization, advancing the centralizing ideologies and economic patterns of consumer capitalism in part through the structures and programs of broadcasting. Localism emerged in large measure as a conservative, defensive response to that project. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of this study that localism—today a discourse most closely associated with liberal,

²⁵ "Move to Restore Field at Saratoga," *New York Times*, (20 September 1925): 6. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

²⁶ Personal discussion with the author.

middle-class, cosmopolitan professionals—began life as a political project defending against the growing influence of the liberal, middle-class, cosmopolitan professionals of an earlier time.

A fourth contribution is to the field of media policy studies. Traditional policy studies tend to focus on institutional actors such as legislators, regulatory bodies, the courts, organized citizen groups, and the industry itself. This study looks at all of those sites, but additionally attempts to operationalize a more expansive definition of media policy, one that is negotiated in and through culture as well as within authorized policymaking arenas such as Congress and the FCC. I attempt to pay particular attention to those who had little say in the formation of official policy but nonetheless lived its effects. For example, I examine the actions of civic boosters seeking to find advantages for themselves within the gaps and fissures of the FCC's policy dictates. Media policy at that level was a process of turning media localism into a political project, a means of encountering national modernization on their own terms and defending their own cultural and economic interests. Media policy, I argue, must be understood in the interface between official regulatory acts and the ways in which those acts were adapted by differently positioned actors to the lived conditions of media in a range of social contexts.

Turning localism into an affirmative political project also meant thinking about local identities and the shape and formation of local public spheres, and here too this study hopes to make a modest contribution. One of the effects of national network radio was the weakening of local culture and local public spheres, not necessarily in any conspiratorial or deliberate way, but in the course of ordinary individuals acting according to often class-based interests and tastes. For example, as I detail in Chapter Three, the networks bypassed local civic organizations and religious institutions to work solely with national organizations to produce their public-interest programming, even for their local owned-and-operated stations. This practice was in keeping

with both their national self-image and the discourses of efficiency and centralization that guided their early operations. Culturally, too, urban cosmopolitans sought to replace what they saw as impoverished and inadequate local culture with quality national culture. As Federal Radio Commissioner Orestes Caldwell commented on the role of radio in the local country church:

In place of the choirs, church leaders may bring to their fellow communicants ... the life like voices of metropolitan vocal stars. ... Even the preacher himself may have to give way to noted divines whose sermons, carried far beyond metropolitan pulpits, will be audible to countless thousands of Sabbath worshippers in "electronic chapels" in villages, towns, and tiniest cross-road hamlets.²⁷

What observers like Caldwell failed to understand is that the local church choir is not solely about musical quality, but also about participation in local public spheres and the maintenance of social relations; sermons, too, are often used to promulgate a local identity. To replace them with "quality" national fare, as Caldwell and other urban cosmopolitans tried to do, would have undermined the social networks and public practices in which local public spheres are often instantiated. At the same time, the period of this study also covers a brief era of extensive citizen involvement in local radio program origination, a window of several years during which millions of ordinary people, individually or in local organizations, produced countless hours of local civic, educational, religious, and social programming on local stations, usually on a sustaining basis. As such, participatory local public spheres thrived on radio in the late 1920s and early 1930s—not thanks to regulators, but in the gaps and interstices of the national system that regulators were attempting to bring about. In Chapter Four, I outline the conditions of possibility for this involvement and the structures of inclusion and exclusion that

²⁷ Qtd. in "Radio Urged as Aid to the Rural Church," *Greenwich Press*, 31 March 1931. Caldwell Papers: Box 1, "News Clippings, Related Material–1931."

shaped local public spheres, as well as the reasons for their decline in the late 1930s. In that sense, my study suggests ways in which the traditional conception of the public sphere as a primarily discursive space fails to adequately explain the embodiment of local public spheres in local social relations. While my dissertation can no more than gesture at this issue, it does propose avenues for further study.

The final contribution of this study is good old-fashioned broadcast history. I present a plethora of research on the ideological construction of media policy, the workings of the Federal Radio Commission, the operations of the networks, and the activities of independent local stations and the citizens who supported them. Several of my findings will be of interest to students of local politics as well as broadcast historians. First, in contrast to received scholarship, discussed above, that says that localism was tried and found wanting, I suggest that localism was not tried in the way that previous scholars have suggested until well after the commercial network system was firmly entrenched. To the extent that affirmative localism would have "inevitably undermined how the industry actually functioned," as Robert Horwitz claimed, I argue that such an outcome was *not* inevitable at the birth of broadcasting.²⁸ If it subsequently became inevitable, that inevitability was itself a function of how regulators used and contained localism in the system prior to 1934. Second, my research may not entirely vindicate the bureaucrats of the FRC, but I do seek to at least partially rehabilitate their long-standing reputation for venality and incompetence. Specifically, I argue that, not only were they less naïve and nostalgic about the local community than the literature claims, and also less "captured" by the industry, they were in fact quite astute at reading their political context and navigating competing pressures to achieve their vision for radio. Third, this study joins a

²⁸ Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform*, 129.

growing body of work that collectively has begun to fully describe the extensive localness of so-called national radio. My contribution to that work (of which Michael Socolow and Alexander Russo are prominent exponents) is to explore the local-national tensions that structured internal network administration, and to situate the network's aesthetic localism within those tensions.²⁹ Finally, I examine the role of localism from the point of view of local stations and local citizens, demonstrating the ways that localism functioned not just in negotiating modernization vis-à-vis the national, but also participated in the reorganization of local and regional identities and economies.

Literature Review

To my knowledge, the present study is the only sustained analysis of the cultural, economic, and policy dimensions of localism prior to 1934. As such, I believe it makes a substantial addition to the work on localism in U.S. media and to early U.S. radio studies more generally. I have also attempted to situate discourses of localism within a longer tradition of American political and social thought, which I hope will make this study valuable to the wider fields of history and political science as well.

Previous work on localism in media history is mostly concentrated in the field of traditional policy studies, communications law, and political economy. Many of these dissertations, books, and articles analyze issues of localism in connection with contemporary policy debates. Paul Cowling, for example, analyzes localism and the question of media ownership; Silverman and Tobenkin examine the "main studio rule," a policy dating from the

²⁹ Michael Socolow, "To Network a Nation: N.B.C., C.B.S., and the Development of National Network Radio in the United States, 1925-1950" (Ph. D. diss., Georgetown University, 2001); Alexander Todd Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth: Audiences, Aesthetics, Economics, and Technologies of American Broadcasting, 1926-1951" (Ph. D. diss., Brown University, 2004).

days of the Davis Amendment that says that the location of a station's main studio determines that station's community of license, and find the rule burdensome and ineffective; Tom Collins, whose primary interest is in addressing the problems and questions involved in balancing local programming and the first amendment rights of broadcasters, reviews the FCC's enforcement of local service requirements and suggests changes to make them less ambiguous and more useful.³⁰ Substantive discussions of localism from a legal or political economy perspective can be found as well in works by Don Le Duc, Robert Horwitz, Sven Lundstedt and Michael Spicer, Gigi Sohn and Andrew Jay Schwartzman, and Stephen C. Godek.³¹ As these authors are most interested in contemporary policy in a legal or industrial context, they were only tangentially related to the present study.

From a cultural studies or media studies perspective, Alan Stavitsky's article on localism in contemporary public radio was helpful for its argument that conceptions of localism at National Public Radio and on local public stations are shifting from a geographic localism to a social localism based on shared tastes, interests, and values.³² Robert L. Hilliard and Michael C. Keith cover some of the same historical ground as my study in the early chapters of *The Quieted Voice*; this book is also excellent at tracing the decline of localism since the 1996

³⁰ Paul Cowling, "An Earthy Enigma: The Role of Localism in the Political, Cultural and Economic Dimensions of Media Ownership Regulation," *Communications and Entertainment Law Journal* 27 (Winter 2005): 257-357; Silverman and Tobenkin, "The FCC's Main Studio Rule"; Collins, "The Local Service Concept in Broadcasting."

³¹ Le Duc, *Cable Television and the FCC*; Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform*; Sven B. Lundstedt and Michael W. Spicer, "Latent Policy and the Federal Communications Commission," in *Telecommunications, Value and the Public Interest*, ed. Sven B. Lundstedt (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1990); Gigi B. Sohn and Andrew Jay Schwartzman, "Broadcast Licensees and Localism: At Home in the 'Communications Revolution,'" *Federal Communications Law Journal* 47 (December 1994); Stephen C. Godek, *Determinants of Public Interest Cable Communication Policies* (New York: University Press of America, 1996). See also Murray Edelman, *The Licensing of Radio Services in the United States, 1927 to 1947, A Study in Administrative Formulation of Policy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950).

³² Stavitsky, "The Changing Conception of Localism." For an excellent treatment of contemporary localism in the Canadian context, see also Serra Tinic, "Global Vistas and Local Reflections: Negotiating Place and Identity in Vancouver Television," *Television & New Media* 7, no. 2 (2006), 154-183.

Telecommunications Act.³³ Two recent dissertations on the topic of localism and broadcasting are equally impressive. Gregory Newton links contemporary localism to the goal of program diversity and argues that, ultimately, access is a more important principle for regulators to be pursuing than localism.³⁴ John Armstrong's study on localism in early television shares much of my approach—he, too, found inspiration in Thomas Streeter's work—but examines a later period; he uses a value-analysis approach to determine how the FCC was defining "community" in its decisions on localism.³⁵ Chris Anderson and Michael Curtin wrote an invaluable article on 1962 FCC hearings on television localism in Chicago; this and a related article by Michael Curtin contribute significantly to the theoretical framework for this study.³⁶

Public sphere theory also informs this work, with the notion of effective local public spheres crucial to the idea of affirmative localism. While any such discussion is invariably indebted to Habermas and certain other key works,³⁷ I found the work of Robert Asen and Kate Lacey particularly helpful in grappling with the relationships among radio, the local, and the public sphere. Asen in particular has examined this question from various angles, from the role

³³ Hilliard and Keith, *The Quieted Voice*, 1-54.

³⁴ Newton, "Localism Considered."

³⁵ John Stevenson Armstrong, "Localism, Community, and Commercial Television, 1948-1960: A Value Analysis" (Ph. D. diss., University of Utah, 2002).

³⁶ Anderson and Curtin, "Mapping the Ethereal City"; Michael Curtin, "Connections and Differences: Spatial Dimensions of Television History," *Film & History* 30, no. 1 (March 2000): 50-61.

³⁷ Among the most important works for the study of the public sphere include Juergen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989); Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 109-142; Michael Schudson, "Was There Ever a Public Sphere?" *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 143-163; Craig Calhoun, "Civil Society and the Public Sphere" *Public Culture* 5 (1993), 267 – 80; and Joan B. Landes, "The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration" *Feminism, the Public & the Private*, ed. Joan B. Landes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

of imagining and representation as a social force to the tension in John Dewey's thinking between social diversity as it manifested in multiple publics and the face-to-face processes of communication through which Dewey believed the public sphere is instantiated.³⁸ Lacey, writing of early German radio, makes a persuasive argument that broadcasting aided the construction of public spheres that transgressed gendered public/private divides and other social barriers, contrary to concerns that radio and the mass media more generally are destructive of the public sphere.³⁹

Scholarly work on early radio also proved helpful. Two foundational works for the current wave of cultural radio history, Michele Hilmes' *Radio Voices* and Susan Douglas' earlier *Inventing American Broadcasting*, provide a wealth of insight into the social and cultural dimensions of the growth of radio.⁴⁰ Hilmes' book in particular was helpful, in part because of her theoretical approach, but also because she takes as her theme the emergence of an imagined national community in and through radio. Her work explores the gaps, fissures, and tensions of that nationalizing process, including issue of gender, race, class, and the local. This study builds

³⁸ Robert Asen, "Imagining in the Public Sphere," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35, no. 4 (2002), 345-367; Robert Asen, "The Multiple Mr. Dewey: Multiple Publics and Permeable Borders in John Dewey's Theory of the Public Sphere," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2003), 174-188. See also *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

³⁹ Kate Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923-1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). See also Dana Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere" *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 3 (September 1992), 712-721; Lisa McLaughlin, "Feminism, the Public Sphere, Media and Democracy" *Media, Culture and Society* 15 (1993), 599-620.

⁴⁰ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). See also Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Philip T. Rosen, *The Modern Stentors: Radio Broadcasters and the Federal Government, 1920-1934* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); J. Fred MacDonald, "Don't Touch that Dial": *Radio Programming in American Life from 1920 to 1960* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979); Susan Merrill Squier, ed., *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

on that work, especially at the intersections of class and ideas about the local community. A third scholar, Thomas Streeter, has provided a model of the study of policy as ideological practice, i.e. the ways in which ideological frameworks shape the creation and implementation of policy, even at highly specialized and technical levels. This dissertation borrows heavily from his approach, especially as illustrated in *Selling the Air*, and applies it to issues of localism.⁴¹

Four additional scholars have written studies that are important dialogue partners for my own. Michael Socolow's and Alexander Russo's recent dissertations explore the problematic construction (in both the practical and ideational sense) of national radio. Socolow describes the lacunae and internal divisions that prevented network radio from being truly national in any meaningful sense before the late 1930s. Russo also analyzes the problematic industrial production of nationalness in early radio, arguing that the result was "a multi-tiered system, with intermingling, yet distinct, national, regional, and local programming forms, sponsorship patterns, and methods of distribution."⁴² Both of these studies posit localism and regionalism as important constitutive elements of so-called national radio. This dissertation develops many of their insights while providing an alternative perspective on the same processes they describe. A third study, by Clifford Doerksen, examines radio broadcasting that fell outside the norms established by urban cosmopolitan elites, such as local programming for the urban working class, so-called farmer radio stations such as Henry Field's KMA, and populist political broadcasters like KWKH's William K. Henderson. Doerksen pays close attention to the class dimensions of such "rogue broadcasters," and my own work complements his by applying many of his insights

⁴¹ Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴² Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth," 21.

about class and modernization to policy formulation, network development, and the civic uses of local radio.⁴³ Finally, Derek Vaillant has written two articles that are especially important for the issues addressed here. First, his study on William K. Henderson outlines many of the same social and cultural divisions that I discuss, including the challenges Henderson presented to the FRC's national-class project in radio.⁴⁴ Second, his article on local radio in Chicago emphasizes the industrial and popular uses of localness for urban stations and audiences during this time. His approach is particularly valuable as an alternative to the "imagined community" thesis associated with Benedict Anderson⁴⁵; Vaillant argues that local community cannot be reduced to "imagined" status given the embodied social networks and public spheres that local radio participated in.⁴⁶ I have tried to incorporate all of these aspects of Vaillant's work into my own thinking and analysis.

This study is also in dialogue with cultural histories of modernization in the early twentieth century, and several scholars deserve special mention in this regard. Paul Boyer's work on urban moral-reform efforts has been particularly influential in both providing a long-term context for the uses of localist structures and discourses by the middle class, as well as demonstrating a scholarly attitude of historical empathy toward different, sometimes

⁴³ Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ Derek Vaillant, "Bare-Knuckled Broadcasting: Enlisting Manly Respectability and Racial Paternalism in the Battle Against Chain Stores, Chain Stations, and the Federal Radio Commission on Louisiana's KWKH, 1924–33," *Radio Journal* 1, no. 3 (2004): 193-211.

⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

⁴⁶ Derek Vaillant, "Sounds of Whiteness: Local Radio, Racial Formation, and Public Culture in Chicago, 1921–1935," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (March 2002): 25-66.

unsympathetic, social actors.⁴⁷ I have attempted to extend his analysis into the area of radio studies while remaining sensitive to his model of the responsibilities of the cultural historian. Hal S. Barron studied modernization processes from the perspective of rural northerners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; his insights about the ways that Americans in small towns and rural areas attempted to encounter modernity on their own terms and for their own purposes are central to my own analysis of the role of local radio.⁴⁸ Lawrence Levine pays close attention to the cultural dimensions of class during the period covered by my research; again, I have extended his thinking and analysis deeper into the struggles over the radio system in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁹ Lastly, Robert Wiebe's work on the development and shifting structures of American democracy over two centuries is an important backdrop for my study, especially his analysis of processes of class differentiation within the middle class in response to nationalizing forces in American society.⁵⁰

Theory and Methodology

This dissertation was written during a period of resurgence in radio studies, largely sparked by key works by Hilmes and Douglas. Academic interest in early U.S. radio in particular has enjoyed a renaissance in the last few years, with work by Hilmes, Douglas, Russo, Socolow, Doerksen, Vaillant, Jennifer Wang, Jason Loviglio, Elena Razlogova, Bruce Lenthall,

⁴⁷ Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

⁴⁸ Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴⁹ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁵⁰ Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

and many others contributing substantially to our understanding of both the period and the medium.⁵¹ Aside from the subject matter, these studies have also largely shared a critical-cultural approach to media history, informed by post-structuralist historiographical methodology and cultural history's concern with the popular. In these works, traditional institutional histories like Erik Barnouw's *Tower of Babel* and traditional political economy studies like Robert McChesney's *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy* are augmented with close attention to ideological and cultural contexts.⁵²

The present study also adopts a critical-cultural approach, and is especially indebted to the work of Thomas Streeter, who takes as his theme the ideological construction of policymaking. In *Selling the Air*, his work on corporate liberalism, Streeter traces the discourses by which regulators made sense of broadcasting and its place in the increasingly powerful corporate economy, bridging political economy and the history of ideas in order to map out the broad patterns of meaning within which media policy was made to fit. While my focus is narrower than Streeter's, I have attempted to emulate his attention to the ideological dimension of regulation and borrow heavily on his understanding of discourse in policy formation. Drawing on Foucauldian theories of discourse as a set of practices productive of the object or condition being described, Streeter writes, "[M]ajor economic, institutional, and technological changes—

⁵¹ Jennifer Hyland Wang, "Convenient Fictions: The Construction of the Daytime Broadcast Audience, 1927-1960" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2006); Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Elena Razlogova, "True Crime Radio and Listener Disenchantment with Network Broadcasting, 1935–1946," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2006): 137-158; Bruce Lenthall, "Critical Reception: Public Intellectuals Decry Depression-era Radio, Mass Culture, and Modern America," *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, eds. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002): 41-62.

⁵² Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, & Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

events normally understood as part of the hard material world of facts and things—are actually in part the product of discursive changes—events normally ascribed to the ephemeral world of ideas."⁵³ Applied to media regulation, Streeter argues that the often technical language used in policy never fully corresponds to the media system it constructs: policy discourse "serves to shape an institution that it fails to describe."⁵⁴ The present study examines this process in federal policy, network radio, and local radio; at all three sites, I probe this disconnect between the shape of the institution and the discourses that various actors used to describe it.

My primary methodology, then, is discourse analysis, examining a wide range of primary popular, trade, and governmental policy texts from the period 1920-1934 to trace out the varied and often contradictory conceptions and uses of "localism." Like Streeter, I am especially interested in the ideological and rhetorical frames within which historical actors made sense of and explained their actions; I therefore draw particularly heavily on primary archival sources such as FRC minutes, NBC memos, citizen letters to Herbert Hoover, station correspondence with Radio Division personnel, and similar documents (the complete list of the archival collections I consulted is on p. ii). For each utterance, I attempted to identify—in context—its purpose and effects: From what social position does this discourse emerge and within what rhetorical situation? Whose interests does it seek to advance or block? What ideological positions and assumptions about society does it reveal? What silences or traces of suppressed discourses does it seem to contain? At the same time, this discursive analysis was conducted with particularly close attention to the political economy of the evolving media system.

⁵³ Thomas Streeter, "Technocracy and Television: Discourse, Policy, Politics and the Making of Cable Television" (Ph. D. diss., University of Illinois, 1986), 22.

⁵⁴ Thomas Streeter, "The Cable Fable Revisited: Discourse, Policy, and the Making of Cable Television," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987): 176.

Economic rationales, the imbalances of power resulting from differently positioned actors within the economics of the broadcasting industry, and the confluence of economic and political agendas play a major role in the study that follows.

Regarding both my theoretical approach and my methodology, two main contentions are central to my argument, each of which requires a measure of theoretical explanation. The first contention is that "the local" is not primarily a geographical designation, but a social, economic, and even temporal discourse depending on its deployment within a given context. Of course, the local is understood to have a spatial correlate, but as the literature makes clear, the relationship between physical geography and an idea of a local is ultimately unfixable. Even prior to modern communication and transport, the imagination of one's locale could be quite elastic and surprisingly expansive; for example, historian John Stilgoe found that some localities in the early republic (as defined by whom people considered to be their "neighbors") sprawled up to three hundred square miles, easily two or more days' journey in any direction.⁵⁵ At the same time, definitions of the local situationally expanded and contracted according to the imperatives of the moment. When it came to political and financial issues such as the drawing of a school district or building roads, for instance, the precise boundaries of a "neighborhood" or "locale" could quickly become quite contested, often shrinking drastically.⁵⁶ What this indicates, in essence, is the danger of emphasizing the geographical dimensions of locality over the social dimensions: the local—and by extension any notion of a local community—was always socially constructed, not merely an accident of space. Put another way, social space determines geographic space at least as significantly as vice-versa.

⁵⁵ John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 211.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 243-246.

This study attempts to avoid the problem of geography by situating the local within the wider literature on place. I use terms like "locality" and "local community" for the sake of convenience, but always with the understanding that such terms and their associated concepts are neither unproblematic nor uncontested. The study is written, therefore, with an understanding of the discursive as well as physical dimensions of the local. Theorist Doreen Massey defines place as the particularity of social relations interacting at a given location, with the specificity of a place emerging from the specificity of those interactions. In turn, these interactions exist both in and across space, embedded in regional, national, and global relations, and extending beyond any particular specific locality. Therefore, there can be an identifiable identity of place, but that identity is never static nor stable; instead, it is provisional, contested, and contextual, partly constructed by social relations within a posited geographic local and partly by relations with a posited elsewhere.⁵⁷ This is contrary to the thinking of Joshua Meyrowitz, who seems to want to reduce all locality to discursiveness, or more precisely dismiss the importance of place altogether: "[E]lectronic media ... bypass the communication networks that once made particular places unique. More and more, people are living in a national (or international) information system, rather than a local town or city."⁵⁸ This study adopts Massey's approach, emphasizing the discursive and relational nature of place without neglecting its specificity and materiality.

Anderson and Curtin have applied Massey's thinking about place to the idea of localism as a media policy, arguing that the failure of the FRC and FCC to account for the discursive and

⁵⁷ Doreen Massey, "A Place Called Home?" *New Formations* 17 (1992): 3-15.

⁵⁸ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 146.

relational dimensions of the local make a policy of localism "virtually impossible to enforce in actual cases; it simply cannot account for the diversity of modern societies."⁵⁹ Michael Curtin has extended this analysis to debates over translocal media (such as network radio), arguing that such media have the power to reorganize discourses of place within a wider (e.g. national or global) reorganization of spatial and economic relations. In that sense, the problem of localism is not just one of defining the social and geographic contours of locality, but also one of organizing difference in order to manage uneven development at global, national, regional, and local levels.⁶⁰ Curtin's insight provides the most proximate theoretical influence on the way that I have approached localism in this study. As the following chapters demonstrate, radio was a crucial component of a set of cultural, economic, technological, and political transformations that powerfully challenged both the ways in which the social and geographical contours of any given locality could be understood and the relations of empowerment and disempowerment between the local and the national.

My second main contention that requires further clarification is that class played an important role in these transformations, and that differently positioned classes reacted differently to them in ways relevant to a discussion of localism. Various scholars have emphasized the class shifts at work in the early twentieth century, most notably Robert Wiebe, Lawrence Levine, and Paul Boyer.⁶¹ Although their interests and therefore their terminology differ, these authors agree

⁵⁹ Anderson and Curtin, "Mapping the Ethereal City," 294.

⁶⁰ Curtin, "Connections and Differences."

⁶¹ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Boyer, *Urban Masses*. See also Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest*; Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); David Burner, *Politics of Provincialism: The Democratic Party in Transition, 1918-1932* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1955); Nathan Miller, *New World Coming*:

that white-collar professionals, in order to secure their status in the national corporate economy, differentiated themselves from others in the middle class, as well as the upper and working classes, to the extent that they may be spoken of as a relatively cohesive whole. I have adapted my terms and much of my analysis from the work of Robert Wiebe, who called this new segment of the middle class the "national class," in contradistinction to the "traditional local middle class."

One of the key criticisms of Wiebe's work, and thus one of the dangers of adapting his terms and analysis, is that he privileges abstract structures (like "the national class") over the unpredictable, self-contradictory, and unstable thoughts and actions of actual human beings who are often drawing their identities and ideologies from multiple, inconsistent, and contradictory sources.⁶² I find such criticisms misplaced: Wiebe's modes of analysis are perfectly appropriate for the works of historical synthesis on which he built his well deserved reputation. Nonetheless, the present study is not a work of historical synthesis; therefore it is important to specify exactly how structures such as the "national class" and the "traditional local middle class" figure into my, rather than Wiebe's, analysis. In particular, there is the problem of establishing a clear and historiographically defensible relationship among class positions (e.g. socioeconomic status), individual actions, and discourse.

An especially helpful model in apprehending class formations is offered by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who argues that individuals participate in history in three ways: as *agents* who occupy

The 1920s and the Making of Modern America (New York: Scribner, 2003); Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

⁶² See for example Gordon S. Wood, "Faux populism—*Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* by Robert H. Wiebe," *The New Republic* 213, no. 17 (23 October 1995): 39; Kenneth Cmiel, "Destiny and Amnesia: The Vision of Modernity in Robert Wiebe's *The Search for Order*," *Reviews in American History* 21, no. 2 (June 1993): 352-368.

multiple structural positions in society (such as "workers," "slaves," "mothers," etc.); as *actors* who are confronted with historical particulars and, at a given moment in a specific historical context, *do* things; and finally as *subjects*, that is, as narrators of their own history defining the terms of their agency and actions.⁶³ As Trouillot puts it, human beings—as agents, actors, and subjects—are "[engaged] simultaneously in the sociohistorical process and in narrative constructions about that process."⁶⁴ The key for the historian, he argues, is not to find out what "really" happened, but to understand the process by which differently positioned and differently empowered human beings are able to produce descriptions of their actions and have those descriptions counted as history: "[H]istory reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives."⁶⁵

For the purposes of the present study, the main value in Trouillot's model is in untangling the messy realities of class—which is constituted by individual agent-positions, actions, and narratives—without removing the analysis to an inappropriate level of abstraction. To illustrate my approach, consider the example of Herbert Hoover. As an international mining engineer who was deeply invested in the modern corporate economy, he was precisely the kind of cosmopolitan, translocal professional that Wiebe says was splitting off from the traditional middle class; his agent-position for most of his career locates him as a member of the national class just as surely as a steel-mill worker can be identified as a member of the working class. As a prime architect of corporate liberalism, a federal bureaucrat, and a national leader, Hoover's

⁶³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 23.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

official acts are consistent with what Wiebe describes as national-class concerns of efficiency, rationality, and modernity, while what we know of his beliefs (e.g. anti-Prohibition, racially tolerant, sympathetic to science) are consistent with the urban, cosmopolitan values that Wiebe ascribes to the national class; his actions (at least those relevant to this study) also allow us to locate him as a member of the national class as certainly as the actions of Emily Davison identify her as a suffragette. Finally, Hoover typically narrated his own actions and the conditions of his society using the preferred discourses of others of his agent-position; his subject-position as expressed in his public utterances also allow for his location as a member of the national class to the same degree that Emma Goldman was an anarchist.

To the extent that similarly positioned agents performed similarly consistent actions and narrated themselves using similar sets of discourses, it is legitimate and useful to speak of a class identity—in this case, one called for convenience the national class. The notion of the "national class" is not as thoroughly integrated into our thinking and categories of analysis as the "working class" or the "upper class," (although "professional class" comes close as a descriptor), but as an analytic concept it is as descriptive of the sociohistorical process as more traditional categories, especially when approached with careful attention to the multiplicity and inconsistency of any identity category. With that in mind, the remainder of this study uses "national class" and "traditional local middle class" as a shorthand way of describing such actions and utterances, with a non-necessary correlation to actual individuals occupying specific agent-positions within the American economic and cultural landscape of the early twentieth century. These class categories refer, then, not to static human beings with fixed identities, predictable behaviors, and a stable worldview, but rather to relatively cohesive and relatively stable discursive and social

formations within which many intellectuals and professionals narrated the radically changed America of the twentieth century and acted in ways consistent with that narration.

I am also situating these class differences within a cultural field, which calls for an understanding of the role of culture and taste in class formation and class identity. Pierre Bourdieu has argued that cultural markers constitute a key element of the social production of class, and his theories provide a good framework for understanding the class shift that is central to my argument. In particular, Bourdieu argues that our definitions of class cannot be limited (as in a perhaps reductionist reading of Marx) to economic resources alone, but must also encompass the cultural and social resources that help account for both the differences among classes and the persistence of class identity and status despite the theoretical possibility of greater economic mobility or alternative social identifications. Factors such as cultural competencies and aesthetic tastes enable classes to distinguish and perpetuate themselves, and non-necessary correlations of class with particular (but shifting) discourses and attitudes provide the means by which classes come to know and identify themselves, both within the group itself and within society at large, as well as by which they negotiate their interests vis-à-vis differently classed individuals and groups.⁶⁶

When class and notions of the local are considered together, one more proviso seems necessary: what follows is not strictly an examination of an urban-rural divide. In writing about the 1920s, it is commonplace—to the point of being an occupational hazard—to frame the social tensions of the era in terms of a rural vs. urban binary. There are numerous reasons why that conceptual framework has dominated the literature. As Charles Eagles points out, it starts with

⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).

the fact that so many Americans in the 1920s—including public intellectuals like John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, H. L. Mencken, and Lewis Mumford—themselves understood the changes that U.S. society was undergoing in terms of rural vs. urban.⁶⁷ In that sense, the primary source material is often thoroughly saturated with a rural-urban dichotomy that, even with active, conscious resistance on the part of historians, almost inevitably colors one's interpretation of the times. Complicating matters, the field of sociology has been much influenced by rural-urban frameworks over the past century, from Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* forward.⁶⁸ This has resulted in a wealth of sociological data, a key resource for historians, that is also imbued with this dichotomy; a prime example is Sorokin and Zimmerman's *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology* from 1929.⁶⁹ When historians then draw on this contemporaneous sociological data and other primary material, and then other historians draw on *those* historians, the rural-urban divide builds in their histories like mercury in fish. Finally, and perhaps most confoundingly, there is just enough truth in the rural-urban framework to justify its use by both the people who lived through the 1920s and the historians who write about them.

Given the intellectual weight of all this rural-urban baggage, I cannot claim that my study is absolutely free of it, and readers will find places where I slip into rural-urban thinking. However, I have attempted to avoid it in several ways. First, the key terms of my analysis are not rural-urban but rather local-national and, as will become clear, local-modern. Furthermore, the dynamics in question were not local vs. national or local vs. modern—I have tried to avoid

⁶⁷ Charles W. Eagles, "Urban-Rural Conflict in the 1920s: A Historiographical Assessment," *The Historian* 49, no. 1 (November 1986): 27.

⁶⁸ For a full explanation of this tradition, see Bender, *Community and Social Change*.

⁶⁹ Pitirim Sorokin and Carle C. Zimmerman, *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1929).

replacing one dichotomy with another—but rather the ways in which differently positioned actors used discourses of localism, nationalism, and modernity to make sense of the world to themselves, explain it to others, and intervene in that world in what they perceived as their interests. This allows what I hope is a more supple analysis of the ways in which modernization trends were managed than would a simple rural-urban framework. Second, I have chosen to focus on modes of class identity and distinction that enable me to slice social divisions both differently and more productively than traditional categories would have allowed. For instance, the national class was middle class, but distinct from the Victorian middle class it superceded and from the traditional middle class with which it competed. It was urban in orientation, but distinct from the urban working classes as well as the urban aristocracy. It was dominated by whites who were confident in their "American" identity, but with a cultural pluralist attitude toward social difference that distinguished them from the nativist whites of the anti-immigrant and pro-Klan variety, for example by embracing relatively progressive racial attitudes (in the context of the times). Similarly, the national class may have been largely Protestant, but it vehemently rejected the Protestantism of Evangelicals and fundamentalists; this was also the class most supportive of Catholic presidential candidate Al Smith in 1928 while the traditional local middle class was raging about Papist rule. Finally, it included many of the thinkers and activists known as the Progressives, notably Dewey, Mary Parker Follett, Jane Addams, and Robert Park, but the concept of the national class also accounts for the split in the Progressive movement that left more locally minded Progressives like William Allen White, Josiah Royce, and a host of traditional middle-class reformers at odds with the projects and concerns of their erstwhile colleagues. These characteristics allowed flexible and shifting sets of alliances based

on race, class, geography, and other axes of difference that did not always correspond to a strict rural-urban division.

Chapter Organization

The organization of the dissertation is inspired by Julie D'Acci's integrated approach to media studies that seeks to integrate analyses of the text, social context, industry, and audiences in order to arrive at a more fully formed understanding of the object of study. I adapted my own approach from her model, analyzing the social and political contexts within which discourses and structures of localism were deployed, the role of localism in official media policy, the local-national tensions in network radio, and finally the uses of localism by citizens and local stations at the local level.

In Chapter One, I examine the historical trajectory of ideologies of localism, beginning in the early republic with two valences of localism that I call New England localism and Jeffersonian localism. I trace the development of these ideas of localism through the nineteenth century, setting the stage for their transformation in the twentieth century. With the rise of the corporate economy, I describe the development of a "national" class that split off from the traditional local middle class, in part by adopting different attitudes toward localism and the local. Broadly speaking, this national class tended to celebrate the "modern" virtues of centralized efficiency, modern rationality, and translocal cosmopolitanism; it also tended to associate the traditional "local" with the "pre-modern" vices of backwardness, irrationality, inefficiency, provincialism, and excessive ethnicity. This shift was expressed in myriad ways: the growth of professional associations and other markers of individual identity that were increasingly distinct from any geographically local specificity; the rise of national bureaucracy

and Hooverian associationalism in government administration; the increasing influence of national and transnational corporations that undermined local economies and traditional sources of local political status and power; the cosmopolitan "revolt against the villages" in arts and letters with its concomitant embrace of certain aspects of ethnic culture and modern urban life; among others. The national class pursued a project of national modernization of the American economy and American culture, seeking to stitch "pre-modern" localities into their "modern" social vision, thereby slowly undermining traditional localist structures. Despite the economic and cultural power of the national class, representatives of the traditional middle class held institutional political power (including the White House and Congress) for most of the 1920s, producing class tensions that shaped the way that radio developed. At the same time, as the national class rose to economic and social hegemony, the national economic and cultural structures that they promoted gradually undermined local political power; this threw into crisis the notion of the democratic public sphere, which had theretofore depended on some measure of New England and Jeffersonian localism for its legitimacy and functionality. The crisis was profound enough that some thinkers like Walter Lippmann began to question the workability of democratic politics altogether, while others like John Dewey sought ways of recovering and redeeming the public sphere by integrating its traditionally localist structures into the twentieth century's modern, national, centralized, corporate, and increasingly complex society. Radio regulation, however, formulated largely in accordance with translocal values of nationalization and modernization, had resulted in a system that worked to the disadvantage of local public spheres.

In Chapters Two and Three, I explore the ways that key regulators, in particular Herbert Hoover, Judge S. B. Davis, and the Federal Radio Commission—themselves largely products (or

in the case of Hoover, even the architects) of the national class—worked to shape the radio system in accordance with their values of efficiency, rationality, cosmopolitanism, and centralized authority. They were not given free rein in this project; Chapter Two explores how the broadcasting system grew out of the radically de-centralized and "inefficient" structures of amateur radio, and how policymakers were further constrained by several sets of competing pressures that required careful negotiation. Specifically, regulators were expected to control content without exercising government censorship or stepping on First Amendment rights; to make radio economically viable without ceding too much power to RCA and other large corporations; and to advance radio toward a widely perceived *telos* of national service while respecting and integrating local and regional interests into the system. In negotiating these competing pressures, policymakers frequently found it useful to invoke discourses and structures of localism, such as the local trustee model, while nonetheless retaining in Washington most of the power over content and the industry's overall financial health. Chapter Three demonstrates how they privileged a model that sought to bring national-class economic and cultural values to all areas of the country, attempting in essence to stitch the "pre-modern" local into the modern corporate economy. The result was a radio system that, although it could be described in terms of localism and local community service, actually worked to minimize local differences and contain local and regional cultural distinctiveness, while privileging national structures and culture.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the use of localism by national radio interests, in particular the networks. Like the nationally minded regulators who controlled licensing and other aspects of policy, network executives and their allies, as revealed in their memos, speeches, articles, and actions, tended to approach the construction of the national radio system in terms supportive of

the national-class project of stitching the local into the modern. They used tropes of localism to advance their political and financial interests, and used the network-affiliate structure to advance programming and economic models that tied localities ever more tightly into national-class norms of appropriate culture and the "modern" corporate-consumer economy. In unpredictable ways, however, the local could prove stubbornly resistant to national reconfiguration. The structural conflict between the national and the local in the networks' business model was difficult to manage, local cultural tastes were difficult to "uplift," and the structures that sustained the economic and social power of the traditional middle class were difficult to overturn. The local, it turned out, had a mind of its own. The networks adjusted to this resistance, in part by producing a kind of cultural "translocal localism" that turned localism into an aesthetic of neighborliness, tradition, and down-to-earth folksiness (with significant racial, religious, and class characteristics designed to appeal to the traditional local middle class). This programming style helped national radio overcome local resistance to national programming, thereby advancing consumerist values and relocating "local" cultural production to the national level while promoting chain stores, national brands, and corporate consumer goods.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I examine this process from the perspective of local communities and local stations, as citizens and local broadcasters attempted to encounter the encroachment of the modern on the local's own terms, using the gaps and weakness of national-class radio to the local's advantage. Specifically, I explore three broad areas: the intersection of local radio and civic boosterism, the exploitation of the politics of localism in regulatory matters, and the construction of local identities for stations (including local public spheres). In each of these areas, I attempt to demonstrate how, in resisting efforts to nationalize radio and marginalize

the local in the early 1930s, the local became an "ism," that is, the local transitioned from a site of relative empowerment for the traditional local middle class to an ideological tactic used to resist the increasing economic and cultural disempowerment of the local in modern American life. This tactic, accordingly, had both economic and cultural dimensions, and it opened up a space during the Depression that enabled affirmative localism—the fostering of local identities and local participatory public spheres—to thrive. While this window of affirmative localism largely closed again when economic conditions changed in the late 1930s, the ideological aspect—the ism—remained, and became increasingly available for the elites of the national class to use when their own doubts and concerns about the new corporate economy began to emerge.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, this project is informed by a political motive to revisit the philosophy and key principles of alternative media—most notably localism, access, and non-commercialism—in order to contribute to making these media forms more effective. I landed on a historical review of localism as a way to intervene in a circular process of media democracy: democratic theory seems to require some notion of a functioning public sphere, which seems to require some avenue for popular access to appropriate and effective means of communication, which seems to require media and cultural policies that structure that access efficiently and fairly, which—coming full circle—seems to require a functioning public sphere. It is not my goal to entirely recuperate localism as an instrument of media policy and media democracy. However, it is my goal to better understand exactly what localism can and cannot do, based in part on what it historically has and has not done.

I have already praised Anderson and Curtin's article on localism and indicated its importance in my own thinking, but let me now use it as a foil. The authors persuasively describe a policy of localism as incoherent, dependent on an ever-shifting and indefinable local, and beset by insoluble contradictions: "it simply cannot account for the diversity of modern societies." I agree. But if localism as a policy is incoherent, how can its incoherence be made productive? If the local is indefinable, taking on meaning in relation to regional, national, and global discourses, how can these relations be negotiated at specific places and times to the advantage of relatively disadvantaged social formations? If localism cannot account for the diversity and complexity of modern societies, how can it partially account for this complexity? Historian Richard Hofstadter writes, "It has been the function of the liberal tradition in American politics, from the time of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy down through Populism, Progressivism, and the New Deal, at first to broaden numbers of those who could benefit from the great American bonanza and then to humanize its workings and help heal its casualties."⁷⁰ The purpose of this study is try to figure out in what ways "localism" has, has not, and might again serve that function.

⁷⁰ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 18.

Chapter One

Localism and the National Class, 1900-1934: Democratic Ideals, Cultural Distinction

In a 1932 profile of Henry Ford for the *New York Times*, legendary journalist Anne O'Hare McCormick wrote:

When the historian of the future desires to recall the year of the American reaction against standardization he will turn to the end of the Model T and the birth of the second generation of Fords in 1927. And when he wishes to fix the date of the revival of localism, the beginning of the nation-wide pursuit of antiques, the rediscovery of early America, he will record when Ford acquired the Wayside Inn and commenced to buy up Americana in wholesale lots.¹

In addition to being spooky—hey! *I'm* that historian, arrived from the future to study your localism—this passage is immediately perplexing. After all, it is well known that Americans had been reacting against standardization and indulging a sentimental localism for decades prior to McCormick's article. For fifty years following the Civil War, American literature had been dominated by loving stories of small-town life awash in local color, populated by the parsons and schoolmarms of places like Friendship Village, a literary cliché that critic Carl van Doren called "the cult of the village."² Since the late 1800s, long before Ford bought his first antiquity, historical societies and folklore revivalists had begun preserving America's local past.³ With the rise of film, D. W. Griffith peddled saccharine nostalgia for the simple charms of the Victorian-era burg, turning prototypical-girl-next-door Mary Pickford into America's undisputed Sweetheart. And if localism as a cultural flavor weren't enough, localism as a political ideology

¹ Anne O'Hare McCormick, "The Future of the Ford Idea," *New York Times* (22 May 1932): SM1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

² Carl van Doren, "Contemporary American Novelists," *The Nation* 113, no. 2936 (12 October 1921): 407-412.

³ See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 271-292.

and social practice had been thriving for centuries as a central tenet of American democracy, not to mention as the instrument of a host of middle-class moral-reform movements acting on the belief that the small local community provided the ideal setting for spiritual and moral uplift.⁴ Using similar rhetoric for somewhat worldlier goals, local business leaders tirelessly preached the gospel of civic boosterism, a mantra of economic localism and "local patriotism" that intensified in the late 1800s with the rise of mail-order, rural free delivery, and chain stores: think locally, shop locally. Given this decades-long wash of localist rhetoric in American culture and politics, if McCormick thought that localism had only begun catching on in 1927, she really hadn't been paying attention.

In other ways, however, McCormick's statement is remarkably accurate. If one scales down her claim from all of America to just McCormick's particular social class—the class that read the *New York Times*, we might provisionally say—then her claim makes more sense: There *was* an America that newly began reacting against standardization and other effects of the machine age beginning in the late 1920s, and whose members began revisiting the possibilities of localism around that time to help them accommodate their growing unease with modernization. This was the cohort that Robert Wiebe called "the national class," and its members would have understood McCormick instantly. Urban cosmopolitans, many of whom had taken lucrative managerial positions in an expanding middle class, were deeply invested in modernization, centralization, and the increasingly translocal corporate economy. They celebrated technical expertise, rationalization, and efficiency on a national scale, and while they were willing to experiment with local political solutions (what I will call "positive" localism: democratic reforms and modernizing projects such as Jane Addams' settlement house

⁴ Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

movement), they were dead-set against localism as a cultural force, which to them represented inefficiency, corruption, factionalism, provincialism, repression, and simple dullness—what I will call "negative" localism. To these urban professionals, a more positive embrace of a sentimental localism *did* seem like a fresh alternative in the late 1920s and early 1930s; McCormick's only mistake—if we can call such a nearly universal failing a mistake—was to imagine that all Americans shared her class's perspective on the twentieth century's cultural changes. But in coming to terms with the history of early U.S. media, it is important to understand—and as I will attempt to demonstrate—that it was often the national class whose perspective mattered most when it came to shaping radio policy, and in that regard McCormick's claim is highly illuminating.

In this chapter, I will argue that discourses of localism helped distinguish the political, economic, and social interests of an emergent national class from the preoccupations of the traditional local middle class, and their reactions against certain strains of localism helped these nationalizers privilege centralization, modernization, cosmopolitanism, and the urban cultural and economic order of the first part of the twentieth century. This split in the middle class became apparent by the immediate pre-war years, and suspicion of localism remained a dominant—even defining—outlook for the new national class until well into the 1930s. There was, however, a tension at work here: the discourses of efficiency, centralization, and modernity that helped the nationalizers distinguish positive from negative localism—and distinguish themselves from the traditional local middle class and rural America—carried within them technocratic elements that undermined the possibility of a democratic public sphere, as well as homogenizing tendencies that seemed to threaten a dangerous uniformity and conformity. This tension became more apparent throughout the 1920s and was unmistakable by the mid-1930s,

leading many of those most invested in a national-class vision of modern America to question their previous ideological commitments to nationalization and centralization. Put another way, the national class's relationship with modernity began collapsing back on itself in the early 1930s. By that point, however, much of the structural basis for local democratic public spheres had already been severely compromised. The particular concern of this study—radio—was no exception: by the time a reaction against national institutions began to achieve critical mass, and calls for more localism in radio attained political force, a corporate-commercial and nationally minded federal radio policy had already long-since weakened broadcasting's potential role as a structure supporting local democracy. In other words, since it was this same national class that was primarily responsible for radio regulation, both these early, anti-localist attitudes of the 1910s and 1920s, as well as the post-crash turn to localism of the 1930s, would have a profound impact on the growth of U.S. radio as both an industry and as an institution of the public sphere.

Part I: Pre-Twentieth-Century Localism

In order to situate attitudes toward localism in the early twentieth century, it is helpful to trace the trajectory of localist ideas in American thought, if at a necessarily broad level.⁵

Ideologies of localism have been a persistent feature of American life at least since the earliest

⁵ This section draws on a range of secondary sources that studied community and localism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Most prominent have been Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 620-647; T. H. Breen, "Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions Once More in Need of Revising," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997): 13-39; Andrew Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Self-Image* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999); Stephen Minicucci, "The 'Cement of Interest': Interest-Based Models of Nation-Building in the Early Republic," *Social Science History* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 247-274; Andrew W. Robertson, "'Look on This Picture ... And on This!' Nationalism, Localism, and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1920," *American Historical Review* (October 2001): 1263-1280; David Zarefsky, "The Roots of American Community," *Speech Communication Association*, San Antonio, Tex., 17 November 1995; Michael Zuckerman, "The Fabrication of Identity in Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (April 1977): 183-214.

European immigrants in the 1600s, but two main discursive constructions of the ideal "local" (and the local ideal) have proven remarkably powerful in shaping Americans' social imaginations over the centuries. The first is the New England town, still one of the most common ways of imagining local community.⁶ Although a constitutive element in the communal myth of the small town, today this New England localism is often reduced to a secularized model of participatory democracy: citizens meet face-to-face in the town hall and deliberate issues facing the community.⁷ But the procedural political dimension of New England localism has long been secondary to two other features: its emphasis on spiritual cohesion and its function as a form of social control. For the Puritans, the local (geographical) community was considered identical to the spiritual community: congregations were coterminous with a given locality, such that settling in a given locale was synonymous with joining the congregation. This idea was fixed enough that Captain Edward Johnson, in his seventeenth-century account of Massachusetts, expressed concern that this link between locale and congregation was coming undone: "[T]he people of this Towne have of late placed their dwellings so much distanced the one from the other, that they are like to divide into two Churches."⁸ Although the specific institutional religious character of the New England town no longer features in most renderings of the communal myth, this spiritual dimension lives on in discourses of social cohesion,

⁶ Bender, *Community and Social Change in America*, 4.

⁷ The "town hall" metaphor has long been a prominent element of broadcasting as well, from NBC's *Town Hall of the Air* in the 1930s to Ted Koppel's national "town halls" on *Nightline*.

⁸ Edward Johnson, *Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence*, ed. J. Franklin Jameson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 190.

neighborliness, and a sense of common purpose thought to be integral to the ideal local community.⁹

The second goal of New England localism was to enforce congregational unity and exercise surveillance for the sake of public order. Indeed, as historian David Hackett Fischer wrote, "Among the Puritan founders of Massachusetts, order was an obsession."¹⁰ A commitment to the behavioral and cultural norms of the local community—enforced if necessary by public torture, execution, or exile—was the only sure way of preserving social control in the service of the Lord. This was articulated as early as 1630 in "A Modell of Christian Charity," a sermon delivered by John Winthrop during the *Arrabella's* Atlantic crossing that clearly links the local community, the spiritual community, and social order:

For this end, wee must be knitt together in this work as one man. Wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affection, ... Wee must delight in eache other, make others' conditions our owne, rejoyce together, mourne together, labor and suffer together, allwayes haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body. Soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace.¹¹

One of the dangers of community historiography is to mistake this communal ideal for actual practice. When one maintains, as one historian insisted, that "no one doubts that

⁹ For an especially influential and celebrated iteration of this discursive construction, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). See also Harry C. Boyte, "The Civic Renewal Movement in the US: On Silences and Civic Muscle, or Why Social Capital is a Useful but Insufficient Concept," Presentation to the Havens Center: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 10 April 2001; Harry C. Boyte, *Community is Possible: Repairing America's Roots* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); *The Essential Communitarian Reader*, ed. Amitai Etzioni (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Robert Booth Fowler, *The Dance of Community: The Contemporary Debate in American Political Thought* (Lawrence, Kans.: The University Press of Kansas, 1991).

¹⁰ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 189.

¹¹ John Winthrop, *The Humble Request of the Massachusetts Puritans, and A Modell of Christian Charity*, ed. S. E. Morison, Old South Leaflets 9, no. 207 (Boston: Old South Association, 1916), 20.

community was achieved in early colonial New England villages,"¹² one is required to ignore the well-maintained legal records of the Massachusetts Puritans that document their daily deviations from the ideals of social cohesion and "brotherly Affection." Historian John Demos, noting the large families, small houses, and long winters in Plymouth, goes so far as to suggest that the maintenance of domestic (not communal) harmony effectively required the projection of repressed hostilities elsewhere in the community. These hostilities manifested in a raft of anti-communitarian behavior directed at the neighbors, turning the Puritans into world-class slanderers and masters of the petty retribution. Whatever one thinks of this thesis, the historical record nonetheless makes clear that the communal ideal was very frequently honored primarily in the breach.¹³ Nonetheless, the rhetoric of both spiritual unity and social control would become a powerful element in early twentieth-century localism and can still be found in many communitarian and pro-localist tropes today.

While New England localism has been a powerful trope for several centuries, it has competed with a second prominent archetype of localism in American thought: Jeffersonian localism. In contrast to the Puritan's preoccupation with spiritual rightness and public order, Jefferson's localism privileged more individualistic ideals of self-reliance, independence, and local political autonomy for agriculturally based communities. This agrarian ethos significantly

¹² Joseph S. Wood, "Village and Community in Early Colonial New England," *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 165.

¹³ John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Another excellent source for demystifying the Puritan commitment to community is Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed*, in which the authors examine the fault lines within the community that help explain the social meltdown of 1692, further undermining the myth of social cohesion in the New England town. Paul S. Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

predates Jefferson himself,¹⁴ but he developed it into a fairly elaborate political theory and it has come to be associated with him in American political thought. Jefferson's localist design had as its central feature a system of "wards," subdividing counties into political units about six-miles-square in area.¹⁵ Within these wards, citizens could exercise a strong form of direct democracy that would allow representative democracy at higher levels to better reflect the will of the people, "proof that he took seriously the principle of majority rule and that he thought the wards would be the most workable medium for effecting it," as historian Adrienne Koch put it.¹⁶ Like New England localism, however, Jeffersonian localism was not merely about democratic procedure. Each ward would also support a militia company, complete with its own officers, as well as an elementary school, a justice of the peace, a "Folk-house" for democratic activity including voting, and a local welfare system (in Jefferson's words, "Each ward should take care of their own poor"). Suggesting a pyramided structure echoed a century later in John Dewey's work on the "Great Community," Jefferson envisioned that "[e]ach ward would thus be a small republic in itself," and furthermore, "these little republics would be the main strength of the great one." Complaining that the primary political unit of most colonies—the county—was too large to assemble the citizenry for decision-making, Jefferson adamantly adhered to his strong localism: "I [conclude] every opinion with the injunction 'divide the counties into wards' ... to

¹⁴ As William Bowers points out, these discourses were literally ancient: "Hesiod, Virgil, and other ancient writers praised the rustic virtues of country life with essentially the same rhetorical clichés as those used by people at the beginning of the twentieth century and by farm spokesmen of the present." William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press/National University Publications, 1974), 35. See also Charles W. Eagles, "Urban-Rural Conflict in the 1920s: A Historiographical Assessment," *The Historian* 49, no. 1 (November 1986): 26-48.

¹⁵ Much of the country is still divided into six-square-mile quadrants, a fact visible to airplane passengers transiting the "flyover zone."

¹⁶ Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 163.

fortify us against the degeneracy of our government, and the concentration of all its [*sic*] powers in the hands of the one, the few, the well-born or but the many."¹⁷

Jefferson's hostility to cities is well known, and this anti-urbanism informed his ward system. According to political theorist Mason Drukman, "Jefferson wanted the American out of crowded cities, independently situated on his own piece of arable land."¹⁸ At the same time, Jefferson was not blind to the growing importance of manufacturing to the American economy, recognizing that "manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort."¹⁹ Drukman identifies the proposed wards as a hedge on such changes, Jefferson's attempt to preserve what he saw as the healthiest basis for the country's new republican political system even with the decline of agriculture (and with it, the social structures of agrarianism). Thus, although the phrase "Jeffersonian agrarianism" today usually connotes a charming but naive faith in a pastoral America, rooted to the land and united by sentimental ties to the local community, it is important to understand that power politics were at the heart of the ward system. Jefferson was writing within the context of ongoing debates over federalism, and thus his localism was not mere anti-urban bias nor, equally importantly, was he especially concerned with "community" in the sense of affective ties to a place or society. As the line about the degeneracy of government suggests, localism for Jefferson was primarily a bulwark against political tyranny and the corrosive effects of centralized authority: "[T]he way to have good and safe government, is not

¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 2 February 1816. School of Cooperative Individualism <<http://www.cooperativeindividualism.org>> (5 April 2004). See also Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 3-4.

¹⁸ Mason Drukman, *Community and Purpose in America: An Analysis of American Political Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 87.

¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Austin, Esquire, 9 January 1816. School of Cooperative Individualism <<http://www.cooperativeindividualism.org>> (5 April 2004).

to trust it all to one; but to divide it among the many."²⁰ His calls for such radical localism are peppered not with references to neighborliness or communal sympathy but rather with references to Caesar, Bonaparte, and the "autocrats of Russia." In other words, the problems that Jefferson wanted localism to solve were the problems of feudalism—unsurprising given the traumas and idealism of the American revolution, but importantly distinct from the problems that later generations would face. Indeed, the national class of the early twentieth century, faced with very different problems, would come to reject many of the anti-centralization and anti-urban aspects of Jeffersonian localism.

Ia. Localism and Nationalism in the Early Republic

Both New England and Jeffersonian localist discourses had distinct, even inextricable class dimensions. New England localism in particular was a classed and gendered ideology, a system of patriarchal social control that privileged local religious leaders, silenced class and gender inequalities within the society, and subordinated individual will to an all-encompassing construction of a sociospatial local community that perpetuated the dominance of a narrow theocratic elite. The Jeffersonian version was no less dependent on class, gender, and racial assumptions about land ownership, economic autonomy, and political citizenship, but its fundamental orientation was much more toward individual autonomy and independence, especially in comparison to the New England emphasis on interdependence and social order. Perhaps largely for this reason, although both archetypes of localism remained powerful, it was Jefferson's vision that captured the national imagination for the decades following the "war for independence," and was more successful in resolving the tensions of a national community

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 2 February 1816. School of Cooperative Individualism <<http://www.cooperativeindividualism.org>> (5 April 2004).

founded on individual (white male) liberty. Indeed, for all the emphasis (one might say overemphasis) placed on the New England town in American historiography, Richard Hofstadter is certainly correct when he identifies the agrarian myth of the yeoman farmer, with his "honest industry, his independence, his frank spirit of equality, his ability to produce and enjoy a simple abundance," as the key discourse shaping American politics and values in the early republic.²¹ Such discourses were especially persuasive to eighteenth-century elites, and prominent writers such as Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Paine, and Benjamin Franklin (none of whom, notably, chose the yeoman-farmer profession for themselves) championed the freedom that came with self-sufficiency and relative independence from larger structures of authority. So popular was the agrarian myth that Samuel Johnson could somewhat sarcastically claim, "There is, indeed, scarcely any writer who had not celebrated the happiness of rural privacy."²² Despite the exclusionary basis of Jeffersonian agrarianism, its popularity soon spread beyond these elites. Writes Hofstadter: "Among the intellectual classes in the eighteenth century the agrarian myth had virtually universal appeal. ... [B]y the early 19th century it had become a mass creed."²³

Lacking the communal spiritual underpinnings of Puritan ideology, the agrarian ethos in the nineteenth century teetered between ward-style, home-rule localism and a more radical individualism. As Mason Drukman and others have noted, independence in the American context easily slid into an ethos of anti-communalism at every level—including the local.²⁴ For example, the Tidewater area in Virginia was settled in accordance with an individualistic

²¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 23.

²² Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler* 3, no. 135 (1784): 176.

²³ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 27-28.

²⁴ Drukman, *Community and Purpose in America*, 6ff.

philosophy of what David Hackett Fischer calls "hegemonic liberty": dominion over both oneself and one's inferiors, with freedom defined as "the power to rule, and not be overruled by others."²⁵ Like New England congregationalism, this hegemonic liberty had a spatial correlate, but one more conducive to maximum isolation than optimized local community: although this "hegemonic liberty" accrued (unsurprisingly) to only a few, it was part of an individualistic ideal that favored dispersed arrangements rather than the tight, discrete units typical of New England—the "Society of Solitude," in Johnson's phrase.²⁶ Houses were often built miles apart rather than in clusters, and town centers were small and far between despite frequent official encouragement of town development.²⁷ The backcountry of Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana could be especially diffuse, with individual homesteads sprawled at distances up to twenty miles apart. Such settlement patterns appalled European visitors, such as one Frenchman who in 1797 tsk-tsked rural Pennsylvanians: "There ought to be five or six families living close together in these districts. Then they would be very happy."²⁸ But just as one should not assume that New England rhetoric and social arrangements resulted in a harmonious "community," so too would it be a mistake to confuse spatial diffusion with social isolation and unhappiness; as one eighteenth-century writer described it, "The most happy state this life affords is a small estate which will . . . set him above the necessity of submitting to the humors and vices of others.

²⁵ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 411. As Samuel Johnson bitterly noted, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" (qtd. in Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 410).

²⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, 176.

²⁷ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 390.

²⁸ Qtd. in John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 211.

... One thousand acres of land will keep troublesome neighbors at a distance."²⁹ In that sense, perhaps even the Puritans could have used a little more elbow room. But be that as it may, there was a distinct ideology of individualism informing such loose settlement patterns in the early republic. Jacksonian America is particularly known for its full flowering of this independence-oriented mindset, or as one historian characterized it, "a general cultural spirit of boundless aspiration, entrepreneurial initiative, and radical individualism."³⁰ In the absence of strong national institutions and centralized authority, sectionalism, factionalism, and individualism flourished. "*Self-determination*," writes Robert Wiebe, was "the key word in the male-oriented democratic individualism of the nineteenth century."³¹

To many, the agrarian ethos of Jeffersonian localism, with its strains of radical individualism embedded in an imagined national community, appeared so ascendant and so unchallengeable as the keystone of American ideology that it seemed to leave little room for Puritanical appeals to the well-ordered local society. Historian Wilfred M. McClay, observing that neighborliness and sentimental attachment to locality could get squeezed out of early American social life, argued, "Democratic men who would not so much as remove their hat for their neighbor would find themselves ineluctably drawn, even with great eagerness and sense of relief, toward absorption into the nation."³² Those attempting to generate collective action or moral uplift within this landscape often felt the need to frame their appeal in terms of individual

²⁹ Peter Fontaine, qtd. in Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 389-390.

³⁰ Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 41.

³¹ Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 186.

³² McClay, *The Masterless*, 73.

self-interest rather than obligation to or sentiment for a local community. Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, argued that "the doctrine of self-interest properly understood appears to me the best suited of all philosophical theories to the wants of the men of our time, [and] I see it as their strongest remaining guarantee against themselves."³³ Even a (relative) radical like Orestes Brownson, during his proto-socialist phase, was careful to distinguish between individuality and individualism: "Community without individuality is *tyranny* ... Individuality without community is *individualism*, the fruits of which are dissolution, isolation, selfishness, disorder, anarchy ... What we need, then, is ... communalism and individuality harmonized."³⁴ Indeed, as Brownson's plea suggests, Jeffersonian notions of local independence were not necessarily at odds with ideologies of both radical individualism and a burgeoning nationalism during the period, and they did not erase so much as displace more community-minded discourses in the American imagination. That is, the imagined community to which many Americans voiced their primary loyalty was not the local but rather the national community.³⁵ Contrary to Drukman's assertion, then, community-mindedness in the early republic was not necessarily negated by radical individualism, but rather often displaced to the national level. This rhetoric of independence, whether on the frontier, in the farming villages, or even in the growing Eastern cities, manifested not merely as an anarchic brew of dispersed homesteads, get-

³³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), 527.

³⁴ Quoted in Drukman, *Community and Purpose in America*, 152. John Dewey would later also emphasize this distinction between individualism and individuality, most fully in his 1930 book *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Capricorn, 1962), but within a dramatically changed climate more receptive to assertions of collective priority.

³⁵ The literature on "imagined community" is largely indebted to the work of Benedict Anderson. I will offer some concerns about the idea of imagined community in relation to the local in Chapter Five. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

rich-quick schemes, vigilante justice, and tobacco juice on the saloon floor—although it was often all of that. It was also integral to early American nationalism, or in Robert Wiebe's description, "the creative heart of the nineteenth century America's democratic politics: its diffusion of responsibility, its resistance to institutionalized power, its blanketing of the nation."³⁶ At least for the fraternity of white men,³⁷ American *nationalism* grew out of this Jeffersonian *localism* and was performed within the local community:

In the 19th century, then, democracy was rooted in local America. What characterized it and what it accomplished began with this particularity, this self-conscious separation of small group from small group. It ended somewhere entirely different, however. Nothing about 19th century democracy was more striking than its expansive capacity, an opening outward that gathered great mixes of these local pieces into a whole People and made the People, in turn, integral to building an American nation.³⁸

In other words, American individualism and nationalism could co-exist harmoniously thanks to the presence of mediating local communities. In the absence of a strong central state or other "institutional reality" supporting American nationalism ("little more than a post office plus a President," in Benjamin Barber's phrase³⁹), the imagined community of the nation grew locally. On this point, Thomas Bender provides a succinct description:

³⁶ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 65.

³⁷ For a full study of the racial and gender dimensions of American nationalism during this period, see Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

³⁸ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 71-2.

³⁹ Benjamin Barber, "Foreword: Mary Parker Follett as Democratic Hero," *The New State*, by Mary Parker Follett (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), xiv.

Mid-century American nationalism, almost like the sense of being a Greek at the time of Socrates, was a deeply held abstraction. By contrast, the local community, like the polis, was a concrete reality that was immediately seen, felt, and experienced. To the extent that nationalism was given tangible form, it was in this local and immediate context.⁴⁰

The local community, then, in addition to becoming the focal point of "local patriotism" in its own right, mediated between individualism and nationalism as the site where a nation of free men was performed. A nice symbolic instance of this ideological balancing act was identified by Len Travers, who studied the popularity of readings of the Declaration of Independence and other Fourth of July rituals in American towns during this period: local communities enacting nationalism by collectively affirming the sacred documents of individual autonomy.⁴¹

Regardless of the hold that Jeffersonian localism enjoyed on the American imagination, New England-style localism—that discourse privileging social cohesion and public order—retained its importance as an increasingly useful economic and ideological tool of the middle class. Although strains of New England localism can be found in a wide range of guises, it took two primary forms in the nineteenth century: civic boosterism and the moral-reform movement. As described by historian Sally Foreman Griffith, boosterism was a widespread mode of localist rhetoric that sought to contain the potentially antisocial entrepreneurial energy of American individualism by directing it toward social ends at the local level:

⁴⁰ Bender, *Community and Social Change in America*, 88.

⁴¹ Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rise of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

The booster ethos addressed the need in newly created towns for both economic growth and social order. It offered a vision that fused economic and moral values in the belief that a town's prosperity rested upon its spiritual condition. . . . Harmony within the community was therefore a means to both economic growth and social cohesion.⁴²

In its focus on creating a congenial business climate, attracting outside investment (while discouraging outside spending), and equating the interests of local business leaders with the interests of the community as a whole, civic boosterism was an unabashedly class-based and economically motivated strain of localism. Daniel Boorstin calls the booster a peculiarly American invention, conflating the needs of his own merchant class with the betterment of his locality. In that sense, "Not to boost your city showed both a lack of community spirit and a lack of business sense."⁴³ Although Boorstin's analysis emphasizes the undeniable energy of the boosters themselves ("*Businessman Americanus*"⁴⁴) and the competition among communities (which he calls "community-ism"⁴⁵), boosterism was equally instrumental in attempting to discipline the behavior of local citizens and consumers. Often working hand-in-hand with the local press, who wanted to court favor with local advertisers, civic boosters used New England localist rhetoric to police how people used their time, spent their money, and oriented their behavior toward a posited communal good. Humiliation was regularly meted out to residents who failed to act in a sufficiently public-spirited way, and in general the discourses of civic promotion worked to define the conditions of full membership in the community. As a handbill

⁴² Sally Foreman Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6-7. See also Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁴³ Daniel T. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 117.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

announcing a town meeting in Keokuk, Illinois insisted, "All *Good* Citizens who feel an interest in the safety and welfare of our City are *expected* to be present."⁴⁶ Through such rhetoric, as Timothy Mahoney argues, "the booster ethos operated upon and through individuals and groups to contour and coordinate action and stimulate and promote town development."⁴⁷

Less economically naked, but equally peculiar to the preoccupations of the middle class, moral crusades and reform efforts also drew on the rhetoric of New England localism. This was especially the case in the quickly burgeoning cities, where rapid urbanization was bringing an attendant increase in social ills largely related to overcrowding, poverty, and corrupt local government. Although the growth of cities (and their slums) in the early nineteenth century was but a prelude to what the U.S. would experience from the 1840s onward, even these early urban experiences, emerging in the context of the era's wild and woolly individualism, contributed to a generalized sense of a free-for-all threat to the established social order. White, middle-class, Protestant reformers attempted to reassert public order in the cities by imposing behavioral norms and controls that they associated with life in small towns. In other words, this was a social philosophy directly descended from the Puritans, a New England style of localism that Paul Boyer calls "re-creating in the cities the moral order of the village."⁴⁸ For example, New York missionary Ward Stafford urged his allies in 1817 to curb urban pathologies by instituting the strategies of local surveillance and reproof found in the "well-regulated" small town. The problem, he felt, was that in this new environment "there are, strictly speaking, no

⁴⁶ Reproduced in Timothy R. Mahoney, "A Common Band of Brotherhood: Male Subcultures, the Booster Ethos, and the Origins of Urban Social Order in the Midwest of the 1840s," *Journal of Urban History* 25, no. 5 (July 1999): 642. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 626.

⁴⁸ Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 2.

neighborhoods ... [and] we do not expect that all who live near each other should enter into habits of intimacy." His remedy for this was a powerful faith in the potential of the face-to-face local community to exert social control, and he assured his audience, "Should respectable persons *simply pass through* particular streets every day, *and look* at those who now exhibit in those streets all the degradation of the character, it would soon cause them to hide their heads."⁴⁹ Efforts like Stafford's to turn New England localism into a political project enjoyed isolated successes, but like the anti-urban and anti-modern biases of Jeffersonian localism, it contained reactionary elements that would be rejected by important segments of the middle class a few decades later. In particular, the association of localist reform with evangelical Christianity and populist moralizing (as in the temperance movement) would make New England localism an easy target for the self-consciously cosmopolitan nationalizers of the twentieth century.

Ib. Localism and Nationalism After the Civil War

Although elites had always had their suspicions of and distaste for "the unwashed Democracy,"⁵⁰ there was a broader reaction against the radical individualism of Jacksonian America following the Civil War, and a stronger emphasis on nationalism in the wake of the trauma and carnage resulting from sectionalism. Many scholars have discussed the widespread conviction in the late nineteenth century that a new nationalism was required to combat both the sectionalism that had led to the Civil War and the radical individualism that had made antebellum American life seem so chaotic and unstable. Although millions of Americans proudly performed an abstract patriotism in the early nineteenth century, post-war nationalism

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 19. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ George Templeton Strong, qtd. in Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 174.

was significantly different in that it was backed by the rapid growth of centralizing and unifying structures and institutions, from improvements in communication and transport, to the growth of national corporations and bureaucracies, to the emergence of a national popular culture. As one historian characterized this post-Civil War shift, "One of the most fundamental of all the issues addressed by the war, and largely settled by it, ... was the supremacy of national institutions in American life."⁵¹

For many of the most prominent Americans of this era, this increasing nationalization promised a new era of American cooperation. Thinkers and writers like John W. Burgess, Lester Frank Ward, and Charles Peirce, as well as a host of their followers including Herbert Croly, Mary Parker Follett, John Dewey, and Jane Addams, hoped that increased connectedness and centralization, throwing all the levers of the modern, industrial, interdependent society in the same direction, could defeat the ills of individualism and sectionalism through a renewed sense of national purpose. Prominent among such thinkers was Edward Bellamy, whose *Looking Backward* (1887) remains one of the most popular and influential utopian novels of all time. In that book, written from the perspective of the year 2000 in a perfected America free from strife and want, Bellamy asserts that rampant individualism caused so many of the nineteenth century's problems, and that a strong nationalism could fix them. In discussing the woeful lot of poor women, for instance, Bellamy's representative of the future America, Doctor Leete, assures his visitor from the past that "the broad shoulders of the nation ... bear now like a feather the burden that broke the backs of the women of your day. Their misery came, with all your other miseries, from that incapacity for cooperation which followed from the individualism on which your social

⁵¹ McClay, *The Masterless*, 22.

system was founded."⁵² Bellamy is so fully committed to a cooperative national vision that his utopian America has eliminated almost all internal boundaries and political subdivisions: states have entirely disappeared, while municipal governments have nothing much to do except provide recreational facilities and instigate beautification projects.⁵³

Utopian fantasies aside, the effects of this post-war nationalization—both structural and rhetorical—on small towns were profound. As the Unitarian leader Henry W. Bellows (not the same Henry Bellows who was an early Federal Radio Commissioner) wrote in 1872, summarizing the devastation wrought by the growth of a national infrastructure and what he perceived as the concomitant devaluation of local village life:

Thousands of American towns, with an independent life of their own, isolated, trusting to themselves, in need of knowing and honoring native ability and skill in local affairs ... have been pierced to the heart by the railroad which they helped to build to aggrandize their importance. It has gone through them in a double sense—stringing them like beads on a thread, to hang round the neck of some proud city. It has annihilated their old importance; broken up the dependence of their farmers upon the home traders; removed the necessity for any first-rate professional men in the village; ... destroyed local business and taken out of town the enterprising young men ... No woman, above the humblest rank, now shops for anything over a calico gown in her own village!⁵⁴

But if nationalizing trends threatened local communities in the late nineteenth century, they joined rather than supplanted the equally vigorous assertion of both New England and Jeffersonian localism, producing a tension in American life between profound modernization and equally profound local retrenchment. In towns and villages, civic boosterism continued unabated; if anything, the "buy at home" cries of the merchant class became ever more shrill and

⁵² Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 78.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 136-7.

⁵⁴ Henry Bellows, "The Townward Tendency," *The City: An Illustrated Magazine* 1:1 (January 1872), 38.

defensive of white middle-class privilege as improvements in transport and postal service intensified external competition with local economies. As an editorial in William Allen White's *Emporia Gazette* avowed, "The man who buys his goods of a mail order house ... sends his profits out of town like a Chinaman, and has no more right to a standing in the community than a foreigner. We are all neighbors industrially in this town and [he] is not one of us."⁵⁵ In the increasingly troubled cities, attempts to recreate a village moral order among the urban underclass also intensified, and Paul Boyer refers to a "wave of moral reformism and 'civic-uptlift' zeal that swept urban America—or at least *middle-class* urban America—in the 1890s."⁵⁶ Jeffersonian localism, now completely unmoored from its legacy as the philosophy of the propertied British-American aristocracy, remained a powerful ideology in rural areas; indeed, historian Hal S. Barron has pointed out that rural areas saw the autonomous local community of independent farmers become even more important in the late nineteenth century and the agrarian ethos become even more central to their political, social, and cultural lives.⁵⁷ As the twentieth century dawned, all of these discourses remained available and viable for different social formations to use to advance their interests, and all would undergo significant transformations in the social competitions to follow.

It is worth pointing out that the variants of nationalism and localism under discussion here were obviously not the only ideological strains running through late nineteenth-century America. Evangelical Christianity was a powerful force throughout much of the country, as were the temperance and suffrage movements. The labor movement was gaining power and

⁵⁵ "Main Street Leeches," *Emporia Gazette* (22 June 1905), quoted in Griffiths, *Home Town News*, 145.

⁵⁶ Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 162.

⁵⁷ Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 13.

force, while racism and xenophobia were channeled into both virulent forms (Americanization efforts, legislation to control immigration) and even more virulent forms (Ku Klux Klan activity, lynching, eugenics). Corporatism, Populism, Socialism, Anarchism, and Progressivism struggled over the direction of the political system, both within and without the established political parties. Finally, all of these ideologies, movements, and sentiments crissed and crossed, overlapped and aligned, collaborated and clashed at the micro and macro levels. It is impossible to do it all justice. However, for the purposes of this study, it is important to note that at the beginning of the twentieth century, these key fissures set the stage for the emergence of a new and relatively powerful exponent of the middle class, one that would soon reshape American society in profound and unexpected ways.

Part II: The Twentieth Century: The National Class Emerges

In June 1916, the *Chicago Tribune* noticed a growing split between the Democratic party and the Progressive movement over the growth of the federal government and other centralizing institutions that were radically changing American life. "Four years ago [the Democrats were] able to parade as a liberal party. . . . But four years have shown the Democratic party to be still a party of localism and decentralization, where the Progressives see the need of nationalism and centralization." Noting that the Dems could court Progressives all they wanted, the paper observed that "they may as well prepare themselves for an unresponsive stare" as long as the party resisted a strong central government. "Mr. Wilson may still be a liberal," the paper noted, "but he is not the kind of liberal the Progressive party wants."⁵⁸

What the *Tribune* detected was part of an important class shift that began in the late

⁵⁸ "Progressivism vs. Democracy," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (15 June 1916): 8. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Daily Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (9 March 2006).

nineteenth century and continued throughout the 1920s, one that would have profound effects on both American society and the course of radio policy in the U.S. Many scholars have studied this shift using a variety of terms and analytic frameworks; outstanding works by Michael Kammen, Alan Trachtenberg, Lawrence Levine, Richard Hofstadter, Lizabeth Cohen, Paul Boyer, Robert Wiebe, and many others contribute substantially to our understanding of the period.⁵⁹ Although their concerns and conclusions differ, these authors agree that several important changes in American social organization took place at this time, among them that cultural elites, intellectuals, and professionals in the new corporate-industrial economy began to pursue a cultural and political project distinct from their predecessors and peers.⁶⁰ In other words, the American middle class effectively bifurcated, largely along economic and cultural lines, beginning in the 1880s. Well-off urbanites began to distinguish themselves from the traditional local middle class by privileging national identifications and associations over local ones, and by privileging urban cosmopolitan values over rural and village provincialism. Wiebe calls this wealthy new cohort the national class, and it was this group that was most responsible for transforming the U.S. from a rurally oriented commercial-agrarian society into one that was fundamentally urban, national, and corporate-industrial in its outlook and structure. As the *Tribune* article quoted above suggested, it included many of the thinkers of the Progressive movement, but was not limited to them, transcending specific labels and party affiliations in its

⁵⁹ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*; Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*; Wiebe, *Self-Rule*; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶⁰ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 148.

general embrace of "modern" life.⁶¹ This class was national, says Wiebe, "both in the sense of transcending local attachments or boundaries and in the sense of holding central, strategic positions in American society."⁶² These strategic positions included managerial roles in the growing corporate order, as well as specialized scientific and technical professions such as economics or physical chemistry—new fields that only made sense in the increasingly interdependent economic structures and demands of modern capitalism.

As Wiebe points out, these nationalizers were mostly found in the cities, "both because their skills fit neatly into city life and because they took America's urban future for granted."⁶³ Their outlook was self-consciously cosmopolitan and "modern," and they held to centralization, efficiency, and expertise as core values. One especially visible expression of these values, one that united their national and occupational identities, was the effort to organize themselves into national professional associations, which in turn further reinforced a national self-concept and national identifications, but also added new layers of cultural distinction and class differentiation. Wiebe provides examples of the new kinds of questions that were arising in this regard:

⁶¹ As anyone who has tried to study the Progressives as a coherent movement is aware, of course, there was little unanimity among thinkers and activists who are today considered Progressives. It is therefore important to emphasize that not all nationalizers were Progressives (e.g. Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover) and not all Progressives can be considered nationalizers (e.g. William Allen White, Josiah Royce). Furthermore, loyalties and alliances shifted from issue to issue and then again over time. For example, many in the national class who supported Roosevelt in 1912 against Wilson turned around and embraced Wilson in 1916. Like Wiebe, I am discussing large, long-term trends; I am not claiming synchronic uniformity nor diachronic consistency in the constituency and views of the national class, but rather treating them as discursive formations with non-necessary material correlates. For more on my conception of class and its application in this study, see the introduction.

⁶² Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 141-2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 142.

Was the superintendent of schools a native who climbed the local ladder or a member of the National Association of School Superintendents who made career steps from city to city? Did academics think of themselves as faculty members of a college or university with local students and local support, or as mathematicians and political scientists with peers in nationwide professional circles?⁶⁴

Such competing identities need not have been mutually exclusive, of course, but as the answers to such questions gained discursive power and institutional backing, they helped accelerate the process of class shakeout. Different sets of social relationships slowly resulted: specialized networks for each field at a nationwide level, such as the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association, proved especially popular among urban professionals, while the local middle class frequently prioritized organizations like the Rotary Club that brought together local elites from different fields but within a specific geographic area. Again, one could certainly belong to both, but divisions over specific policy questions increasingly separated the economic and political interests of the traditional middle class from those of the national class. An example of such questions was the proper attitude toward national chain stores: were they a sign of progress, offering consumers more choices and lower prices through efficiency and rationalization, or an unfair and ruthless threat to local economies and independent merchants? The local middle class in small towns across the country, whose fortunes were closely tied to real estate and retail sales, ratcheted up the civic boosterism to near-manic levels, while urban professionals with a greater stake in national corporations than in local general stores tended to accept such developments—if not entirely without anxiety—certainly with greater equanimity.⁶⁵

It is important to note that more nationally-minded members of the middle class were not

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁵ For more on this anxiety accompanying specialization, professionalization, and centralization, see Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 207.

simply becoming the haves while the local middle class was becoming the have-nots.

Although the specialized white-collar skills demanded by the corporate economy were generally well rewarded, the traditional middle class continued to do quite well for itself, albeit within a distinct economic sphere and not without painful retrenchment and reorganization in the face of a nationalizing economy. Although the sources of their prosperity differed in many respects, and they competed economically, the most visible expression of the class divide was in the realm of tastes, habits, attitudes, and cultural practices. This cultural dimension of class identity helps explain many of the ways in which the two classes distinguished themselves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In that sense, and as discussed in the introduction, the "national class" and the "local middle class" are best understood as discursive formations within which individuals acted and narrated the changing social and cultural landscape of twentieth-century America.

The widely recognized cultural clashes of the 1910s and 1920s were both the cause and product of the bifurcation of the middle class, a byproduct of economic differentiation but also part of the process of class distinction that scholars like Lawrence Levine and Pierre Bourdieu have identified.⁶⁶ In particular, the national class, with their newfound status in non-traditional fields, had a significant stake in emphasizing their difference from and superiority to both the local middle class and the working classes, thereby justifying their privileged position in the emerging national corporate economy. As Levine points out, "[T]he new professional and middle classes ... lacked any bedrock of security and needed to distance themselves, culturally at least, from those below them on the socioeconomic scale. The cloak of culture—approved,

⁶⁶ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984). See also Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), especially Chapter One.

sanctified, conspicuous culture—promised to become a carapace impervious to assault from above or below."⁶⁷ Wiebe describes one of these cultural markers as the clash between Character and Knowledge. The traditional middle class, he argues, had historically explained and legitimated its privileged social and economic position by embracing the idea that superior character—an individual's innate quality, including faculties of initiative and self-control—resulted in material success and status. In contrast, the new national class more readily celebrated knowledge and expertise, championing the technical skills, managerial philosophy, and a scientific outlook that elevated an individual from his or her less qualified peers. This distinction, argues Wiebe, fed a narrative of exclusivity and superiority among the nationalizers:

Character in the 19th century drew upon attributes of everyday life, universal traits that ordinary people could find in themselves and see in their neighbors; any sensible adult could judge both its qualities and its consequences. The training that produced scientific detachment in the 20th century, on the other hand, separated its beneficiaries from ordinary minds; only experts were qualified to evaluate other experts.⁶⁸

Both the national class and the traditional local middle class were dominated by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Furthermore, both sought to distinguish and distance themselves from the much vaster working class below them on the social and economic hierarchy—a class largely comprised of Catholic and Jewish immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and Ireland, as well as blacks and poor whites both in rural areas and newly migrated from the farm to cities and factory towns. But although both segments of the middle class were primarily white Protestants and enjoyed the privileges that that identity provided them, it is important to keep their racial and religious attitudes distinct. The overwhelming racism and anti-immigrant sentiment of the era is often reduced to "middle class" or "mainstream" prejudice, but that view is too monolithic;

⁶⁷ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 227.

⁶⁸ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 143.

indeed, one of the reasons that the "national class" is such a useful concept is that it helps capture important differences in cultural attitudes within the middle class. As I will discuss at greater length below, one of these differences was the national class's relatively enlightened cultural pluralism and early moves toward racial equality, through which many urban cosmopolitans distinguished themselves from the nativism and open racism that they associated with the traditional local middle class. The national-class appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity was, of course, partial, conditional, and marked by a heavy dose of paternalism—not for nothing did Zora Neale Hurston refer to white patrons of African-American artists and writers as "the Niggerati,"⁶⁹—but the fact that urban professionals were beginning to demonstrate interest in and appreciation of black and ethnic culture was itself a crucial division within the middle class. Similarly, the Protestantism of the national class was less prominent in national-class political and social attitudes than an ecumenical religiosity: they rallied behind a Catholic, Al Smith, for president and reserved their most angry rhetoric for Protestant Evangelicals and fundamentalists of the traditional local middle class who failed to share their embrace of modern scientific rationality.

The relationship between these two segments of the middle class was frequently anything but cordial, especially as they pursued often diametrically opposed political and economic projects. Often characterized as an urban-rural divide, the national class and traditional local middle class squared off on everything from Prohibition to the appropriate punishment for Leopold and Loeb. A prominent and recurring theme in these battles was an opposition within national-class rhetoric between the modern and the local, making discourses and structures of localism central to the class-based struggles of the 1920s.

⁶⁹ Qtd. in Nathan Miller, *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 221.

IIa. Localism and Distinction I: Positive Localism

One of the most important cultural markers by which the new national class separated itself from the local middle class and the rest of society was in its attitudes toward the "local." As Wiebe writes, "Although members of the new class might care very deeply about their geographical roots, particular places no longer defined them. They fulfilled roles that could be played out just as well in hundreds of alternative locations."⁷⁰ The traditional middle class, in contrast, consistently privileged local identities and affective ties grounded in a sense of local place. Furthermore, in contrast to the national class, the local middle class promoted a strong sense of "local patriotism" in the face of nationalizing trends, promoting the discourses of both Jeffersonian and New England localism to contain threats to their social and economic position. Nationalizers were not exclusively wedded to federal political solutions and nationally or professionally based identities, of course, while the local middle class was not solely committed to the locality as both the source and scope of their identities and actions. In fact, the national class tended to privilege efficiency, expertise, rationalization, and managerial solutions in whatever field and at whatever level rather than one-size-fits-all national or centralized approaches, and it was this appreciation of what they regarded as modern efficiency that primarily shaped their worldview. In that sense, a technocratic and cosmopolitan modernity, not a simple national-local or urban-rural split, provided the philosophical overlay by which social attitudes and institutions were judged in national-class discourses.

In their relationships with the rhetoric and structures of localism, then, the nationalizers' attitude was not "anti-localist" but rather a distinction between "positive" and "negative" localism

⁷⁰ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 142.

of both the Jeffersonian and New England stripes, evaluated according to the precepts of modern scientific rationality and managerial efficiency described above. Nationalizers were in fact eager to use many of the structures and discourses of localism to promote their social vision of modernization and rationalization. In general, the national class was sympathetic to the possibilities of cultural uplift and an improved social order afforded by New England localism, particularly insofar as the local community could tame unchecked individualism. One of the more famous examples of this is Jane Addams' settlement house movement, in which Addams sought to facilitate social ties across classes and cultures, improving the lives of the immigrant working class by fostering face-to-face communication and modeling a middle-class way of life.⁷¹ Although it is tempting to lump Addams' work in with the missions and other moralizing projects of the traditional middle class—and there was undeniably a strong element of paternalism and class superiority in the project—it is important to note the differences. First, Addams and her colleagues tried to avoid the moral high ground, rejected proselytizing in favor of secular approaches, and encouraged both classes to learn and gain from their experiences at the settlement house; collectively, these distinctions constitute a nod toward a more cosmopolitan and pluralist attitude in cross-cultural relations than was typical of contemporaneous Christian charity organizations.⁷² Second, while traditional middle-class reformers focused on personal moral correction in their uplift efforts (one important society was even called the National Conference of Charities and Correction), Addams concentrated on the neighborhood as the primary unit of social organization. Settlement workers hoped to inspire

⁷¹ Louise W. Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 179-182.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 182.

community involvement and cooperative effort rather than personal conversion, and they sought environmental rather than individualistic solutions to social problems.⁷³ Such approaches echoed the reaction against "dangerous" individualism that had been such a key theme for Bellamy, Ward, and later thinkers such as Charles Horton Cooley and Mary Parker Follett. In that sense, positive localism was not the top-down social control that reformers like the aforementioned New York missionary Ward Stafford attempted to exercise, nor the retreat to provincialism of communitarians like Josiah Royce, but a spirit of cooperation that worked to contain potentially anarchic individualism and make complex modern society workable.⁷⁴ Furthermore, in keeping with national-class discourses of efficiency, Addams' approach was shaped by what she saw as the ineffectiveness of traditional reform. In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, for example, she criticized the "daintily clad charitable visitor" who was able to evoke superficial agreement from the impoverished targets of her moralizing but little in the way of lasting positive change.⁷⁵

The national class's use of positive localism was not limited to improving the lives of the immigrant poor, but could also be effective in municipal reform. During this great age of muckraking, for example, journalists such as Lincoln Steffens ran scathing investigations of individual localities in *McClure's*, *Hampton's*, and other publications, using the politics of personal reputation to root out corruption. These reform efforts used public shame to improve the behavior of local officials, a strategy of social control that harkened straight back to the

⁷³ Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 157.

⁷⁴ See for example Josiah Royce, "Provincialism," *The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce*, vol. 2, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), especially 1083-4.

⁷⁵ Qtd. in Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 158.

Puritans.⁷⁶ In other words, much of the push for municipal reform emerged not from the traditional local middle class but from nationalizers using New England-style localist rhetoric as an antidote for the greed of local politicians who exploited ethnic pride for personal gain. A 1911 editorial in *The Nation*, for instance, celebrated "a distinct spirit of municipal patriotism" as city commissions (the nationalizers' favored form of efficient local government) replaced machine politics in city after city around the country.⁷⁷ Addams herself was active in the Civic Federation of Chicago, one of the prime forces for municipal reform in the nation.⁷⁸ Furthermore, this push for reform was repeatedly linked to modernity, a rhetorical move that cast machine politics as "pre-modern" and thereby flattered the reformers' self-image as "moderns." Another *Nation* editorial, for example, praised the switch to commission government even in such deep-South (read: backward) cities like Birmingham, proclaiming that "old-time American contentment with dishonest and inefficient city government is a thing of the past."⁷⁹ The thing of the present and future, by implication, was honesty, efficiency, and progress. References to reputation, neighborliness, and other aspects of New England localism also appeared in more scholarly work, including that of John Dewey and Robert Park. Park, for example, approvingly quoted sociologist Robert A. Woods on the interdependency fostered within a face-to-face community: "[T]he man who establishes his home beside yours begins to have a claim upon your sense of

⁷⁶ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 204-8. See also Harvey Swados, Introduction, *Years of Conscience: The Muckrakers*, ed. Harvey Swados (Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1962), 9-22.

⁷⁷ "Editorial," *The Nation* 92, no. 2385 (16 March 1911): 256.

⁷⁸ Knight, *Citizen*, 304.

⁷⁹ "Editorial," *The Nation* 91, no. 2349 (7 July 1910): 2.

comradeship. ... The neighborhood is a social unit ... functioning like a social mind."⁸⁰

As with New England localism, so too could the national class find Jeffersonian structures and discourses to constitute positive localism when it served the ends of modernization and rationalization. Park, for instance, identified the potential of the neighborhood as a Jeffersonian sociopolitical unit: "Local interests and associations breed local sentiment, and, under a system which makes residence the basis for participation in the government, the neighborhood becomes the basis of political control."⁸¹ He tied this directly to reforming the early twentieth-century city's version of the "autocrats of Russia," namely the local political bosses, thereby again illustrating the nationalizers' preoccupation with managerial efficiency and rationalization.⁸² Likewise, Mary Parker Follett advanced the neighborhood as the ideal basis of representative government in language highly reminiscent of Jefferson's ward system: "[A]uthority is to proceed from the Many to the One, from the smallest neighborhood group up to the city, the state, the nation." Although Jefferson would have begun with the individual rather than the neighborhood, this conception nonetheless left some room for individual autonomy and selfhood: "In a neighborhood group you have the stimulus and the bracing effect of many different experiences and ideals."⁸³ Jefferson obviously did not celebrate diversity and difference the way that Follett did, the "infinite variety" of human experience that she (like

⁸⁰ Robert A. Woods, qtd. in Robert E. Park, "The City: Suggestions For the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment," *American Journal of Sociology* 20, no. 5 (March 1915): 580.

⁸¹ Park, "The City," 580.

⁸² Here Park again quotes Robert A. Woods: "The local boss, however autocratic he may be in the larger sphere of the city with the power he gets from the neighborhood, must always be in and of the people ... It is hard to fool a neighborhood about its own affairs." Park, "The City," 580.

⁸³ Mary Parker Follett, *The New State* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 196.

Addams and many other urban cosmopolitans) found so invigorating.⁸⁴ Likewise, Follett explicitly rejected the liberal dichotomy of the individual and society that was a key premise of Jefferson's political vision, stating, "I am an individual not as far as I am *apart from*, but as far as I am *a part of* other men."⁸⁵ Nonetheless, she did not insist on the submergence of the individual in communal solidarity the way that some of her contemporaries did, and she rejected the desire for homogeneity, moral correction, and shared values that marked more New England-minded communitarians: "Loyalty to a collective will which we have not created and of which we are, therefore, not an integral part, is slavery."⁸⁶

Contrary to the image of sentimental idealists that sometimes gets applied to Follett, Dewey, and other national-class reformers, these thinkers were not naïve about the workability of such localism. They recognized that industrialization and urbanization had permanently altered the institutions of American social life, and the structures of the local community would need modification if they were to work on a larger and more urban scale. Speaking of gossip, for example, Addams wrote:

We have all seen the breakdown of village standards of morality when the conditions of a great city are encountered. . . . [I]n a city divided so curiously into the regions of the well-to-do and the congested quarters of the immigrant, the conscientious person can no longer rely upon gossip.⁸⁷

In fact, part of what makes Addams, Follett, Park, Dewey, and others deserve the label of "nationalizers" in the first place, despite their often rousing defense of local communities, was their desire, not to take refuge from modernity in sentimental localism, but to find ways to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 196.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁷ Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 215.

integrate localist structures into a cohesive, efficient, and ultimately national social and political structure: a "nationalism undergirded by diversity," in Michael Kammen's phrase.⁸⁸ If they occasionally felt nostalgic for an earlier time it was what Robert Crunden called an "innovative nostalgia."⁸⁹ Like Jefferson (though unlike some of their national-class colleagues, as I will discuss below), they took seriously the principles of democracy, and they tried to find ways to use the strengths of face-to-face local community in both its New England and Jeffersonian valences to *efficiently* address problems on a national scale.⁹⁰ In that sense, I take issue with historian Jean Quandt, who characterized the Progressive embrace of localism as a sentimental and anachronistic "small-town fetish."⁹¹ Instead of constituting a defensive "retreat to the small community"⁹² with the structures of exclusion and the rejection of social diversity and modernization that that implies, the national class' partial turn to positive localism was, I argue, a forward-looking embrace of modern life and an effort to manage modernity and diversity more effectively. As Robert Asen has written of Dewey, for example, "John Dewey

⁸⁸ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 275.

⁸⁹ Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressive's Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920*, (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 90ff. Crunden's use of the phrase is primarily connected to the arts and architecture of the period, but it works well as a description of Progressive thinkers' political and social projects.

⁹⁰ They often called this project the "Beloved Community" (Follett, borrowing the term from Royce), or the "Great Community" (Dewey).

⁹¹ Jean Quandt, *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 137ff. For more on the role of nostalgia in Progressive thought, see Daniel T. Rodgers, "Socializing Middle-Class Children: Institutions, Fables, and Work Values in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1980): 363.

⁹² Quandt, *From the Small Town*, 149. Part of Quandt's interpretation of Progressive thought as anti-modern and anti-urban comes, I would argue, from her inclusion of William Allen White and Josiah Royce in her study. White was the Kansas editor who tirelessly championed small-town America (visiting France in 1918 White quipped, "Bordeaux would make a good film if it had Mary Pickford in it"), and Royce was the California philosopher of loyalty and defender of provincialism. Both were traditionalists who viewed modern America with much greater trepidation than classic Progressives like Follett, Park, or even Addams. For the White quote, see "How Wichita and Emporia View the War," *New York Times*, (7 April 1918): 71. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

held an expansive view of democracy. ... [He] did not object to multiplicity but to uncoordinated multiplicity."⁹³ From the perspective of such thinkers, what was backward-looking was a continued insistence on the unchecked individualism that had made nineteenth-century America seem so anarchic to so many.

This distinction can most readily be seen by contrasting this situational embrace of positive localism (innovative, modern) with their vehement rejection of negative localism, i.e. the broadly irrational, anti-modern, backward-looking, anti-scientific, and inefficient attitudes that urban professionals widely associated with the "local" during this era. Indeed, although the nationalizers experimented with structures and discourses of localism as policy solutions, it was their repudiation of this negative localism—fed in part by their sense of exclusivity and superiority over other segments of society, as described above—that most forcefully solidified a class identity. This brand of anti-localism, which Hofstadter characterized as the "revolt against the villages," functioned as a dominant cultural force in the 1910s and 1920s, notably the decade in which broadcasting emerged and the shape of radio policy was solidified. Therefore it is to that strain of localism that I now turn.

IIb. Localism and Distinction II: Negative Localism

In 1874, an anonymous writer for the *Chicago Tribune* took a long train ride with Judge Rockwood Hoar of Massachusetts, who had been considered as a Supreme Court justice. During the entirety of the ride, the writer noticed, Judge Hoar read only one newspaper, his local Boston paper. In contrast, the writer read twelve newspapers in the same amount of time, claiming, "I buy all the newspapers, invariably, while traveling, so that they may illustrate the country I am

⁹³ Robert Asen, "The Multiple Mr. Dewey: Multiple Publics and Permeable Borders in John Dewey's Theory of the Public Sphere," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2003), 174-188.

in." For the writer, the incident illustrated a disturbing provincialism on the part of the judge; instead of attempting to situate himself within a national community by reading papers from various parts of the country, Hoar was content to have just his corner of America illuminated, and even that just from a Bostonian perspective. The *Tribune's* writer chided such narrow-mindedness, and concluded that Judge Hoar would not make a fitting candidate for the Supreme Court. Hoar might love his country, but unfortunately "his localism is generally as wide as his patriotism."⁹⁴

The anecdote is an early example of the culture clash between the national and traditional classes and the way that discourses of localism consistently informed it. On the one hand, the writer's faith in reading twelve papers from different regions speaks to the idea, prominent in Dewey's writings, that the various independent local communities could be conceptually integrated into a sense of coherent nationhood. Interestingly, too, it revealed the nationalizers' commitment to communication as a means of achieving common purpose and understanding. On the other hand, the anecdote reveals a growing contempt for certain valences of localism, in this case provincialism. The *Tribune* writer's outlook privileged attachment to the nation over attachment to locality; indeed, the national class often associated "localism" with resistance to their vision of a centralized, unified, and efficiently ordered national society. Together with their corollary cultural values of tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and modernism, this anti-localism helped nationalizers construct their self-image and wield their cultural and economic political power vis-à-vis the traditional local middle class and its rural allies.

The word "localism" itself, which often appeared with a derogatory adjective attached (as

⁹⁴ "Judge Hoar," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (28 September 1874): 8. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (9 March 2006).

in "vulgar localism"), rarely connoted anything good in the literature of the national class.⁹⁵ Instead it described a range of nostalgic, moralizing, or illiberal traits and discourses by which the traditional middle class sought to secure its status as the "heartland," "the common man," or "the real America." Wiebe points out that the national class unilaterally claimed the adjective "urban" for itself and "rhetorically consigned the local middle class to the sticks,"⁹⁶ but the discourses by which the nationalizers cultivated their sense of superiority and distinction were much more extensive and complex than the dichotomy of "urban-rural" could capture. There was in fact an entire chain of articulations that coded the traditional local middle class and separated out the "Moderns" from "Main Street" (as negative localism became known following Sinclair Lewis' novel of that name), many of which were at most only indexically related to a geographic local. Some of the most prominent of these coded terms included "small town," "village," "traditional," "provincial," "parochial," "sectional," "narrow-minded," "old-fashioned," "backward," and "common" (as in "the common man"). Nationalizers constructed a rhetorical identity for themselves based on a series of "national" counterparts to these "local" traits: modern vs. traditional/old-fashioned, urban vs. rural/village, cosmopolitan vs. provincial, rational vs. irrational, scientific vs. religious, tolerant vs. bigoted, open-minded vs. ignorant, managerial vs. cronyistic, and so on.

These binaries of nationalism vs. localism further enabled the nationalizers to justify their privileged place in a corporate economic order—an order that increasingly called for and rewarded the qualities that the national class arrogated to itself—and distinguish themselves culturally from their supposedly less developed middle-class compatriots. The attitudes and

⁹⁵ Notably, they rarely used the word in their discussions of what I am calling positive localism above, further strengthening localism's negative connotation.

⁹⁶ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 147.

characteristics they associated with the interests, politics, and cultural preferences of the traditional middle class were thus rhetorically erased from the nationalizers' lexicon of positive individual traits and social structures, and with it from their vision of the modern nation. Like Judge Hoar, dull provincials who were too contented in their own local worldviews could not be counted on to effectively manage the changes of modern America or advance the national interest, regardless of their patriotism or other qualities. It goes without saying that none of these binaries actually described objective differences between the national class and the rest of society, at least not in any consistent, sustained, and widespread sense that would stand up to empirical investigation. However, this complex of national vs. local discourses does delineate the tropes by which and through which a growing number of urban elites advanced their interests and tastes vis-à-vis the rest of society.

Antithetical attitudes about city and village life, cosmopolitanism and provincialism, and the rest of these oppositions had a long pedigree in American thought, and they were long connected to nationalizing interests. What was relatively new in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was their deployment by an emergent national class securing its economic and cultural power in a radically changed American society. In the key mouthpieces of this class, such as the *New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *American Mercury*, and other journals, these attitudes supported technocratic ideals, describing and legitimizing the emerging corporate order and explaining the nationalizers' modern social vision (at least to themselves). In particular, three facets of this rhetorical strategy stand out. First, there was an **ideological facet** that subordinated individualism, ethnic particularism, and geographically based interests (localism, regionalism, sectionalism) to national interests, and that had national unity and centralization as its main goals. "Sectionalism" in particular was an ideologically loaded term;

not quite a synonym for regionalism, it usually connoted a specific anti-Southernness. In other words, sectionalism, coded as condemnation of a treasonous South with its vicious racism and general backwardness, was a cultural rather than a geographic term and thus elided easily into the nationalizers' disapproval of irrational and pre-modern attitudes that were central to anti-localist rhetoric. Second, a **technocratic facet** constructed centralization and bureaucratization as keys to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the state, consigning the local and the regional to the discursive realm of the old-fashioned and inefficient. Third, there was a **cultural facet** that posited urban cosmopolitanism as the proper attitude for a modern America, depicting local provincialism and the values of the local middle class to be the enemy of modernization, and thereby defining the local as pre-modern, retrograde, and even un-American.

Perhaps the most politically potent of these dimensions of anti-localism was the ideological. I have already described the strong push to marginalize sectional and local interests following the Civil War, with writers like Edward Bellamy publicizing an enormously popular and influential social vision of a radically centralized and nationalized society—one nation, indivisible. The predictable corollary to this postwar nationalism was the demonization of localism as the enemy of national unity. Such anti-localism was not new, of course. As historian Gordon S. Wood points out, observers as early as 1776 warned about an "infinite number of jarring, disunited factions" that threatened to undermine any common purpose or course of action that the colonies might pursue. James Madison complained that "a spirit of locality" caused representatives "to lose sight of the aggregate interests of the Community, and even to sacrifice them to the interests or prejudices of their respective constituents."⁹⁷ Additionally, this early concern about excessive localism was already tinged with the class-based anti-provincialism that

⁹⁷ Qtd. in Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 195.

was such a prevalent component of the nationalizers' discourse more than one hundred years later. For example, New York's William Smith, a prime defender of the aristocracy, groused that the people's representatives, far from the ideal rational actors of Enlightenment theory, were just as likely to be "plain, illiterate husbandmen, whose views seldom extended farther than to the regulation of the highways, the destruction of wolves, wild cats, and foxes."⁹⁸

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, then, these discourses were firmly entrenched, and the Civil War had given them renewed force by associating localism and sectionalism with a rebellious and ill-conceived Confederacy. As expressed in 1879 by General William Tecumseh Sherman (a man who, one might say, had traveled extensively in the South),

The great *sin* of the South, the "great cause of all her woes," has been the "localism" of her brilliant minds. ... [E]very American should be proud of his whole country rather than of a part. Therefore, I hope and pray that the new men of the South ... will cultivate a pride in the whole United States of America, instead of the mere State and locality of birth.⁹⁹

But although it was the South that remained most conspicuously outside many of the nationalizing, industrializing, and urbanizing trends of the postwar era, localism was widely used to disparage any attempt to subordinate a national interest in political affairs, and the accusations of un-American localism could fly thick and fast. In the run-up to World War I, for example, localism was frequently equated with borderline treason.¹⁰⁰ The *Chicago Tribune* in 1916 pulled no punches in decrying the "shortsighted and unpatriotic selfishness" of representatives who were resisting investing in national military preparations:

⁹⁸ Qtd. in Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 194-5.

⁹⁹ Qtd. in "Southern Provincialism," *New York Times* (8 June 1879): 2. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006). Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ For more on the struggles over sectionalism, patriotism, and American identity during this period, see Jonathan M. Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

This myopic and stupidly local mentality disclosed in the struggle to create a common defense is one of the most alarming revelations of our political system. ... If the localism of [the Democrats] forces a hurtful compromise, we have the consolation of knowing that it will be replaced by a responsible, broad visioned nationalism under a coherent and determined leadership next March.¹⁰¹

The key twist on this tradition in national-class discourses was the connection of anti-localist nationalism to modernization and reform. As one writer complained about the inefficiencies of government in 1922, "Is not, indeed, our adhering to localism the thing that makes it hard for us to function nationally as smoothly and effectively as we ought?"¹⁰² So powerful was the faith in nationalism and national solutions that its advocates prescribed it for virtually every social ailment, from the crime rate,¹⁰³ to pork-barrel politics,¹⁰⁴ to the "Negro problem."¹⁰⁵ Surveying the many changes in American society, for example, Herbert Croly declared that the time had come to use "Hamiltonian means" (i.e. a strong central government) to achieve "Jeffersonian ends."¹⁰⁶ Croly, co-founder/editor of the *New Republic* and one of the paragons of the national class, sympathized with Jefferson's desire for local direct democracy but felt, like Follett, that Jefferson's vision was fatally flawed for being "tantamount to extreme individualism."¹⁰⁷ He spoke for much of the national class when he called for a "nationalization

¹⁰¹ "The Fight For Real Defense," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (22 March 1916). *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

¹⁰² Malcolm MacKinnon, "Blaming Provincialism For Bureaucracy," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (24 September 1922): 8. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

¹⁰³ "What Ails America?" *The Nation* 79 no. 2057 (1 December 1904): 428.

¹⁰⁴ "The Handwriting on the Wall," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (6 April 1916): 6. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

¹⁰⁵ Sydney G. Fisher, "The South and the Negro," *The Nation* 88, no. 2283 (1 April 1909): 332.

¹⁰⁶ See McClay, *The Masterless*, 159.

¹⁰⁷ Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 43.

of reform" in order to achieve "a complete democracy in organization and practice."¹⁰⁸

This emphasis on modernization, organization, and reform led to a peculiarly technocratic inflection of the nationalizers' anti-localism, as well as a nationalist inflection of their technocracy; as Croly articulated this dualism, "the national principle [involves] a continual process of internal reformation; and ... the reforming idea [implies] the necessity of more efficient national organization."¹⁰⁹ Therefore, while nationalist ideology made the accusation of "localism" available for any American to use in advancing federal projects, this technocratic facet was much more the proprietary rhetoric of the national class. In particular, many Progressives favored managerial, organizational, centralized solutions to social problems, and saw localism and sectionalism as significant obstacles to smooth national reform. This technocratic vision crossed party lines, earning a nationalizing reformer like Theodore Roosevelt the support of many urban Progressives (such Addams and Croly) due in large part to his efforts toward a strong, centralized state.¹¹⁰ In a 1910 speech in Osawatomie, Kansas, for example, Roosevelt called for a "New Nationalism" (a phrase borrowed from Croly), pushing aside localism to make way for a more efficient federal government:

¹⁰⁸ Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 168-169.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹⁰ I should point out that Roosevelt's nationalism was a prime factor in his support among Progressives, but not the only one. For example, Woodrow Wilson had made common cause with William Jennings Bryan and his evangelical supporters in 1912, a move that made some Progressives shudder and led others to cast about for alternatives. Such divisions were, of course, part of the process of class shakeout that I am describing.

The New Nationalism puts the national need before sectional or personal advantage. It is impatient of the utter confusion that results from local legislatures attempting to treat national issues as local issues. It is still more impatient of the impotence which springs from overdivision of governmental powers, the impotence which makes it possible for local selfishness or for legal cunning, hired by wealthy special interests, to bring national activities to a deadlock.¹¹¹

In many ways, attitudes toward a strong central government was a key issue that split the national class off from the local middle class, and it was a process that happened slowly and painfully. This was a large part of the rift between Progressives and Democrats described by the *Chicago Tribune* in the editorial discussed above, and one can also see the debate unfolding in the pages of elite journals like *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. For example, over the course of several years in the early 1900s, writers and readers of *The Nation* went back and forth on the advisability of strengthening the national government. In September 1912, one writer warned darkly that Roosevelt's reelection would mean "a step of momentous character towards the centralization of all real power in the hands of the Chief Executive," while a vote for Wilson would distribute power more evenly between the federal government and the localities.¹¹² A few months later, another writer asserted the exact opposite, claiming that there is "nothing local" about Wilson; he alone can reduce the "power of localism," since he is "a lobbyist for the nation. He puts himself at the national point of view ... and seeks to think and act in a national sense and spirit."¹¹³

As in many other questions, it was national crisis that did much to settle the issue; during

¹¹¹ Theodore Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism," (31 August 1910), <<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=501>> (26 February 2006). For more on the political context of Roosevelt's speech, see Robert S. La Forte, "Theodore Roosevelt's Osawatomie Speech," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 187-200.

¹¹² "Centralization and Monopoly," *The Nation* 95, no. 2462 (5 September 1912): 204.

¹¹³ "The Wider Point of View," *The Nation* 96, no. 2503 (19 June 1913): 612.

World War I, the rhetoric of national unity was used to achieve centralized efficiency (and vice-versa) by linking patriotism and centralization; as one observer said, "[T]he world war ... forces upon America the idea, if not the ideal of nationality. The state becomes a superman demanding sacrifices of all individual and group interests."¹¹⁴ Similarly, the *New York Times* reporting on a speech by Robert C. Morris, wrote:

Probably we are a united people, and if we are put to a great test we shall prove that Americanism in the national sense exists. But the evils of what Mr. Morris calls localism powerfully affect our public life. ... In Mr. Morris's words: "A budget means federalization of expenditures--it means nationalism. Present methods mean the Pork Barrel, which is only another expression for the reign of localism in finance."¹¹⁵

The *Chicago Tribune* also planted its flag in favor of nationalism, charging, "The Democrats, clinging to localism to the last, offer us no hope. But Republicanism has always shown more ability to think in terms of the nation, and may be expected to strike at this chief evil of parochialism."¹¹⁶ Although the conflation of Americanism and centralization would take a heavy blow following the war, the discourses that positioned localism as antithetical to efficiency and rationalization would continue to enjoy political effectiveness throughout the 1920s, especially under the supervision of nationalizing technocrats like Herbert Hoover.

This technocratic facet of national-class anti-localism informed their approach to a wide range of specific issues. In some questions, such as Prohibition, the national class abandoned

¹¹⁴ George Edgar Vincent, qtd. in "National Unity is Need of U.S., Vincent Warns," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (21 January 1917): 6. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

¹¹⁵ "Localism and Defense," *New York Times* (18 Dec, 1916): 10. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006). See also "Federalism and Centralization," *The Nation* 95, no. 2464 (19 September 1912): 252-253; "A Progressive Illusion," *The Nation* 95, no. 2466 (3 October 1912): 300-301.

¹¹⁶ "The Handwriting on the Wall," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (6 April 1916): 6. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

their desire for centralized efficiency and advocated a town-by-town solution; they largely opposed Prohibition, so such localism may have merely been a way to protect their own interests from the moralizing middle class whose agenda they rejected (and whose hypocrisy in the alcohol question they never tired of pointing out).¹¹⁷ But in many more cases, localism was seen as the problem, not the solution. Sometimes this was figured as an urban-rural divide, as in Connecticut where, due to an inefficient system of local representation, small towns and farmers were able to dictate to the cities on everything from daylight savings time to movies on Sunday: "The rural tail wags the urban dog."¹¹⁸ Other times the threat was to civilization and the rule of law itself. In the case of lynching, for example, *The Nation* ran a decades-long campaign calling for a federal anti-lynching statute, having given up on the ability or willingness of local authorities to stop such crimes.¹¹⁹ "It is impossible to treat it as a local, a neighborhood question," insisted one of the magazine's editorials. "This country has such a thing as a national citizenship, with its rights and immunities. It cannot, without stultifying its laws and Constitution, allow any locality to nullify ... the guarantee which it throws about the humblest."¹²⁰ This mistrust of localities to stop lynching on their own was dramatized in a chilling example in 1919, when *The Nation* reprinted newspaper stories announcing a lynching to

¹¹⁷ For an example of an advocate of localism in the Prohibition question, see "Aspects of Local Option," *The Nation* 75, no. 1951 (20 November 1902): 395-396. For an example of the charge of hypocrisy regarding Prohibition, see the condemnation of "dry-voting, wet-drinking farmers" in William W. Norton, "Prohibition in Littleton," *The Nation* 130, no. 3382 (30 April 1930): 510-511. Regarding the national class's opposition to Prohibition, see Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 209-210.

¹¹⁸ Orville A. Welsh, "Progressive Hopes and Rotten Boroughs." *The Nation* 120, no. 3105 (7 January 1925): 12.

¹¹⁹ See for example "Editorial," *The Nation* 93, no. 2425 (13 July 1911): 23; "Editorial," *The Nation* 96, no. 2481 (16 January 1913): 47; "Editorial," *The Nation* 110, no. 2869 (26 June 1920): 841; "Editorial," *The Nation* 115, no. 2997 (13 December 1922): 650; Don C. Seitz, "The Lynching," *The Nation* 115, no. 2999 (27 December 1922): 717.

¹²⁰ "The Nation and the Negro," *The Nation* 76, no. 1979 (June 4, 1903): 448.

be held later in the week in Ellisville, Mississippi. Despite the lynchers' open planning and eager publicity, local authorities failed to stop it. *The Nation's* headline was: "How the Officials of an American City Connived at a Mob's Crimes--Why There Must be Federal Action to Suppress Lynching" (see Figure 1, p. 92).¹²¹ *New Republic* editor Croly also argued for a pre-emption of local authority in favor of "state police, efficiently used." Only such a solution, he felt, could address the dual problem of local inefficiency and irrational local passions:

Lynching, which is the product of excited local feeling, will never be stopped by the sheriffs, because they are afraid of local public opinion. . . . But it can be stopped by a well-trained and well-disciplined state constabulary, which can be quickly concentrated, and which would be independent of merely local public opinion.¹²²

Likewise, when the "zealous patriots of Jacksonville" tarred and feathered a presumed German sympathizer in 1921, *The Nation* excoriated them for their mob mentality, contrasting "modern law" with "medieval folly."¹²³ Such examples demonstrated the way that these discourses could intersect, meld, and reinforce each other, the negative localism of nativism easily eliding with the negative localism of populism, and both of these contrasting with the nationalizers' "modern" self-image. Although the national class largely lacked the institutional political power to enact specific policies such as a federal anti-lynching ordinance, these political battles helped sharpen the cultural distinctions between the old and new middle class.¹²⁴

¹²¹ "The Shame of America," *The Nation* 109, no. 2820 (19 July 1919): 89.

¹²² Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 344.

¹²³ "Editorial," *The Nation* 112, no. 2896 (5 January 1921): 3.

¹²⁴ When a Richmond, Virginia paper gloated with obvious "sectional pride" over a near-lynching in New York, "home of more of the professional and political South-baiters than any other city in the world," the *Nation* turned the tables by welcoming Virginians into the modern era: "The more Southern patriotism comes to be identified with an effort to prove the South humane and law-abiding, the better for all of us." "Editorial," *The Nation* 119, no. 3089 (17 August 1924): 274.

The Shame of America

How the Officials of an American City Connived at a Mob's Crimes—Why There Must be Federal Action to Suppress Lynching

NEGRO JERKY 3,000 WILL BURN NEGRO AND SULLEN AS BURNING HOUR NEARS

Kaiser Under Stronger Guard Following Escape Of Crown Prince

NEW ORLEANS STATES

[Heading and News Column at Left from *New Orleans States*. News-article below from *Jackson (Miss.) Daily News*.]

JOHN HARTFIELD WILL BE LYNCHED BY ELLISVILLE MOB AT 5 O'CLOCK THIS AFTERNOON

To Be Taken to Scene of Crime and Stood Before Crowd

ELLISVILLE, Miss., June 26.—(Special)—As four o'clock approaches John Hartfield, assailant of the Ellisville white girl, is being carefully guarded in the office of Dr. Carter of this city. The wounded negro has confessed and seems very nervous. Dissension has broken out among the indignant citizens as to what disposition should be made of the prisoner. It is said the negro will be taken to the scene of his crime, near the Ellisville railroad tracks, where he attacked Miss Meek, and will be stood up where everybody can see him. Some of the angry citizens, it is said, want Hartfield lynched while others want him burned.

ELLISVILLE, Miss., June 26.—(Special)—Walter Crawley and Will Rogers, two farmers, were members of the posse who shot Hartfield in the shoulder, and affected his capture. Three thousand strangers are in Ellisville today to witness the disposition of John Hartfield, negro assailant of Miss Meek. Officers are unable to control the crowds.

HATTIESBURG, Miss., June 26.—John Hartfield, negro assailant of an Ellisville young woman, has been brought to Ellisville from Collins and is guarded by officers in the office of Dr. Carter in that city. He is wounded in the shoulder. The officers have agreed to turn him over to the people at 4 o'clock this afternoon when it is expected he will be burned.

HATTIESBURG, June 26.—John Hartfield, the negro alleged to have assaulted an Ellisville, young woman, has been taken to Ellisville and is guarded by officers in the office of Dr. Carter in that city. He is wounded in the shoulder but not seriously. The officers have agreed to turn him over to the people of the city at 4 o'clock this afternoon when it is expected he will be burned. The negro is said to have made a partial confession.

GOV. BILBO SAYS HE IS POWERLESS.
When Gov. Bilbo was shown the above dispatch and asked what action, if any, he intended to take to prevent the affair, he said: "I am powerless to prevent it. We have guns for state militia, but no men. It is impossible to send troops to the scene for the obvious reason that we have no troops. Several days ago, anticipations for the lynching has now been fixed for five p. m. A committee of Ellisville citizens has been appointed to make the necessary arrangements for the event, and the mob is pledged to act in conformity with these arrangements. Rev. L. G. Gates, pastor of the First Baptist church of Laurel, left here at one o'clock for Ellisville to entreat the mob to use discretion."

THOUSANDS GOING TO

Figure 1: As part of its ongoing campaign for a federal lynching law, *The Nation* reproduces headlines from various southern papers announcing an upcoming lynching in Ellisville, Miss., near Laurel (July, 1919).

In this context, it is important to consider the role of race in national-class discourses. As mentioned briefly above, national-class figures consistently embraced at least the theory of racial equality, and often took substantive action to support racial justice. For example, Woodrow Wilson had re-segregated the federal government during his first term in office, but Herbert Hoover pointedly re-integrated the Commerce Department in the early 1920s.¹²⁵ Likewise, national-class publications like *The American Mercury*, *Vanity Fair* (under Carl Van Vechten), and *The Nation*, despite the personal racial prejudices of individuals like *American Mercury*

¹²⁵ Miller, *New World Coming*, 90.

editor H. L. Mencken, opened up their pages to African-American authors and ran numerous articles on black concerns. They also consistently opposed racist local initiatives, of which there were many around the country, typically using the favored national-class tropes to do so. When one writer protested the redlining policies of the St. Louis Home Protective Association, for instance, he emphasized the "modern" and "professional" qualities of the policies' victims:

"[T]hese Negroes ... are law-abiding, industrious people In many instances they are business and professional people seeking small, modern homes." Condemning the local elites responsible for the St. Louis plan, the writer closed: "Democracy! Christianity!"¹²⁶ His invocation of "Democracy" here seems to refer to the Bryan wing of the Democratic Party, and as that coda indicates, it was but a short leap in the nationalizers' rhetoric from condemning the lynch mob to condemning what they saw as the hypocrisy and mob mentality of the Populist-led masses, "ruled by localism, heeding the voice of the demagogue and the advice of the charlatan."¹²⁷

Looked at from the point of view of cultural distinction, then, comparatively progressive racial attitudes helped the national class set itself apart from the more retrograde prejudices and practices of the traditional local middle class, particularly in the South.

Despite such positions, however, national-class whites could be paternalistic in their attitudes toward non-whites or, as the case of Mencken illustrates, even openly racist. Michele Hilmes has demonstrated how American popular culture of the era, including national radio, displaced pre-modern traits onto racial and ethnic others in programming such as *Amos 'n'*

¹²⁶ Carl Kizkage, "Sainly St. Louis," *The Nation* 123, no. 3203 (24 November 1926): 530.

¹²⁷ Progressive Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, quoted in "The Malpractice of States Manship" [*sic*], *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (7 October 1916): 6. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

Andy.¹²⁸ Clearly "Main Street" was not the only discourse through which various classes laid claim to being "moderns." Indeed, one explanation often offered for the pathologies of the urban lower classes was their unfitness for modernity:

The industrial and commercial life of the present is so intense and rapid that even strong men bend and break under the pressure. There is a struggle and stress in social life unknown in other times. ... Fatigue, disease, and sadness invite intemperance ... [among] the poor ... who seek to bring a momentary idealism into their lives by an artificial stimulus.¹²⁹

In that respect, as much as I have emphasized the cultural clash within the bifurcated middle class, urban professionals were also interested in distinguishing themselves from the working classes, including the teeming ethnic immigrants in the metropolises, and this was often reflected in noxious rhetoric. For example, a writer in *Radio Broadcast* warned of the "insidious" immigrants weakening America from within: "Each is a parasite living upon the natural resources and under the protection offered by America, yet giving little or nothing in return."¹³⁰ Many of these discourses articulated the ethnic enclaves of the city to negative localism, attributing to blacks and immigrants a provincial separatism within the city that threatened social cohesion. As one Pennsylvania broadcaster complained, "There is another queer thing about [Erie] in connection with nationalities, and that is that they are very clannish, and they live together, they group together. For instance, the Polish people are what you might say segregated voluntarily to the east side of the town."¹³¹ Given such attitudes, historian Matthew Murray suggests that widespread fear of urbanized others, including new immigrants, blacks, and

¹²⁸ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). See especially 75-96.

¹²⁹ "A Disease of Civilization," *The Nation* 81, no. 2097 (7 September 1905): 196.

¹³⁰ J.M. McKibbin, "The New Way to Make Americans," *Radio Broadcast* 2:3 (January 1923): 238.

¹³¹ "In re: Broadcasters of Pa., Inc. (WLBW), Docket 1724," 30 July 1932, 224. FRC Dockets: Box 375, Folder "1724."

sexualized women, was in fact a structuring force in cultural policy, including radio policy.¹³²

My own research indicates that the role of racial and ethnic minorities in the national-class worldview was more complex and subtle than Murray suggests, and the racial attitudes that characterized both urban cosmopolitans and, ultimately, radio regulation cannot be reduced to a simple case of "othering." First and foremost, national-class rhetoric paled in comparison to the racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic vitriol (not to mention practices) of the rest of the country. In the context of the era, then, a *relatively* enlightened attitude toward race relations and ethnic culture was constitutive of national-class identity. For instance, despite the (today) obviously problematic constructions of race in, say, *Show Boat*, the self-conscious moderns who made it a hit knew they were watching the first American musical play in which blacks and whites appeared onstage together. Similarly, as easy as it is to deplore the racist policies of jazz clubs that allowed in only white patrons to watch black performers, the urban cosmopolitans who made the trip up to Harlem (and the many more who wished they could) most likely saw themselves as appreciative of ethnic diversity and African-American culture. One sees the shift even in publications like *The Nation*. Prior to the 1920s, the magazine wrote extensively about African-Americans, but almost exclusively in terms of lynching, segregation, and the "race problem." But in the 1920s they began exploring Black culture, printing letters from Langston Hughes, running appreciative criticism on African-American music, and taking other tentative steps toward cultural integration. Capturing this attitude, Randolph Bourne celebrated a "new cosmopolitan ideal" that drew strength from immigrant cultures rather than trying to "Americanize" them, while philosopher Horace Kallen coined the term "cultural pluralism" in 1924 to describe the increasingly enthusiastic embrace of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity by

¹³² Matthew Murray, "Broadcast Content Regulation and Cultural Limits, 1920-1962" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1997), 40-45.

the urban middle class.¹³³ As Paul Boyer points out, a "celebratory tone toward the diversity and openness of urban life pervades much of American social thought of the post-1920 era."¹³⁴

Immigrants and blacks could be guilty of negative localism if they hived off to themselves and refused to assimilate to modern ways, but they could also be the paragons of positive localism. For example, a 1921 article by Rollin Lynde Hartt in *The Outlook* contrasted the neighborliness of immigrant communities with the dull and "socially poverty stricken" villages and towns of the traditional local middle class. Hartt asks his Italian friend Bimbo why immigrants pack together in the crowded tenements of Elizabeth Street, to which Bimbo replies, "Big times; play; sociability; friendliness; everybody a good mixer, just as in a Sicilian village." In American villages, however, "*Basta!* Your country folks don't know how to play. They don't pull together. They don't really know one another. They're stiff." Although Hartt is able to find "exceptions to the general rule of monotony and aching dullness" of Main Street, he looks at one representative small town and decides, "This isn't a community, it is a disease." Arguing that provincial Americans could learn a lot from immigrant communities, he concludes, "[O]ne would wish to elevate such town to the Elizabeth Street standard. ... Under our skins, we are Sicilians, all of us."¹³⁵

A more productive way of thinking about race and the national class is provided by Homi Bhabha, who emphasizes the hybridity of identity resulting from the encounter of self and other in situations of differential empowerment. Analyzing relationships in instances of colonization,

¹³³ Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86-97; Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press), 144. See also Horace Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation* 100 (18 and 25 February 1915).

¹³⁴ Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 287-8.

¹³⁵ Rollin Lynde Hartt, "Just As Much Fun In Your Own Little Town," *The Outlook* (3 August 1921): 545-547.

Bhabha discusses how the identity of the colonial subject is partially informed by desire for the colonizer—a self-imagination based on wanting (some of) what the colonizer represents. At the same time, this identity is equally defined by difference—both elective and imposed—in an effort to establish a distinction between colonizer and colonized. Similar processes are at work for the colonizer, whose identity is a hybrid of the demands of difference and desire for the colonized other. Furthermore, neither of these positions—colonizer and colonized—are fully enunciated wholes; there is only the hybridity of the interaction, out of which emerge positions that are intrinsically dependent on each other for their expression and effectiveness. The result of this tension, according to Bhabha, is the enabling condition for identity formation: I can be *me* through *you*. Applied to urban cosmopolitans, Bhabha's work suggests that their racial attitudes were informed by both desire for and distance from the ethnic other whose cultural production the national class so eagerly consumed. If blacks and new immigrants were othered, then, that othering was neither universal nor uncomplicatedly hostile, but rather hybrid and structured partly by desire.¹³⁶

Ultimately, then, what the national class othered was not a particular race, class, religion, or sexuality, but what it perceived as pre-modern resistance to its nationalizing project, and its most pronounced hostility was reserved for the local middle class that populated the small towns and countryside throughout the nation. This was the widespread and intense hatred for Main Street that Richard Hofstadter called the "attack on the country mind, [a] savage repudiation of the old pieties" of the traditional local middle class. This was a cultural anti-localism with which the national class roundly assaulted the ostensibly provincial, irrational, and pre-modern

¹³⁶ Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity: The Postcolonial Prerogative," ed. David Theo Goldberg, *The Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990): 183-209.

philistines of the small towns and villages.¹³⁷ Again, such rhetoric had a long history, but observers of the time nonetheless felt that something profoundly new and daring was emerging in its nationalizing incarnation. A 1908 article in *Scribner's* posed the question as "Provincial or National?" and made clear the nationalizers' low opinion of local life: "A settled and fixed society tends to develop a spirit of caste, a narrow outlook, a distaste for travel, and a slavish adherence to old traditions and customs which may be, and often are, exceedingly foolish."¹³⁸ When Edgar Lee Masters published *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915, a remarkable book of poems that portrayed small-town life as often dark and sordid, it was widely interpreted as an overdue rebuke to the proudly provincial "local color" regionalism of the previous fifty years: "What seemed local color seems now provincial color, or parochial."¹³⁹ Sinclair Lewis stoked the fire with his vicious portrayal of local life in *Main Street* in 1920, and writers like E. W. Howe and Sherwood Anderson kept the attacks coming, ridiculing the New England-style localism of civic boosters, the anti-scientific demagoguery of Christian preachers, and the unsophisticated cultural tastes of the local middle class. In their vision, Main Street could do nothing right: "Her factories [are] ghastly, her shops tawdry, ... her people fried-suppered, and her aesthetics infantile."¹⁴⁰ Even Zona Gale, creator of the syrupy "Friendship Village" series two decades earlier, took a shot at the "village virus" in the cautiously feminist novel *Miss Lulu*

¹³⁷ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 287.

¹³⁸ Louis Howland, "Provincial or National?" *Scribner's Magazine* 43 (April 1908): 453.

¹³⁹ "Local Color and After," *The Nation* 109, no. 2830 (27 September 1919): 426-427. See also Van Doren, "Contemporary American Novelists."

¹⁴⁰ John W. Owens, "A City Without a Main Street," *The Nation* 120, no. 3122 (6 May 1925): 513-515.

Bett.¹⁴¹ Most famously (and, it must be said, most entertainingly), H. L. Mencken vented the nationalizers' impatience with the "prehensile morons" of middle America, gleefully assaulting "the yokel's congenital and incurable hatred of the city man--his simian rage against everyone who, as he sees it, is having a better time than he is."¹⁴² This firestorm of cultural anti-localism was so ceaseless during the 1920s that even *The Nation* was moved to remark that "the weight of all this village ridicule has often been heavy," arguing that neither Emerson nor Whitman would understand the current "restless and intense hatred of the 'provinces' ... the regiments of criticism being raised against suburban Philistia and the villatic bourgeoisie."¹⁴³

The traditional local middle class and its rural allies, for their part, frequently resented this incursion of "modern, urban" values into "traditional" culture. They selectively adopted elements of modern culture (such as the automobile) when such innovations fit their needs and lifestyles, but they remained wary of what they often saw as the degeneracy and immorality of the city, and understandably bristled at being regarded as "rubes" and "hicks" by their urban compatriots. Richard Hofstadter described this cultural struggle in terms that are all too familiar to those of us wearily grinding our way into the twenty-first century:

[There was] a growing sense that the code by which rural and small-town Anglo-Saxon America had lived was being ignored and even flouted in the wicked cities, ... and that the old religion and morality were being snickered at by the intellectuals. ... Anglo-Saxon Americans now felt themselves more than ever to be the representatives of a threatened purity of race and ideals, a threatened Protestantism, even a threatened integrity of national allegiance.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Van Doren, "Contemporary American Novelists," 410. For an excellent discussion of Gale's work in relation to feminist politics, see Deborah Lindsay Williams, *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

¹⁴² H. L. Mencken, "Editorial," *American Mercury* 1 (1924): 293.

¹⁴³ "On Hating the Provinces," *The Nation* 111, no. 2889 (17 November 1920): 550.

¹⁴⁴ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 294.

Feeling that their traditional (white, protestant, patriarchal) values were under threat, some turned to racism and religious fundamentalism, which only confirmed the urban stereotype of rural folk as pre-modern troglodytes.

Indeed, much of the national-class hatred toward the local was a response to the multiple provocations emerging from the local middle class. Prohibition, the Klan, and events like the Scopes Trial reinforced nationalizers' fears that local America's "mental backwardness and complete insensibility to ideas" threatened to "reduce the United States to a bondage more complete than that of the darkest puritan village of colonial New England."¹⁴⁵ This linkage between the traditional middle class and the dark ages of New England-style localism was not accidental, and many writers criticized the extreme forms of social control that accompanied moralistic small-town efforts toward public order. Mocking William Allen White's oft-repeated boast that Emporia, Kansas (his beloved stand-in for the values of the traditional middle class) was "too good a town" for this or that modern cultural development, one writer to the *Nation* seethed, "Emporia is now so good that raids are made in private homes on Sundays to see if they are playing cards. In Osawatomie people are so good that many of them display a large card in their windows: 'WE GO TO CHURCH.'"¹⁴⁶ Even a genteel academic like John Dewey could, in his polite way, attack the "church-going classes" for their "obscurantism and intolerance." In an essay in the *New Republic*, he criticized their opposition to "modern thought" that he believed was "holding down the intellectual level of American life."¹⁴⁷ Mencken, usually more

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Wood Krutch, "Darrow vs. Bryan," *The Nation* 121, no. 3134 (29 July 1925): 136-137.

¹⁴⁶ Edward Gale Agran, *"Too Good a Town": William Allen White, Community, and the Emerging Rhetoric of Middle America* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 1998). Betty Bradshaw, "Religious Bigotry in Kansas," *The Nation* 122, no. 3175 (12 May 1926): 525.

¹⁴⁷ John Dewey, "The American Intellectual Frontier," *The New Republic* (10 May 1922): 303-305. When considering his condemnation of church-goers, it is worth noting that Dewey, like his friend and colleague Jane

apocalyptic than his peers, called for nothing less than total victory in the battle between the moderns and the locals:

[I]n the end peasant-rule will be broken. It is plainly incompatible with civilized progress. Drained of all their best blood by the cities, the country districts subside into a futile malignancy. . . . They are against every variety of enlightenment, and every common decency. The old naïve belief in their virtue and wisdom must be abandoned, and they must be stripped of their power to harass and impede civilization.¹⁴⁸

As the foregoing indicates, the bill of particulars against "Main Street" was long; more importantly, it was infused with a sense of anger and cultural superiority that scoffed at subtlety and obliterated distinctions. If the "national class" was less an actual group of like-minded people and more a set of discourses by which many intellectuals and urban professionals tended to narrate the world, this cultural anti-localism nonetheless seemed to give the nationalizers definition and coherence: the intelligent moderns vs. the local yokels. Indeed, discourses affirming the modernity of the national class are rampant throughout this era. Writers in the *Nation*, the *New York Times*, and other national-class publications never tired of referring to themselves as "moderns" and congratulating themselves for their ability to master the complexities and challenges of modern (urban) life. "Observe the city man crossing the street amidst heavy traffic," wrote *The Nation*. "He displays not only a physical but a mental agility of which his grandfather would probably have been incapable."¹⁴⁹ Localism, in contrast, was pre-modern, a holdover from the colonial period that had long since outlived its usefulness. As one university president argued:

Addams, was a social Christian, but both Dewey and Addams were disappointed with institutionalized religion and deeply dismayed by what they perceived as the irrationalism of the Bryan wing of the evangelical movement. For more on this issue, see Knight, *Citizen*, 238.

¹⁴⁸ H. L. Mencken, *Carnival of Buncombe*, ed. Malcolm Moos (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956): 167.

¹⁴⁹ "The Fickle Modern Man," *The Nation* 120, no. 3106 (14 January 1925): 31.

Individualism and localism are persistent influences in American life. ... They survive from the days of colonial isolation and of westward moving frontier. They are the expression of personal initiative and responsibility under conditions of detachment and migration. ... [But now] we are being forced to think nationally, to consider our problems from the standpoint not chiefly of individual, local, provincial, or class interest but from that of national unity and welfare.¹⁵⁰

Within the specific worldview of the national class, modernity and localism were intuitively regarded as antithetical, so much so that this trope could often be reinforced merely in passing. For example, an article in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled "The Modern Newspaper" that quickly identified the problem of the "not-modern" newspaper: "The most serious defect of the papers of the present ... is that of localism."¹⁵¹

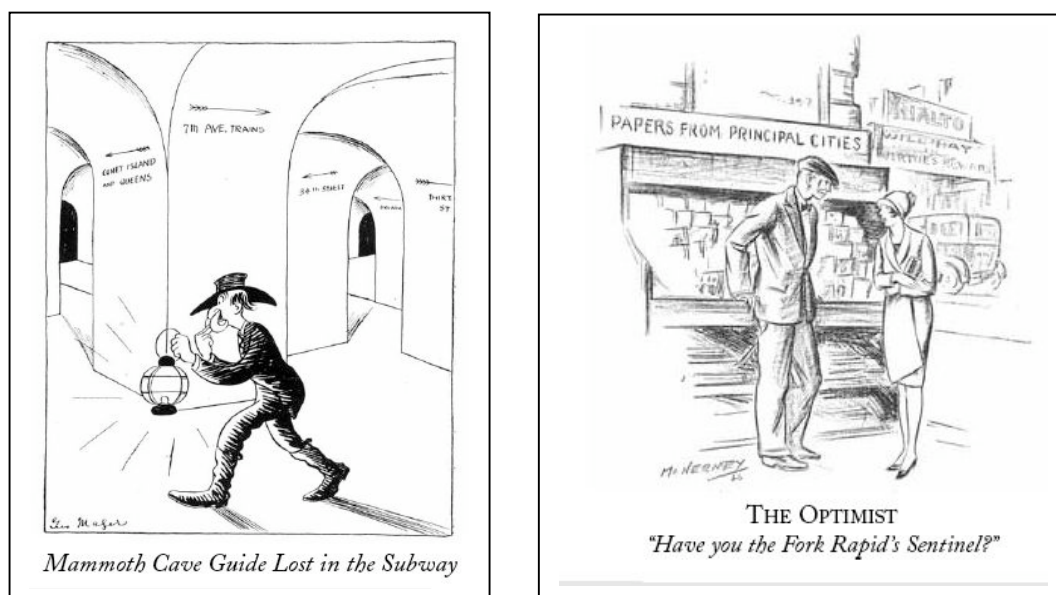


Figure 2: The *New Yorker* mocks pre-moderns and provincials as unfit for modern urban life. Left: Gus Mager, 21 Mar. 1925; Right: E. McNerny, 17 Apr. 1925.

¹⁵⁰ George Edgar Vincent, qtd. in "National Unity is Need of U.S., Vincent Warns," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (21 January 1917): 6. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

¹⁵¹ "The Modern Newspaper," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (5 December 1897): 32. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

The national class also constructed specific issues such as feminism in opposition to the local. Generally speaking, nationalizers valued greater rights and freedoms for women, and the "modern woman" gained more ready acceptance among urban professionals than in the traditional local middle class, at least according to the popular national-class narrative. A typical exemplar was "Trying to Be Modern," an account of a woman who had been a social worker in New York before moving to the provinces, where her feminist expectations were quickly disappointed. In the city, it had been easy to be both a career woman and a mother, but she found small-town life still backward in that respect: "Our social organization is simple and primitive. Woman's work is as definitely fixed as is a squaw's and she does it as unquestioningly. ... Part-time jobs for educated women may be developing in cities. They are few and far between in rural and small-town America."¹⁵² The articulation of traditional gender roles to the societies of Native Americans—the pre-moderns *par excellence* in American imagination—further reinforced the separation between modern feminism and the backward burghs. Similarly, the article "Feminism on the Farm" outlined the social barriers to gender progress outside of urban areas: "[If] you have no way of getting together with other women in a like state of discomfort and rebellion--things are apt to slide. It is hard to conduct a revolution entirely by yourself."¹⁵³ Even the "sexually dangerous" flappers and chorus girls were, for the national class, one of those things that made modern urban America great. *The Nation* decried attempts to suppress the sexuality of young women, slyly linking the moralizing of the traditional middle class to anti-Darwinist backwardness: "Some day, perhaps, we shall evolve reformers

¹⁵² Edith Clark, "Trying to Be Modern," *The Nation* 125, no. 3241 (17 August 1927): 153-155.

¹⁵³ "Feminism on the Farm," *The Nation* 113, no. 2937 (19 October 1921): 440.

who do not reform."¹⁵⁴ In the case of gender relations, as it was in the case of race, religion, and technology, the "modern" and the "local" were often viewed as antithetical values.

Part III: Positive and Negative Localism in the Modernizing Project

To summarize my argument thus far, the national class used a range of discourses to exclude certain negative inflections of localism from its vision of modern American society. Although most of these tropes were not new, nationalizers combined them and articulated them to each other in ways that specifically privileged the economic and social position of a new cohort of urban technocratic elites. In the process, they fostered an anti-localism that marked the small town and its inhabitants as pre-modern, provincial, and even un-American. This anti-localism, however, was in tension with some of the specific efforts of the national class to use discourses and structures of positive localism to contain individualism and recuperate democratic processes in the changed landscape of twentieth-century America. When we analyze the tensions between these "positive" and "negative" localisms, what overarching political project emerges and what is its relationship to the local? What definitions did the local, on balance, accrue, and what role did localism ultimately play in the nationalizers' world view?

I argue that, in its repudiation of the "pre-modern" aspects of the local and its use of localist discourses and structures primarily as a means of increasing the efficiency and rationalization of American life, the relationship of the national class to localism from the turn of the century through the 1920s was one of colonizing the local in the service of modernity. Specifically, to the extent that they endorsed positive localism, it was *not* with the purpose of fostering local identities, encouraging local autonomy, resisting the homogenizing forces of mass

¹⁵⁴ "The Chorus Girl Irredenta," *The Nation* 109, no. 2829 (20 September 1919): 391.

production, or celebrating local idiosyncrasies and particularisms. Instead, it was with the purpose of integrating the pre-modern local into their vision of the modern American nation.

At stake in this process was not the modernization project per se, but on whose terms and in whose interests modernization was to occur. Many thinkers and writers from the era argued for the need to work within existing structures in this modernizing process; as Woodrow Wilson stated in a 1912 speech, "You must knit the new into the old. You cannot put a new patch on an old garment without ruining it; it must be not a patch, but something woven into the old fabric."¹⁵⁵ In contrast, many others, including the national class, maintained that traditional structures themselves needed to be transformed: local culture needed to be uplifted through cosmopolitan culture; local economies needed to be rationalized through such innovations as national credit, chain stores, and national brands; local governance needed to be modernized through a politics based on competence and efficiency rather than character and reputation; etc. For example, Anne O'Hare McCormick, in somewhat Deweyan language, called for "a translation of democratic formulas into new forms" in order to lead "a civilization emerging from the settled localism of the agricultural system into the non-localized diffusion of the industrial."¹⁵⁶ For the national class, the goal was clear: to stitch the local into their vision of a diffused, non-localized, and thoroughly modern corporate-industrial American nation.

The process of knitting the local into the modern took many forms. I have already discussed this process, in slightly different terms, in the example of municipal reform above; in that case, nationalizers used localist rhetoric to improve the efficiency and rationality of city governments around the country. Other examples included a range of large and small proposals,

¹⁵⁵ Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1933), 44.

¹⁵⁶ Anne O'Hare McCormick, "Light on the Elusive Lobbyist," *New York Times*, (3 November 1929): SM1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

from a bill to put local postmasters on the merit system as a way to increase their efficiency, to the "back-to-the-land" movement in which urban residents were encouraged to relocate to the country as a way of providing cultural uplift to the provinces (among other goals).¹⁵⁷ A congressional bill to improve country life employed much the same terms: "All that is needed are plans adjusted to the conditions of modern life ... and the standards of cultivation and rural life that will prevail to attract the right kind of people and build up a sound, prosperous, and patriotic life on the land."¹⁵⁸ An admiring 1916 piece in *Survey Midmonthly* about civic cooperation in the Arizona desert illustrates this process of modernization especially effectively; what separates it from the standard story of civic boosterism is the way the article links the communities' success to the proper use of positive localism and the careful avoidance of negative localism. Settlers to Arizona began by cooperating to share water resources, but out of these contacts emerged organizations to meet the needs of friendship and socialization; gradually, these communities took on bigger civic projects, including clean streets, street lights, and parks. The article goes on to say, "Settlers come here from the North, the East, the South, and the West. Hence a cosmopolitanism is to be found such as is rare in other rural communities. The welding together of all [these] types ... makes possible a type of true democracy." In other words, the growth of strong communities was due to pursuing positive localism (social ties, cooperation, unity in diversity) while overcoming the negative localism of narrow-mindedness, backwardness, and insularity. As the author put it, these settlers succeeded because they were able to "cast aside the customs and prejudices of their old localities which they have found to be hampering, and to

¹⁵⁷ "The American Way," *The Nation* 104, no. 2698 (15 March 1917): 302; William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press/National University Publications, 1974), 67.

¹⁵⁸ U.S. Congress. House. *Creation of Organized Rural Communities to Demonstrate the Benefits of Planned Settlement and Supervised Rural Development*. 71st Cong., Calendar No. 30, Report No. 23 (16 May 1929): 1-11.

preserve and develop in new surroundings such traditions, measures, and standards as have proved to be beneficial."¹⁵⁹ A communitarian like Mary Parker Follett could not have said it better herself.

As nationalizers sought structures they could use to modernize more established communities, one of the central sites they focused on was the local school; school buildings could double as community centers, and education itself was in many ways seen as the optimal localist instrument of national modernization. As *Educational Review* wrote,

People [are realizing] as never before what a great democratizing agent the public school system is and may be. We have learned that, in order to maintain and to promote our national aspirations and our ideals of democracy, must begin at the bottom—with the community—the social, political and economic foundation of modern society.¹⁶⁰

John Dewey, still one of the most influential theorists of education, described one of the purposes of education as the "development within the young of the attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society," among which he included "social efficiency" and "personal mental enrichment." While he did not explicitly speak of saving youth from the narrow-minded "prehensile morons" of local America, he did call for the "comparatively modern ... relaxation of the grip of the authority of custom and traditions as standards of belief," which in Deweyan terms was close enough.¹⁶¹ Of course, there was some question whether country folk would be smart enough to benefit from modern education; as one expert cautioned, "Farm bookkeeping requires considerable figuring ability if one is to follow such a scientific method as the cost-accounting system of the New York College of

¹⁵⁹ Caroline B. Sherman, "Democratizing the Desert," *Survey Midmonthly* 46 (16 August 1921): 593-594.

¹⁶⁰ "Lessons in Community and National Life," *Educational Review* (March 1921): 242-7.

¹⁶¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, vol. 9 of *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 26, 138, 314.

Agriculture."¹⁶² *The American City* proposed sending city and farm kids to the same schools, which would give the children "better education advantages than they now have. Their vision would become broader."¹⁶³ While the magazine outlined advantages to both city and country kids, in context there was little doubt that it was the narrow-minded farm kids who most needed their vision broadened. And if this faith in education was not universally shared, that was often because of doubt about the effectiveness of using local institutions to modernize those same localities, especially in the years following the Scopes Trial. As one critic wrote:

[O]ver very great areas in the United States, especially in rural sections, the schools are still so meagerly supported and miserably poor that they are little if at all better than no schools at all. The situation is traceable to our fatuous obsession for localism in school affairs. You may apostrophize local self-government, but if you expect to get efficiency through 150,000 different school boards your sentimentality leads you to expect the impossible.¹⁶⁴

Central to all of these modernizing projects was a belief in communication: if only Americans could communicate better with each other—end the isolation of the provinces, expose scientific truths, share the most modern information, talk with each other as neighbors—then social progress through national unity would be possible. This was the idea behind, for example, Upton Sinclair's call for a national newspaper to end "sectionalism"; it was the inspiration for the muckrakers who believed that knowledge of corruption would lead people to take action against it; it was behind Ruth Seinfeld's call for "textbooks for moderns" featuring "discussions of sex,

¹⁶² Felix Sper, "Why Is a Farmer?" *The Nation* 112, no. 2899 (26 January 1921): 116-117.

¹⁶³ "The Town and the Country Are One in Interests," *The American City* 23, no. 2 (August 1920): 137.

¹⁶⁴ Henry C. Morrison, "What Have the Schools Accomplished?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (13 November 1932): 12. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

politics, and religion" despite the benighted "hysteria" of "sentimental" locals.¹⁶⁵ Mastery of communications technology was so closely linked to the nationalizers' self-image that one writer for *The Nation* joked that his generation's attitude was: "I telegraph, therefore I am."¹⁶⁶ As Jean Quandt points out, communication was especially central to the thinking of the Progressives, with Dewey, Addams, and Follett particularly interested in the power of face-to-face communication to bring about cultural understanding and social unity.¹⁶⁷

Rarely did anyone seem to consider the possibility that improved communication could exacerbate disunity, that putting, say, F. Scott Fitzgerald's books next to Zane Grey's would be less likely to change local attitudes than simply to sell more westerns.¹⁶⁸ Instead, as the *New York Times* said, "No phrase-tag of opinion is more familiar than that modern means of communication have obliterated State lines and made this vast land one nation. The work has been done by the railway, the telegraph, the automobile, radio, the moving picture."¹⁶⁹ Here, too, the Progressives proved themselves forward-looking modernizers: while valorizing face-to-face communication, they were still strongly interested in communications technology, hoping that the communication revolution would overcome the limits of geography, multiply the frequency

¹⁶⁵ Upton Sinclair, "Building an Honest Newspaper," *The Nation* 110, no. 2849 (7 February 1920): 168-170; Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public*, 7; Ruth Seinfeld, "Textbooks for Moderns," *The Nation* 124, no. 3229 (25 May 1927): 579-580.

¹⁶⁶ "Survival of Letter-Writing," *The Nation* 70, no. 1801 (4 January 1900): 5-6.

¹⁶⁷ Quandt, *From the Small Town*, especially Chapter 3.

¹⁶⁸ Despite the canonization of national-class favorites like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, the most popular writers of the 1920s were Zane Grey, Gene Stratton-Porter, and Harold Bell Wright. Grey in particular sold millions of books; in contrast, *This Side of Paradise* sold about 50,000 copies. When Fitzgerald died in 1940, 23,000 copies of *The Great Gatsby*'s first two printings were still sitting unsold in a warehouse. See Miller, *New World Coming*, 215 and 223.

¹⁶⁹ "Persistent Sectionalism," *New York Times*, (24 September 1922): 34. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

and diversity of contacts, and provide an endless supply of scientific information and enlightened viewpoints to help modernize even the most hidebound provinces.¹⁷⁰

Such tensions serve as an important reminder that the political project of stitching the local into the modern was in constant competition with the social process of class differentiation and cultural distinction. As Levine points out, cultural elites could even have a vested interest in maintaining the markers of cultural distinction, notwithstanding all of the talk of uplift and eradicating difference:

Despite all of the rhetoric to the contrary ... there were comforts to be derived from the situation as well. Lift the people out of their cultural milieu, wipe them clean, elevate their tastes, and where in this world of burgeoning democracy was one to locate distinctiveness? How could one justify any longer the disparate conditions in which the various classes lived and worked?¹⁷¹

When analyzing the modernizing project of the national class, too, it is important to keep in mind that, despite the national class's growing economic and cultural power, institutional political power was dominated by representatives of the traditional local middle class throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. As a report reprinted in the *New York Times* observed, "Candidates for the offices of Governor, Congressman, Senator do not hold the majority of their campaign meetings in the large cities ... but in the small towns. Here they assemble the voters who hold the balance of power in the nation."¹⁷² The Republicans, whose base of popular support was the traditional middle class, controlled Congress for the entire decade of the 1920s, with two proudly locally minded figures, Warren G. Harding of Marion, Ohio, and Calvin Coolidge of Northampton, Vermont presiding as Localist-In-Chief for most of that time. Harding, in

¹⁷⁰ Quandt, *From the Small Town*, 33-35.

¹⁷¹ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 227.

¹⁷² "Small Towns," *New York Times*, (24 December 1922): 26. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (13 May 2005).

particular, was closely linked to Main Street, declaring that "there is more happiness in the American small village than in any place on earth." He refused to even leave his hometown to campaign for the presidency. As journalist Mark Sullivan remarked, "To understand Harding you had to know Marion."¹⁷³ Coolidge, who had what historian Nathan Miller called a "small-town New England mind," was equally provincial; as Michigan Senator James Couzens griped to the president, "You have a Northampton viewpoint, instead of a national viewpoint."¹⁷⁴

The national class held these figures in predictably low esteem. Walter Lippmann complained about the "provincial, ignorant politicians" running the country, while Mencken declared of Harding, "No other such complete and dreadful nitwit is to be found in the pages of American history."¹⁷⁵ *The Nation* snidely called Coolidge "our offering to the ancient homilies ... a totem of the seventies," by which, of course, it meant the 1870s.¹⁷⁶ But it was Mencken's overall assessment of the country's leadership that best captured the despair of the national class over the perpetually disappointing outcomes of U.S. democratic politics: "We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron."¹⁷⁷

The point of this national-class anti-localist rhetoric was not merely to feel superior or marginalize the morons who continually voted politicians like Harding into office, but actually to wrest political power from the local middle class. There was, in other words, an important and

¹⁷³ Qtd. in Miller, *New World Coming*, 61.

¹⁷⁴ Qtd. in Harry Barnard, *Independent Man: The Life of Senator James Couzens* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 178.

¹⁷⁵ Qtd. in Ronald Steele, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 169; Qtd. in Miller, *New World Coming*, 83.

¹⁷⁶ Benjamin Stolberg, "Walter Lippmann, Connoisseur of Public Life," *The Nation* 125, no. 3257 (7 December 1927): 641.

¹⁷⁷ H. L. Mencken, *Carnival of Buncombe*, 19.

structuring tension between urban professionals' economic and cultural power, and their relative weakness in legislative and executive institutions. This tension would become critically important in radio regulation, where national-class bureaucrats like Hoover and the FRC (controlled by men hand-picked by Hoover) had to work within a political climate dominated by the traditional local middle class. As was made especially clear to the FRC in 1928, when the Commissioners came under severe attack by Congress, their modernizing purpose required careful navigation of the political waters, including more skillful use of the discourses and structures of localism.

IIIa. Radio in the National-Class Project

When radio broadcasting emerged in the 1920s, it was soon clear that it had the potential to support this modernizing agenda like no previous form of communication. As Susan Douglas points out, radio had been socially constructed for twenty years as one of the pinnacles of modernity, and a large part of its mystique was its ability to overcome the social, cultural, and intellectual limitations of pre-modern life by transcending distance and connecting remote communities and isolated individuals with the greater social body.¹⁷⁸ The teleology that was constructed for radio was the elimination of the local as a determining factor in American life; one might not be able to easily leave one's locale in a physical sense, but radio enabled the listener to visit the outside world spiritually from even the most remote and isolated location. As historian Randall Patnode points out, metaphors of travel and bridging distance ran rampant in discussions of early radio, such as the Atwater Kent ad that called radio "your passport to the four corners of the country," or an ad for speakers promising that listening to the 1924

¹⁷⁸ Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 23-25, 303-314.

presidential candidates on its equipment would be like having the campaign be "waged right in your own home."¹⁷⁹ Through the wireless, the rural dweller as well as the urbanite could broaden their horizons, explore new vistas, and learn from others, though the urbanite was sure that he needed such flights less than the rural dweller. Many of these discourses, then, were clearly aimed at rural folk and posited an "excess" of localism in rural and small-town America as a kind of disability for which national radio provided the cure. As one RCA ad assured readers: "Radio ... drives away that sense of isolation which is perhaps the greatest handicap of agricultural life."¹⁸⁰ Patnode argues, "By the 1920s, the farmer's relationship to his land—once a virtue—had become a handicap, owing to its isolation from the wellspring of modernism, the city. Radio promised to restore the farmer's tarnished morality not by reconnecting him with the land but by allowing him to transcend it."¹⁸¹

Large corporate broadcasters, intent on profiting from national broadcasting, pushed this discourse particularly vigorously. RCA's David Sarnoff spoke of "keep[ing] the remotest home in the land attuned to the thought and doings of the great world outside," and solemnly intoned, "I hold a stronger brief for the lonely prairie home where radio has become an essential utility rather than a luxury, than for the dweller in many of our larger cities."¹⁸² Similarly, the president of RCA, J. G. Harboard, argued that national radio's greatest social benefit lay in bringing urban culture to rural America: "[T]he farmhouse is in touch with city life; its isolation has forever

¹⁷⁹ Both qtd. in Randall Patnode, "'What These People Need Is Radio': New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America," *Technology and Culture* 44, no. 2 (April 2003): 297.

¹⁸⁰ "The Man on the Farm" (Advertisement), FRC Correspondence: Box 139, Folder "1732."

¹⁸¹ Patnode, "What These People Need Is Radio," 298.

¹⁸² David Sarnoff, "Address by Mr. David Sarnoff, Vice President and General Manager of RCA," Third Radio Conference Called By and Under the Auspices of the United States Department of Commerce, 10. Hoover Papers: Box 496, Folder "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)."

gone. . . . Whenever there is something of unusual interest in the distant city, [the farmer] may be fairly sure that the grouping of stations will bring the event to his sitting-room."¹⁸³ Other industry insiders and their allies praised network radio for making the "talent of our great cities available everywhere," as when *Radio Broadcast* highlighted the life-saving effect of bringing "civilization," in this case in the form of a Bach sonata, to the locals: "Those stranded souls who live in the territory rather vulgarly called the sticks depend much on what the broadcasters offer, and how much more worth while radio must make life!"¹⁸⁴ RCA's house engineer Alfred Goldsmith and Austin Lescarboursa took this trope even one step further, arguing that national-class radio possessed not just the power to banish rural loneliness and uplift the people, but the miraculous ability to completely transform the pre-modern, knuckle-dragging local yokel into a modern, cosmopolitan, man-about-town. Thanks to radio,

[when] the farmer walks down the street of the city, smooth-shaven, neatly dressed, self-possessed—nobody turns to stare . . . [He is] no longer a Rube but a man of the world, sympathetic with his fellow men . . . [D]ue as much to the widespread influence of radio on all cultural and financial aspects of his daily life, he is truly a citizen of the world."¹⁸⁵

The idea of "national" radio service thus became synonymous with a one-way transfer of "culture" from the cities to the provinces with the aim of uplifting the backward farmer and small-town dweller, making radio an ally of a national culture centered on cosmopolitan values in the struggle between localism and modernity. As an article in *Wireless Age* predicted, in

¹⁸³ J. G. Harboard, "Radio and the Farmer," Speech delivered to the Advertising Club of New York, 16 September 1925, 5, 10. FRC Correspondence: Box 139, Folder "1732."

¹⁸⁴ "Reports of Subcommittees: Subcommittee No. 1: General allocation of frequency or wave-length bands," in Recommendations for Regulation of Radio Adopted by the Third National Radio Conference, 13. Hoover Papers: Box 496, Folder "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)"; Kingsley Welles, "Brooms for Symphonies," *Radio Broadcast* 7, no. 6 (October 1925), 755.

¹⁸⁵ Alfred N. Goldsmith and Austin C. Lescarboursa, *This Thing Called Broadcasting: A Simple Tale of an Idea, an Experiment, a Mighty Industry, a Daily Habit, and a Basic Influence in our Modern Civilization* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1930), 258-59.

arguing that urban cultural fare would "emancipate" Main Street from the mental bondage of negative localism: "The small village of the past, with its warped outlook on life, its ignorance of current events, its mean and petty superstitions, is in a line to be completely 'revamped,' as it were."¹⁸⁶ Such observers betrayed their national-class prejudices in presuming that the provinces would want nothing more than to listen to the cosmopolitan tastes and going-ons of the city, which is why they were so sure that silent nights, the practice whereby local stations stopped broadcasting for an evening so that listeners could pick up distant stations, would only catch on in the burghs, not the cities: "The best radio programs obtainable are sent out from New York, so what is the use of depriving the listeners of [this] entertainment ... Silent night may be observed on Main Street, but it never will be on Broadway."¹⁸⁷

The national class was equally vehement that the national interest, rather than small-minded local concerns, should guide radio policy. As I discuss in the next two chapters, the system of local licensees that grew out of the amateur era would, in this view, need to be managed on an efficient, national scale. As *Radio Broadcast* put it, "Radio is too large a force to deal with the many petty social and political differences of village and town—it deals with matters of state and nation, with matters of international importance."¹⁸⁸ The large corporate broadcasters repeatedly expressed the dream of unifying the country through national radio, as in this remarkable vision of national homogeneity from the Chicago Broadcasters Association:

And there come hours at a time, during some of those marvelous chain station broadcasts when millions of Americans, of all racial antecedents, all religions, all political convictions, rich and poor, cultured and unlettered, sit listening to the same thing, getting the same inspiration, thinking the same thoughts. Millions of

¹⁸⁶ Qtd. in Patnode, "What These People Need Is Radio," 298.

¹⁸⁷ "Current Events In Radio," *Radio Broadcast* 7, no. 5 (September 1925), 601.

¹⁸⁸ McKibbin, "The New Way to Make Americans," 239.

American minds, adolescent and adult, are for the time being concentrated on the same thing, marching in phalanx, thinking in unity, wholly in accord.¹⁸⁹

Despite prioritizing the task of getting all Americans marching toward what they viewed as the common national interest, it is important to keep in mind that the nationalizers' attitude was not "anti-localist" per se but rather a distinction between "positive" and "negative" localism in the service of their vision of the modern American nation. In that sense, they were willing to use local structures to encourage positive localism or, if necessary, to contain negative localism. I have already mentioned the prime example of this flexibility in the early twentieth century, the case of Prohibition, for which "life-long Hamiltonians," as John Dewey put it, conveniently began to "play a tune *ad hoc* on the Jeffersonian flute."¹⁹⁰ But the same situational embrace of localism by the national class obtained in radio as well, a good example being the struggle over radio on Sundays. Many states and municipalities around the country prohibited various kinds of activities on Sundays, including movie exhibition. Naturally, then, there was a push for "Blue Radio Sundays," reserving that day for religious programming. At the initial FRC conference in March, 1927, for example, a religious broadcaster from Louisville, Ky. urged the Commission that, "inasmuch as the Lord gives us the air and he set aside one day for rest ... that one day might well be reserved in honor of Him who furnishes the whole business."¹⁹¹ His was a lonely voice, and the corporate broadcasters who dominated the conference spoke quickly and vehemently against such notions. One representative from a Milwaukee newspaper even

¹⁸⁹ William J. Clark, "Educational Value of Radio Broadcasting," in Souvenir Program from the Chicago Broadcasters Association Annual Benefit at Rainbow Gardens (28 February 1927). Mass Communications Ephemera: Box 3, Folder 5.

¹⁹⁰ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 133.

¹⁹¹ W. H. Bennett in "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C.," 31 March 1927, 341. Hoover Papers: Box 491, Folder "Radio: Conference, 3/31/27."

claimed that banning secular programming on Sundays could be counterproductive, offering the example of a fellow newspaperman. This colleague had been listening to jazz on the radio on a Sunday when a sermon came on; the newspaperman was so moved by what he had heard that he would be joining a church in two weeks.¹⁹² Given such widespread opposition to the idea of blue radio Sundays, it was resolved to leave the question up to the individual broadcaster, conveniently allowing local solutions to a cultural restriction that the national class viewed as backward and retrograde.

Although representatives of the traditional local middle class dominated Congress and the White House during most of the 1920s, most early radio regulators, like the most powerful figures in the industry, were clearly aligned with the national class and stood philosophically and politically behind its modern social vision. In part, this was biographical: the regulators themselves, by and large, were far removed from quaint notions of the small town and the local community. Unlike Congressmen who can easily rise to power by aligning with the interests of local elites and opposing the federal culture and values of "Washington," Hoover and other

¹⁹² G. W. Grignon in "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C.," 31 March 1927, 348. Hoover Papers: Box 491, Folder "Radio: Conference, 3/31/27." Grignon's story provoked a fellow attendee to joke: "The gentlemen of the press have stood by courageously and seen one of their number turn his face to religion, two weeks hence." As this remark indicates through its knowing sarcasm, the cultural lines both in the conference and society at large were clearly drawn, with sophisticated urban newspapermen and broadcasters on one side, and the evangelical preachers of places like Louisville on the other. Indeed, the religious broadcasters in attendance clearly did not fully understand that those most in control of radio were interested in furthering modernity, not containing it through blue laws and the like. For example, one evangelical broadcaster pleaded for regulation that would help radio support, rather than supplant, traditional local values, explicitly linking broadcasting to a project of protecting the traditional local middle class:

I am here to plead ... for a great place for religion [in radio]. We are facing some very paramount issues in America. We are facing the great issue of motivation in human character. ... Now out in your village places ... we are losing out in our country churches. Your little cross-roads church, where you got your conception of God and your high ideal, is no more. ... The wilderness is there but the church is not there. The automobile and other modern facilities and luxuries that have come have taken men here and yonder.

He hoped, in other words, that radio could be used to undo some of the damage to the local that modernization had wrought. Unsurprisingly, his words met with little acclaim from most of the other participants at the conference. Alfred J. McCosker in "Before the Federal Radio Commission," 1 April 1927, 410; Paul Rader in "Before the Federal Radio Commission," 1 April 1927, 474. Both in Hoover Papers: Box 491, Folder "Radio: Conference, 4/1/27."

policymakers were in fact selected for their ability to integrate smoothly into the bureaucratic, technocratic, translocal universe of modern national governance. Wiebe even singles out Herbert Hoover not merely as a spokesman for the national class, but as no less than "the class prophet, drumming incessantly" for the nationalizers' goal of modern efficiency and centralized rationality.¹⁹³ Although some of the top Radio Division and Federal Radio Commission personnel, including Hoover, originally came from places like West Branch, Iowa and Lexington, Kentucky, by the time they reached the Commission they were seasoned cosmopolitans far removed from quaint notions of the small town and the local community: they were big-city broadcasting executives and globetrotting engineers and influential New York editors. Like Wiebe's school superintendent, forsaking local loyalty for a translocal career path, they had made their choice, transferring to the cities and aligning themselves primarily with others of their profession nationally rather than with others of their locality as members of a local middle class. Most were also selected by Hoover for their sympathy with his national-class vision of radio. Once in power, they exhibited little of the provincialism of whatever small-town roots they may have carried with them, and even occasionally gave in to Mencken-style anti-localism. For example, in a chummy note from Commissioner Charles McKinley Saltzman to NBC President Merlin Aylesworth, Saltzman grouched sarcastically about the "important problems" on his desk, "such as whether Henry Field at Shenandoah, Ioway, should be allowed a radio station to advertise the price of a fresh consignment of prunes."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 209.

¹⁹⁴ Charles McK. Saltzman to Merlin H. Aylesworth, 17 February 1932. NBC: Box 9, Folder 50. Similarly, Orestes Caldwell used exaggerated southern dialect to mock rural preachers for their bad sermons, promising that quality sermons, delivered nationally through radio, would mercifully put them out of business: "[Radio's] going to make them git to work on the roads or sumpn." Orestes H. Caldwell, "Preachers Storm as Radio Roars: Facing Ouster, Clerical Bores Rant and Rave in Face of Electronic Threat" (fake press release?), n.d. (30 March 1930?). Caldwell Papers: Box 1, "Press Releases."

In negotiating the tension between the local and the national, however, as well as between positive and negative localism, agent-position was more important than biography: These regulators' view of radio was from a federal perch, and their responsibility was not to accommodate national projects to local idiosyncrasies but rather to subsume and level out local conditions within an efficient and rational national system. Despite being required to make decisions involving the political, cultural, and economic intricacies of hundreds of localities, they lacked the time and resources to truly understand and appreciate local conditions. With five to seven hundred stations to manage, they saw themselves as having no choice but to develop uniform guidelines and national standards. Furthermore, their overriding concern was with the health of the field as a whole, not with individual stations; as Wiebe points out, "During the 1920s the very meaning of public policy changed to take on broad responsibilities for a smooth running, comprehensive economy," of which radio was an increasingly important part.¹⁹⁵ Likewise, many of the industry executives, engineers, and attorneys with whom these policymakers consulted exhibited a similarly national perspective and a similar responsibility to manage radio on a national scale. Localism, for regulators and key industry figures alike, was not a value to be nurtured and protected from the modern world, but an obstacle to be overcome in exercising the power and duties of their offices.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 209.

¹⁹⁶ While emphasizing that positionality mattered more than identity in exercising federal radio regulation, it is also worth pointing out that identity, i.e. the role that Trouillot's "actors" play in the historical process, cannot be entirely discounted. One of the dangers of correcting "great man" historiography with more culturally and structurally inflected analyses, as I am trying to do here, is the possibility of overlooking when a particular individual actually makes a substantial difference in the course of events. In that spirit, it must be pointed out the Herbert Hoover was a rare figure in the largely localist Harding administration—so progressive and nationally-minded that he could easily have identified as a Democrat rather than a Republican. In other words, by any of Trouillot's categories—agent, actor, or subject—Hoover was a national-class figure in a cabinet populated by representatives of the traditional middle class. Therefore, it was in some ways mere historic chance that a Herbert Hoover, rather than, say, a Will Hays, was running the Commerce Department during this critical time for radio, and if another individual had been

Hoover himself frequently insisted that "radio will not have reached its full service" until a national radio system was in place.¹⁹⁷ His goal was to establish a system within which "radio fans may receive an even more vital contact with our national life; that is, to receive constantly improving programs of entertainment, larger participation in the discussion of public questions, in vital events and important news."¹⁹⁸ In this model, consistent with the discourses celebrating the modernizing and civilizing influence of radio discussed above, the power and benefit of national broadcasting was not for the cities to listen to the hinterlands, but for the hinterlands to listen to the cities. The farmer, while always acknowledged as the salt of the earth, was constructed as culturally bereft: lonely, isolated, and cut off from society, trapped in a miserable pre-modern existence from which only the modern miracle of wireless could save him. Hoover applauded radio for its benefit "to our farmer folks ... bringing more of those contacts that the town populations have enjoyed up to this time," as if he imagined that farmers went weeks without talking to another living soul.¹⁹⁹ The FRC continued this rhetoric, promising that their policies would help the lonely farmer. For example, in General Order 40, the Commission

in charge, radio history might have followed a very different course. For example, there was a substantial push for *local* regulation leading up to and at the Fourth Radio Conference in 1925; had a less nationally-minded figure than Hoover been making the decisions, might some or all of that local regulation have taken root instead of the concentration of policymaking and regulation at the federal level?

Hoover was also largely responsible for selecting the first FRC members, and he picked people who shared his national vision for radio. Although a locally minded Commissioner like West Virginian Ira Robinson did help shape early regulation—e.g. he appears to have been singularly responsible for limiting the number of clear channels to forty, much to the frustration of Caldwell and others—the majority of the FRC throughout its tenure was drawn from and allied with the national class.

¹⁹⁷ Herbert Hoover, "Address by Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, by Radio to Convention of National Electric Light Association at Atlantic City May 21, 1924," 4. Hoover Papers: Box 490, Folder "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1924 Apr.-Sep."

¹⁹⁸ Herbert Hoover, "Radio Problems—Address Before California Radio Exposition, San Francisco," 16 August 1924, 8. Hoover Papers: Box 490, Folder "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1924 Apr.-Sep."

¹⁹⁹ "Secretary Hoover Reviews Radio Situation" (Press Release), (8 February 1925). Hoover Papers: Box 490, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1925 Jan.-Apr."

used the terminology of "national" stations to "rural" stations interchangeably, and claimed that the farmers and residents in small towns would most benefit from the reallocation.²⁰⁰ The point, for the industry as well as its overseers, was not to put an urbanizing society back in touch with its rural, small-town roots, but to spread national cosmopolitan culture, economic structures, and social ideas throughout the land. It was, in other words, to integrate the local into the nationalizers' modern nation.

The question, then, was on whose terms modernization would proceed in and through radio. Rural Americans may or may not have been entirely immune to the nationalizers' "modern miracle" rhetoric, but they were certainly not immune to the utilitarian appeal of radio, which offered immediate practical benefits that directly improved farmers' lives. Most notably, weather reports helped farmers plan and optimize their labor, while market reports began to level the playing field between producers and the purchasers who had long been able to take advantage of the farmers' ignorance of current crop prices.²⁰¹ Radio manufacturers appealed to this use value—Atwater Kent urged farmers to "Buy your radio just as you buy your farm machinery"—and farmers adopted the new technology at a stunning rate, slowed only by the obstacles of cost and electrification (battery-powered models were very popular in rural areas). By 1930, between forty-five and seventy percent of farm families owned radios.²⁰² But what began as "necessary equipment" was soon the centerpiece of the reorganization of family and social life in rural America. Historian Hal S. Barron has shown how the rural embrace of radio precipitated numerous changes, from the death of the Chautauqua to the adaptation of work

²⁰⁰ "New Allocation Plan to Reduce Radio Interference Made Effective," *New York Herald-Tribune* (?), 12 November 1928. FRC Correspondence: Box 23, "Re Allocation of Wave Lengths by Radio Commission."

²⁰¹ Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 216.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 216-217.

schedules to mesh with program schedules. Many rural Americans, like their cosmopolitan counterparts, hoped that broadcasting would provide the fruits of cultural modernization in their locales; as one farmer from Roachdale, Indiana, wrote in a wonderfully clipped language: "Would like for the farmers to be able to hear any city of any size in the U.S. so we can learn from that particular point their ways of expressing their views. ... Asking this: that life on the farm be made more endurable."²⁰³

Other observers, however, were more suspicious of encountering the modernization project on national-class terms. Complained one journalist from Estherville, Iowa, rural inhabitants were "preoccupied with riding in their automobiles or listening to 'Amos and Andy,' 'Fibber McGee and Molly,' and other classics on the radio. They forgot about improving their minds and their morals."²⁰⁴ Indeed, as that quotation indicates, the very technology of radio could be seen as potentially corrupting, introducing modern new habits and practices that undermined the traditional morals of rural society in its search for the "popular." Even when small-town listeners were tuning in WLS' *Barn Dance* rather than WGN's jazz programs, radio itself seemed to some rural Americans to be an agent of urban modern culture that came in like an alien to reorganize the time, space, and values of rural life. Radio, in other words, threatened to disrupt traditional cultural patterns and undermine the status of local elites, structures that for more than half a century had been understood and supported through discourses of positive localism and small-town virtue. The tensions that radio introduced into rural life, therefore, were constructed not so much a struggle between modernity and localism (as they were for the

²⁰³ C. C. Dodds to U.S. Dept. of Commerce, (2 January 1929). FRC Correspondence: Box 23, "Re Allocation of Wave Lengths by Radio Commission."

²⁰⁴ Qtd. in Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 222.

cosmopolitan), but a struggle over the correct place of modernity *within* the local. These tensions will be discussed at length in chapters Three and Four.

IIIb. The National Class and its Discontents

As the foregoing suggests and as I will demonstrate more fully in the next chapter, early federal radio regulation was exercised by national-class-minded bureaucrats according to national-class cultural values and a national-class desire to modernize the country through radio. Occasionally using "positive" localism to carry out their political project, their main concern was in containing—preferably eliminating—"negative" localism, i.e. the provincialism, inefficiency, backwardness, local "selfishness," and moralizing tyranny (such as Prohibition) of the traditional middle class and their rural allies. After 1934, however, there was a reconsideration of localism in the face of the economic and political changes of the 1930s, and radio policy began to reflect that reevaluation in the late 1930s. But the seeds of that shift can be seen earlier, in the period I have discussed in this chapter, and for that reason I will briefly address some of the fissures in national-class culture that became visible in the 1920s and would become politically consequential in the 1930s.

One of these fissures was a growing dismay with the culture of cosmopolitanism—or at least the repeated claims of cosmopolitanism among urban dwellers. There was nothing especially new in this. In 1894 Teddy Roosevelt had derided "that flaccid habit of mind which its possessors style cosmopolitanism,"²⁰⁵ while as early as 1908, O. Henry mocked the urbanite's pretensions to worldliness—what one might call the provincialism of the cosmopolitan—in one of his Jeff Peters stories:

²⁰⁵ Qtd. in Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 236.

This New Yorker ... hadn't been above Fourteenth Street in ten years. He was a typical city Reub [*sic*]—I'd bet the man hadn't been out of sight of a skyscraper in twenty-five years. ... He's lived twenty years on one street without learning as much as you would in getting a once-over shave from a lock-jawed barber in a Kansas cross-roads town.²⁰⁶

In that sense, it might seem merely like the continuation of a tradition when Mary Parker Follett wrote in 1918, "Why are provincial people more interesting than cosmopolitan, that is, if provincial people have taken advantage of their opportunities? Because cosmopolitan people are all alike—that has been the aim of their existence and they have accomplished it."²⁰⁷ But what was different in the postwar puncturing of the cosmopolitan's self-image, however, was a new note of fear of cultural homogenization, of being "all alike." As with other sectors of society, the national class was not immune to anxieties about standardization and mass production, and clearly World War I had altered Americans' relationship with notions of technological "progress." A writer in *The Nation* nicely captured this tension between a sense of wonderment at the miracles of modernity and dismay about where it might lead: after witnessing a skywriter use the astonishing feat of flight to puff out an ad for Lucky Strikes, he wrote, "If anyone wants an illustration of the blending of real grandeur with indescribable meanness which our civilization affords we commend him to this illustration. If anyone wants ammunition for the argument that if we don't look out the machine will kill the soul--here it is, too."²⁰⁸ Such concerns about the negative effects of modernization continued to grow throughout the postwar period, even as the national class was ridiculing everything "old-fashioned." Frederick Jackson Turner, in his 1926 defense of sectionalism, spoke of "a deadly uniformity" that had overtaken

²⁰⁶ O. Henry, "Innocents of Broadway" (1908), <http://www.literaturecollection.com/a/o_henry/57/> (16 April 2006).

²⁰⁷ Follett, *The New State*, 195.

²⁰⁸ "Editorial," *The Nation* 116, no. 3022 (6 June 1923): 643.

American life. Even a proud nationalizer like Sherwood Anderson, who in 1925 had celebrated the diversity and excitement of the city by saying, "I do not want to join the chorus of men who cry out against modern life,"²⁰⁹ by the end of the decade was singing in tune with that chorus:

The newspaper in Los Angeles is exactly like the newspaper in Detroit Individuality has simply been swamped; sectionalism and localism have been swamped. There isn't any provincialism any more, except perhaps in New York City. Everything is standardized now--our cigarettes, our clothes, our houses, our thoughts. The machine has triumphed. ... We have got each in his own way to begin to fight to make ourselves figures with at least some of the dignity modern men have built into their machines.²¹⁰

With the emergence of economic crisis in the 1930s, as well as the rise of fascism in Europe, this despair about the modernizing project became even more pronounced, even drawing suspicion of radio into its orbit of anxiety. Anne O'Hare McCormick, for example, unsettled by her first encounter with radio in an automobile, realized what modernity had wrought: "Perhaps inflamed localism is the instinctive recoil from the universal and the world-wide, the last stand of nations as we have known nations, against the scientific destruction of nations."²¹¹ For a car radio to provoke such a response, clearly broader social realignment was underway.

Slowly, over the course of about a decade, a reevaluation of the local in all its sentimental and inefficient incarnations became more acceptable within national-class discourse. The modern corporate order in which the national class had found its place

²⁰⁹ Sherwood Anderson, "Living in America," *The Nation* 120, no. 3127 (10 June 1925): 657-658.

²¹⁰ Qtd. in "Asserts Farm Need Is Marketing Aid," *New York Times*, (13 August 1929): 8. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

²¹¹ Anne O'Hare McCormick, "Radio: A Great Unknown Force," *New York Times*, (27 March 1932): SM1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

was obviously in severe straits during the Depression, and their vaunted urban cosmopolitan culture was increasingly in disarray. Perhaps the traditional local class was, for all its vulgarity, worth another look—and what the nationalizers saw when they looked was a tremendous communal effort, using "local patriotism" and other tropes of positive localism to organize food and clothing drives: "Nobody is going to starve in *this* town this Winter."²¹² The always-wonderful McCormick perfectly captured the nationalizers' quandary in 1932 of still thoroughly disrespecting the "common man" of Main Street but seeing no place else to turn for answers to this crisis in the very fabric of modernity. So rich are the contradictions here, so visible the national-class prejudices and insecurities, and so good the writing that it is worth quoting at length:

[I]t seems to me that it is time to pin a sprig of mistletoe on the shiny lapel of the American who is never heard on the air or on the Hill ... I refer, of course, not to the prominent citizen but to the little fellow--the small manufacturer, the independent merchant, the farmer, the country doctor ... Maybe this American is not the brains of the country, wherever they are. He understands little of the world-wrecking transfer system of international bankers ... His ideas on planned economy are desperately personal. But he is just as confused as if he were an expert in these intricate matters. He has the haziest notions of the epoch-making changes in which he is involved. For the most part he is looking backward rather than forward. You'd be surprised to know how many millions in this progressive nation are homesick for the past. If there is a hero of this hour, however, it is this average American. If the country weathers crises, it is because he keeps his head and holds on.²¹³

An editorial in the *New York Times* explicitly connected this Depression-era loss of faith in the nationalizing project with the "return to localism":

A full half century after the telephone completed the work of the railroad, telegraph and newspaper by standardizing and ironing the American people out of localism and sectionalism into pancake uniformity, people instinctively resort to

²¹² Anne O'Hare McCormick, "The Average American Emerges," *New York Times*, (3 January 1932): SM1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

²¹³ McCormick, "The Average American Emerges," SM1.

community drives. ... In a dozen different ways it can be proved that American civilization today is centralized, mechanized, urbanized. But every emergency finds Americans responding, first of all, to the call of neighborhood fellowship and noisy, costly, democratic 'drives' and 'campaigns.'²¹⁴

The growing discontent over modernization and homogenization represented one key fissure in the nationalizers' worldview; another was what to do about it. It was one thing to organize charity drives and look out a little more diligently for your neighbor; it was another thing to find political solutions to the crisis. Without trying to examine the roots and battles of the New Deal era, I wish to briefly discuss the role of localism in this political crisis. Overstating the case only slightly, one could say that New England localism and Jeffersonian localism were the only two theories of the popular participatory democratic public sphere that Americans had inherited—New England localism as the reliance on a common (spiritual) purpose of the local community to guide public policy and enforce public order, and Jeffersonian localism as an outline for democratic procedures to communicate the will of autonomous individuals upwards through a republican system. Dewey himself made much the same point, arguing that Americans' procedural-democratic inheritance was nearly impossible to think about without the influence of localism:

American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life, that is, association in local and small centers where industry was mainly agricultural and where production was carried on mainly with hand tools. ... The township or some not much larger area was the political unit, the town meeting the political medium, and roads, schools, the peace of the community, were the political objectives. ... The imagination of the founders did not travel far beyond what could be accomplished and understood in a congeries of self-governing communities.²¹⁵

Of course, given formal restrictions on citizenship practiced under both systems of

²¹⁴ "Incurable Villagers," *New York Times*, (7 April 1932): 22. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

²¹⁵ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 111. See also Asen, "The Multiple Mr. Dewey," 174-188.

localism as well as informal differences in social power, American procedural democracy has often been a better theory than practice; as Thomas Bender points out, "[A]fter 1789 local elites, as local elites, continued to shape public policy."²¹⁶

By the 1920s, of course, due in large part to many of the nationalizing trends described above, even the theoretical achievability of politically effective local public spheres had diminished considerably. Centralization, technical specialization, shifts in power from the polity to corporations, and the problems of managing difference and diversity in a complex and radically changed American society combined to make local democracy appear less viable than ever. An important tension within the national class, therefore, was the possibility and even the desirability of participatory self-rule. Thinkers such as Walter Lippmann, George Alger, Harold Lasswell, Edward Bernays, H. L. Mencken, Gustave Le Bon, and many others expressed grave doubts about the ability of the public to understand, much less take creditable action on, the major issues of the day. For example, Lippmann spoke of the so-called "sovereign citizen" as a bewildered puppy, "trying to lick three bones at once" as he considered mass transit issues on Thursday and the role of Britain in the Sudan on Wednesday.²¹⁷ Alger characterized this as the impulse "to make the mass power of the uninformed common man apply to problems which he was incompetent to decide. This program is no longer appealing. There is less interest in these so-called democratic methods than ever before."²¹⁸ Yet other thinkers, notably John Dewey, Mary Parker Follett, George Zueblin, Jane Addams, Frederick Howe, and

²¹⁶ Bender, *Community and Social Change in America*, 85.

²¹⁷ Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), 25.

²¹⁸ Qtd. in "Where Are the Pre-War Radicals?" *Survey* (February 1926): 561-2.

Edward Ward, sought ways to recuperate participatory democracy within the modern nation, usually by turning to variations of local structures (e.g. settlement houses, community centers, schools) that sought to embed the local community within a rationalized "Great Community." As Dewey famously put it, "The essential need . . . is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That is the problem of the public."²¹⁹

Numerous scholars have analyzed this disjuncture in depth, and there is no need to rehearse their analyses and conclusions here.²²⁰ But I do wish to suggest an irony regarding the potential role of U.S. radio in a democratic public sphere. As the national class pursued the project of modernizing American society, they correspondingly reduced the space for and legitimacy of meaningful local political deliberation and action. As they marginalized the local culturally and economically, they severely weakened the structures and institutions for forming and communicating public opinion within local public spheres. Although it would be a gross exaggeration to imply that all local political power was drained from the system, it is fair to say that the range, scope, and strength of that power in the lives of ordinary citizens diminished considerably with the coming of modernity. This process was further encouraged and abetted by the logic of corporate economic forms themselves.

Importantly for this study, the radio industry and radio policy became a participant in this process. By pursuing a broadcasting policy that privileged radio as a nationalizing and modernizing corporate instrument bringing national class culture to the provinces, the Commerce

²¹⁹ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 208.

²²⁰ See for example Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public*, Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, Quandt, *From the Small Town*, Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, Juergen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger in association with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

Department and later the Federal Radio Commission undermined radio's potential as a local public sphere. I will explore this process in depth in later chapters from the perspective of policymakers, the radio industry, and citizens, including how audiences in the 1930s managed to preserve participatory local public spheres in radio despite the nationalizing priorities and preoccupations of both regulators and the industry. For now it is enough to say that when the national class began to re-evaluate its commitment both to urban cosmopolitan culture and to national political and economic structures—when, in Anne O'Hare McCormick's words at the beginning of this chapter, Americans "revived" localism—it was far too late to adjust the social and economic underpinnings of the radio system to reflect that shift in values. Put another way, radio policy was formulated by the national class during a period in which powerful anti-localist discourses were hegemonic in shaping their worldview; although policymakers would use some structures and discourses of localism (such as the local trustee model) to control radio, it was in the service of the nationalizing project described above. As that project fell into crisis, especially in the late 1930s, regulators did belatedly pursue efforts to foster local public spheres through radio, only to find that the national system was too entrenched for their policies and directives to make a substantial difference.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to outline the status of "localism" as a cultural and political force during the era in which American broadcasting policy was established. I have explored the historical precedents in the early republic that profoundly influenced the political and social ideas about the local with which Americans had to work; further, I have outlined the nationalizing trends that resulted in the emergence and rise to power of a national class that was

more invested in centralization, rationalization, and efficiency than in the maintenance of localist or sectionalist structures and differences. This template of efficiency, in the service of a broad project of modernization, led nationalizers to preserve some aspects of localism and reject others. Ultimately, however, the tensions between positive and negative localism proved irresolvable, and a distinctly anti-democratic anti-localism prevailed throughout the 1920s. The effects of this outcome will be more fully explored in the rest of this study, but the implications for the political and cultural role of U.S. radio would prove to be profound.

In various contexts, journalism professor Jay Rosen argued that, in the struggle between what we might think of as the democratic and anti-democratic wings of the national class, i.e. between those like Dewey who argued that direct democracy could be saved and those like Lippmann who believed it could not, Lippmann won the argument but Dewey *should* have.²²¹ My analysis suggests that Dewey could not have won, in large part because the argument in question was waged not so much in the realm of ideas, but in the realm of culture. To "win" the debate, Dewey and his philosophical allies would have had to successfully disarticulate their embrace of the "positive" localism (i.e. participatory democracy and public order through face-to-face communication at the neighborhood level) from their rejection of "negative" localism (anti-national particularism fostered by local privilege and reinforced by irrational and provincial habits of thought). In the context of the 1920s, the possibilities for such a disarticulation were severely curtailed, primarily because cultural issues including Prohibition, violent racism, recalcitrant sectionalism, and anti-scientific religious fanaticism contributed in framing the "local" as a threat not just to the modernizing project but to the national class's very way of life. If one's cultural status and privileged place in the socioeconomic order is premised upon a high

²²¹ See for example Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 70.

valuation of rationality and centralization, it would be difficult to view widespread irrationality and local separatism with equanimity. Furthermore, if your opposition consists, at least in part, of "prehensile morons"—Klansmen, biblical literalists, dry-voting-wet-drinking hypocrites, etc.—it would understandably be difficult to muster the requisite respect to entrust them with democratic control of either the nation's politics or its culture. Finally, if participatory democracy had nonetheless put such localists in Congress and the White House, a reactionary anti-democratic impulse would be understandably difficult to avoid. This cultural dimension of class differentiation, I argue, is ultimately why negative localism proved more powerful than positive localism in how the national class went about its work. As I will demonstrate, national-class representatives could and did use the rhetoric of positive localism to navigate political tensions, but negative localism supported the national structures through which they could exercise real influence and control.

Regardless of who should or should not have won the debate over participatory democracy, however, the key point remains that radio policy and the shape of the media system were structured within cultural struggles much larger than the narrowly defined particulars of "radio" itself, i.e. its scientific properties, economic underpinnings, technological characteristics, and so forth. Discourses and structures of localism, shaped as they were by largely class-based attitudes toward the local, were an important component of those struggles. Previous scholars have often emphasized the legal and technical terms within which media policy was formulated, and doubtless Hoover and other policymakers believed they were merely solving specific engineering problems when they allocated spectrum or made similar policy decisions. In the following chapters, however, I hope to complement the work of scholars who have moved

significantly beyond this view—including Michele Hilmes and Thomas Streeter²²²—by exploring the specific role of discourses and structures of localism in the formation of U.S. radio in the arenas of federal policy and regulation, national networks, and on the local level itself through the actions of audiences, citizens, and local broadcasters.

²²² Hilmes, *Radio Voices*; Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Chapter Two

Establishing the Regulatory Context: Politics, Economics, and the Local-National Divide

In Chapter One, I traced the development of ideas of localism through the nineteenth century, setting the stage for the rise of a "national" class that split off from the traditional local middle class, in part by adopting different attitudes toward localism and the local. Broadly speaking, this national class tended to celebrate the "modern" virtues of centralized efficiency, modern rationality, and trans-local cosmopolitanism; it also tended to associate the traditional "local" with the "pre-modern" vices of backwardness, irrationality, inefficiency, and provincialism. The national class pursued a project of national modernization of the American economy and American culture, seeking to stitch the pre-modern local into their modern social vision, thereby slowly undermining traditional localist structures. Radio regulation, I contended, was formulated largely in accordance with such translocal values of nationalization and modernization.

In this chapter and the next, I will examine that regulatory process more closely. Far from encouraging radio to preserve local identity and reinforce local autonomy and power, regulators used radio to bring the "modern" (in the form of national programming, urban culture, consumerism, formalized financial systems, technical professionalism, etc.) to the "local." Although one could certainly imagine a more efficiently constructed radio system than one based on local licensees, such alternatives were blocked in the U.S. by technical or political obstructions. Foremost among these obstructions was a Congress dominated by the traditional local middle class, whose representatives were trying, through measures like the Davis Amendment, to preserve local economic and cultural power against the encroachment of national

corporations and culture. Regulators navigated the social, economic, and political climate of the 1920s and early 1930s by frequently using discourses and structures of localism to achieve their goals. In that sense, the local was not, as previous scholars have assumed, the loser in a "national vs. local" contest, but the means in a "national through local" policy project. Many scholars have noted that radio had a modernizing and nationalizing effect on American audiences¹ (although, as Lizabeth Cohen points out, such effects should not be overstated²). But I have found no other study that demonstrates how regulators deployed localism to advance, rather than inhibit, this nationalizing process. In these two chapters, then, I hope to show that there is little contradiction between what regulators practiced and what they preached regarding localism in the early broadcasting era. The answer lies not in what *we* think localism *is*, but in what *they* thought localism ought to *do*.

This chapter is divided into two parts. First, I sketch out three political tensions within the field of early radio policy that influenced the kinds of problems that regulators used discourses of localism to solve. Second, I trace the development of the idea of "local" and "national" stations, demonstrating that economic and cultural differences and tensions between the national class and the local middle class were primary factors in the emergence of these categories. In the following chapter, I will look at selected cases and procedures in both the Commerce and FRC era to show how discourses and structures of both positive and negative localism were applied in specific regulatory instances. I argue that localism was used not to

¹ For two especially strong treatments of radio's role in building a sense of national identity in 1920s America, see Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

² Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s," eds. Ronald Edsforth and Larry Bennett, *Popular Culture and Political Change in Modern America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 81-101. The section most relevant to radio begins at 90.

preserve local identity and local political power against modernity's tide, but rather to help advance that tide by adapting the pre-modern locale to the modern nation.

Part I: Political Tensions Shaping Radio Policy in the 1920s and 1930s

In the previous chapter, I laid out the general political climate of the 1920s and early 1930s, characterized by the bifurcation of the middle class, and discussed the role of radio in that process. Here I will look more narrowly at the competing social values within which radio policy and regulation was shaped. For the purposes of this study, I identify three important tensions that regulators used discourses of localism to navigate. These three tensions were interrelated and shifted over time, but I will try to keep them distinct for the purpose of clarity while pointing out in my analysis where they overlap. First, there was the tension between the perceived need to control radio content and the power that government could or would exercise to achieve that aim. Americans in the 1920s had few doubts about the power of the radio, and many feared radio's potential for subversion or corruption should broadcasting fall into the "wrong" hands. These fears inevitably found expression at the federal level as listeners, lawmakers, and advocacy groups turned first to Commerce and then to the FRC to put radio into the "right" hands. At the same time, government censorship or ownership of broadcasting stations faced strong opposition within the government, industry, and much of the public, often due to First-Amendment concerns. The result was an imperative to guarantee "safe" content in radio, but only indirectly.

Second, there was a tension between ensuring the economic viability of the radio industry as a whole and allowing too much power to large, monopolistic corporations. In part because Hoover and the FRC dealt directly with licensees, and in part because of ideas about what the job

of federal regulation of private industry should be, they felt strong pressure to establish a radio system that could be made economically sustainable, yet public and Congressional opinion opposed simply letting RCA and a handful of other powerful corporations blatantly dominate broadcasting. When the Depression hit, severely eroding the financial stability of many stations, this tension became even more acute, requiring regulators to re-think the economics of the industry and the role of individual stations within that system.

Third, there was a tension between the cultural and economic power of the national class, which tended to support national, commercial, high-powered radio, and the institutional political power of traditional local interests that favored a dispersed broadcasting structure more supportive of local and regional economies and cultures. In particular, the urban, northern character of most "national" radio, together with regional rivalries (particularly in Congress) led to demands for geographic distribution of independent radio facilities that further complicated regulators' lives. Here, too, discourses of localism helped regulators negotiate competing pressures and to provide politically feasible solutions to what they perceived as radio's problems.

Ia. Content Control, Private Control

When radio began taking shape as a mass medium in the 1920s, Americans were still coming to terms—none too gracefully—with another mass medium: film. The struggles over film content (seen by many vocal critics as dangerously immoral), as well as the struggles over economic control in the film industry (perceived by many as dangerously Jewish), have been well documented by film historians.³ Many of the same tensions and fears that fueled critiques

³ See for example Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988); Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History Up to World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

of Hollywood—and, for that matter, that continued to drive the prosecution of authors and the banning of books—also came to bear on radio, including concerns about "un-Americanism" and the new sexual freedoms of the Jazz Age. Radio regulators therefore faced considerable pressure throughout the 1920s, especially from reform societies within the traditional middle class, to ensure that broadcasting not fall into the "wrong" hands. As one interested citizen wrote to Herbert Hoover, her charming syntax belying her anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant attitude:

It would be a thousand pities, -- would it not? -- if radio, this newest and super-force, -- should be turned over to the man-in-the-street, -- as we have already turned over our moving pictures, many of our newspapers and much of our literature -- (so-called.) To all who truly want to preserve and to cherish our Anglo-Saxon civilization, such a possibility is unthinkable.⁴

Such sentiments were echoed repeatedly by listeners and social critics, inspired in part by the example of the BBC and other European systems that firmly excluded undesirable voices from the airwaves.⁵ As Susan Douglas writes, "Implicit in virtually all of the magazine articles written in the early 1920s about radio's promise was a set of basic, class-bound assumptions about who should be allowed to exert cultural authority in the ether."⁶ Douglas may be overstating how clear those assumptions actually were, since there appears to have been little agreement on exactly whose hands were the "wrong" ones—Jews, Catholics, immigrants, Communists, evolutionists, snake-oil salesmen, persons of questionable moral standing, and

⁴ Joan Benedict to Herbert Hoover, 29 May 1922. Hoover Papers: Box 489, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1922 Apr.-May." To put Benedict's bigotry in context, it should be pointed out that David Sarnoff, the most prominent public face of RCA, was, like many of the most powerful figures in the film industry, a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe.

⁵ For more on the structuring opposition between the radio systems in the U.S. and Great Britain, see Michele Hilmes, "British Quality, American Chaos: Historical Dualisms and What They Leave Out," *Radio Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 2003): 13-27.

⁶ Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 313-4.

vulgarians of all stripes.⁷ Nonetheless, she is correct that regulators clearly felt some responsibility to safeguard the airwaves from subversive or dangerous material.⁸

Despite the prevalence of concerns about who would be allowed to broadcast, however, the public's desire for censorship of broadcast content was far from absolute. To understand the government's response, then, it is important to situate broadcasting within the struggle that was taking place over content regulation in the 1920s. The vice societies, social-hygiene movements, and censorship campaigns that had arisen in the nineteenth century and flourished throughout the Progressive era were beginning to face popular backlash and legal defeat, particularly in the years immediately after World War I and particularly among the national class. Although the influence and prestige of organizations such as the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice remained strong during the early 1920s, the diversions and explorations of the Jazz Age increasingly made censors (and would-be censors) appear irrelevant and out of touch, especially to that growing segment of Americans invested in urban, cosmopolitan values. Court victories upholding bans of books and films—so easy to come by just a decade earlier—grew progressively rare, while popular resentment over Prohibition often carried over into a generalized opposition to the most zealous middle-class reformers and their agenda, including the censorship of speech, literature, and film. Suddenly, moral guardians were on the defensive. As historian Paul Boyer writes, "As the vice societies sought to come to terms with

⁷ Examples of each of these concerns are not difficult to find in the 1920s, but a few particularly entertaining ones that turned up in my research can be found in: "Sansannah" to Herbert Hoover, 24 April 1926. Hoover Papers: Box 490, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1926 January-April"; R. H. Peacock to Herbert Hoover, 7 April 1923. Hoover Papers: Box 489, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1923"; Mark Goodman and Mark Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927: Progressive Ideology, Epistemology, and Praxis," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (2000): 408-409.

⁸ For more on the similar content pressures on both film and radio, see Louise Benjamin, "Defining the Public Interest and Protecting the Public Welfare in the 1920s: Parallels Between Radio and Movie Regulation," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 12, no. 3 (1992): 87-102.

unaccustomed weakness, their opponents grew more confident and articulate."⁹ This resistance was expressed in what Boyer calls "the onslaught against federal censorship,"¹⁰ exemplified by the typically apocalyptic words of H. L. Mencken:

These are dark and atrabilious days for liberty in the republic. No one seems to be in favor of it any more—no one, that is, save a few old fashioned members of the American Civil Liberties union, hired for the hellish purpose by the executors of the late Lenin. Officially, it is obviously under the ban. ... Liberty is caged, but its shibboleths still circulate. Some day the plain folk of the republic may suddenly decide to take them seriously again.¹¹

In the face of this onslaught throughout the 1920s, bureaucrats' appetite for censorship in both the Postal Service and the Customs Bureau ebbed and waned, and by the late 1920s the legal and popular tide had definitively turned against federal prohibition of most content.¹²

Radio did not fit easily into these battles. In some ways, radio was less threatening than film since it lacked the visual representations of sex and violence that so agitated moral guardians. But words were viewed as dangerous as well—this was, after all, a time when using the phrase "with child" (much less the word "pregnant") in intertitles could get a film banned in some localities—and certain kinds of music (most prominently jazz) contained at least as much corruptive potential as a steamy love scene. Furthermore, radio posed a challenge to the modes of social control that worked so well with film and literature, such as prior restraint and public surveillance. Compared to film and print, radio was relatively inaccessible to censors: although

⁹ Paul S. Boyer, *Purity In Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2d. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 143.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹¹ H. L. Mencken, "Why Liberty?" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (30 January 1927): F1. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

¹² In an interesting "road not taken," one senator proposed that Commerce retain control over the technical side of radio, while the Post Office police content since they had so much experience in that area. Goodman and Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927," 408.

radio permitted easy surveillance, censors could not clip offending frames out of the endless radio stream, nor could Customs officials open up a package of radio and confiscate the contents as Exhibit A in an indecency trial. But the most important distinction between radio and other media was that radio came more-or-less unbidden into the household. As radio historian Michele Hilmes put it, "Radio's 'immateriality' allowed it to cross [traditional] boundaries: allowed 'race' music to invade the white middle-class home, vaudeville to compete with opera in the living room, risqué city humor to raise rural eyebrows.... [A child] would never be allowed to go to a local jazz club, but the radio could bring the club into her living room."¹³ Furthermore, such anxious discourses were thoroughly entrenched in popular thinking about radio by the time of the broadcasting era, having already had a long period in which to circulate. For example, broadcast historian Dorinda Hartmann found stories as far back as 1907—less than a year after Reginald Fessenden's famed Christmas Eve "first broadcast"—in which radio was used to circumvent social and familial control, with titles like "A Wireless Elopement" and "Wooed by Wireless."¹⁴ In other words, anxiety over radio content was both well established and easily exploited by the 1920s.

The acuteness of these concerns can be seen in the degree to which Herbert Hoover and other regulators felt compelled to reassure the public that they would safeguard the home from the invisible filth and subversion that could potentially emerge from the Radiola. Hoover expressed early and often his determination not to let radio fall into "uncontrolled hands."¹⁵ As

¹³ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 15-16.

¹⁴ Dorinda Hartmann, "A Latchkey to Every Home': Intrusive Radio" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, in preparation).

¹⁵ Herbert Hoover, "Statement by the Secretary of Commerce at the Opening of the Radio Conference on Feb. 27, 1922," 3. Hoover Papers: Box 489, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1922 Jan.-Mar."

he argued in his address to the Third Radio Conference in 1924, which he also issued as a press release for maximum exposure, "It is not the ability to transmit but the character of what is transmitted that really counts."¹⁶ Hoover reminded attendees that radio had "reached deep into the family life," making it unique among Commerce's responsibilities; indeed, it is difficult to determine whether his primary audience was the public or the industry when he promised: "We will maintain [radio activities] free--free of monopoly, free in program, free in speech--but we must also maintain them free of malice and unwholesomeness. ... We can protect the home by preventing the entry of printed matter destructive to its ideals, but we must double-guard the radio."¹⁷ Clearly he felt that some form of content control in broadcasting was necessary, a view shared by one of his key advisors, Bureau of Standards chief J.H. Dellinger, who warned that radio's propaganda potential meant that it would require government control.¹⁸ While this would seem to be in tension both with the shifts in political philosophy that were putting moral reformers on the defensive and with First Amendment rights, it would be naïve to expect that the political and class elites who controlled radio policy would *not* tend to try to shape a media system run primarily in their interests—different, but in many ways not *so* different, from the public service systems of Europe. Indeed, as Michele Hilmes has demonstrated, Great Britain and the U.S. each used an ideologically potent caricature of the other's radio system in order to put broadcasting into the hands of their respective elites. In her analysis, a structuring opposition to the BBC worked to construct private enterprise and First Amendment rights as particularly

¹⁶ Herbert Hoover, "Opening Address by Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce," 10 October 1924, *Recommendations for Regulation of Radio Adopted by the Third National Radio Conference*, 2. Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)."

¹⁷ Hoover, "Opening Address by Herbert Hoover," 2.

¹⁸ Benjamin, "Defining the Public Interest," 87ff.

American virtues integral to U.S. radio, even as both systems removed broadcasting from popular (i.e. "uncontrollable") hands.¹⁹ In the case of American regulators, the lack of specificity regarding what counted as "unwholesomeness" enabled national-class cosmopolitans and traditional small-town conservatives to each imagine their own preferred bogeymen while superficially agreeing on the need to control content.

Nonetheless, it appears that Hoover had little desire to become the Comstock of the wireless. A firm believer in the ability of government and business to work together to their mutual benefit, Hoover's political philosophy and personal inclination was to let private interests regulate themselves as much as possible for the common social good, an approach that he had pursued from the beginning with the radio industry. But the above quote also suggests the contradictions posed by insisting on both free speech and safe content, especially within a competitive free-market system. The essential problem Hoover faced was this: if, as he had repeatedly maintained, the government bore some responsibility for protecting the home from broadcasting's threat, clearly the point of transmission was the only site where even moderately efficient control could be exercised, and clearly government ownership or censorship of radio—not markets—would be the most effective way to exercise that control. Yet that solution flew in the face of Hoover's national-class trust in corporate-liberal ideology, as well as the nominal free speech rights that Americans still respected in principle if not always in actual practice.²⁰ The

¹⁹ Michele Hilmes, "British Quality, American Chaos," 13-27.

²⁰ For a full discussion of corporate liberalism, see Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a discussion of free speech on radio in the 1920s and early 1930s, including numerous cases of censorship, see Herbert N. Foerstel, *Banned in the Media: A Reference Guide to Censorship in the Press, Motion Pictures, Broadcasting, and the Internet* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

result was a tension between the goal of safeguarding the airwaves and a predisposition to leaving radio in the hands of (responsible) private interests.

The U.S. was hardly the only country struggling with the question of how to contain and control the ideological power of radio, and there was adequate precedent in England and elsewhere to put radio programming in the hands of the government (or a government subsidiary).²¹ Despite the frequent equation of private enterprise and Americanism, such a solution in the U.S. would not have been entirely foreign to even recent American history, since the military had controlled wireless communication during World War I, and the government already used more than half the radio spectrum. Furthermore, given the continued question of how to finance broadcasting, the idea of governmental radio appealed to many people. For example, in 1922 *Radio Broadcasting* floated the idea of government-supported radio, calling it a possibility that, although "socialistic," was nonetheless "probably the most reasonable way" to pay for broadcasting and likely no worse than government-run schools or museums.²² The power of such calls can be seen in the recommendations of the First Radio Conference in 1922, which gave non-exclusive government broadcasting a clear endorsement. In the Conference's vision of the radio system, government-run stations would be given the best frequencies, the highest power, and first priority in any disputes over "public broadcasting" (i.e. universities and public institutions), "private broadcasting" (i.e. broadcasting by private entities such as newspapers and department stores for goodwill publicity purposes), and toll broadcasting, in that order.²³ There

²¹ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 7.

²² "Radio Currents," *Radio Broadcast* 1, no. 1 (May 1922): 1-4. See also Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 43-44.

²³ "Report of Department of Commerce Conference on Radio Telephony." Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences—National First, Reports and Resolutions." For an excellent overview of all four radio conferences,

was also the fledgling phenomenon of municipal stations beginning in the mid-1920s. The most notable of these was New York's WNYC, which went on the air in 1924 and maintained its municipal status well into the 1990s. Importantly, however, critics charged in the late 1920s that WNYC was guilty of exactly the kind of pro-government censorship that opponents of government-controlled broadcasting were predicting, and by 1927 *Radio Broadcast* was calling for the station's elimination.²⁴

Given the contentiousness of government broadcasting and fears of censorship, the possibility of such an outcome emerging from the political context of the interwar period now appears downright fanciful. Hoover's corporate-minded associationalist and free-market tendencies never favored publicly-owned or government-controlled radio to begin with, and he tended to oppose the kind of expansion of government that a move into broadcasting would dictate.²⁵ So despite his emphasis on safe content, by the mid-1920s, Hoover was forcefully resisting direct governmental control of radio content and insisting that, although some federal regulation of radio would be necessary, no single group or organization including the

including the key themes, debates, and recommendations, see Edward F. Sarno, Jr., "The National Radio Conferences." *Journal of Broadcasting* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 189-202. See also Louise Benjamin, "Working It Out Together: Radio Policy from Hoover to the Radio Act of 1927," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 221-236.

²⁴ WNYC had its supporters, but *The Nation* charged that "municipal operation of a radio station does not mean freedom of speech, [and] in the case of station WNYC it has meant quite the opposite." The magazine said that the station was avoiding the investigation of government scandals and suppressing robust political debate. It compared the situation to England, "where government control has proved irksome and repressive." See "While We Are Distributing," *The Nation* 127, no. 3312 (26 December 1928): 699. For the *Radio Broadcast* call to eliminate WNYC, see "Welcome to the Radio Commission," *Radio Broadcast* 10, no. 6 (April 1927): 555-557.

²⁵ Consider, for example, one of the key battles over the 1927 Act: whether to regulate radio from within the Commerce Department or through the creation of a new governmental body. Hoover strongly opposed expanding the bureaucracy through a new independent agency and fought for Commerce to retain responsibility for radio. Goodman and Gring make the point that one might argue that this was merely an effort to consolidate his power at Commerce, but by this point Hoover's eyes were firmly on the White House. A fairer reading is that Hoover was simply sticking honestly by his political philosophy and that only a series of compromises secured his assent to an independent commission. See Goodman and Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927," especially pp. 403-404.

government should be allowed to control broadcasting.²⁶ "I certainly am opposed to the Government undertaking any censorship even with the present limited number of stations," Hoover told a radio audience in 1924. "It is better that these questions should be determined by the 570 different broadcasting stations than by a Government official."²⁷ It was a theme he would repeat in testimony before Congress as well as in letters and speeches for the next several years. Other voices with influence over the emerging regulatory scheme, such as Judge S. B. Davis in the Commerce Department, Representative Wallace White (a key author of the 1927 Radio Act), and President Calvin Coolidge himself were equally wary of either government ownership or direct federal censorship.²⁸ As Hoover's line about "570 different broadcasting stations" suggests, ultimately localism would provide a politically viable response to this tension between content control and federal control of broadcasting. As Louise Benjamin summarized the result of these negotiations, "Consequently, the industry position became one in which informal public reaction would monitor programs, not the repercussions of more formal censorship groups as found in the movie industry."²⁹

With direct governmental control an unacceptable means of keeping the potential threat of radio in check, large corporations such as RCA and Western Electric were ready and eager to

²⁶ Herbert Hoover, "Statement by Secretary Hoover before the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries on H.R. 7357, 'To Regulate Radio Communication, and for other Purposes,'" 11 March 1924. FRC Commerce, Box 130, "67032/7."

²⁷ Herbert Hoover, "Radio Talk by Secretary Hoover, Washington, DC, March 26, 1924." Hoover Papers: Box 489, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1924 Jan.-Mar."

²⁸ See S. B. Davis to Alfred N. Goldsmith, 2 July 1925. Commerce Papers: Box 130, "67032/7"; J. C. Edgerton, "Minutes of the First National Radio Conference," 123. Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National First, Minutes"; Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*, 3d ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 96; Goodman and Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927," 407; Donald G. Godfrey and Louise M. Benjamin, "Radio Legislation's Quiet Backstage Negotiator: Wallace H. White, Jr.," *Journal of Radio Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 93-103.

²⁹ Benjamin, "Defining the Public Interest," 87ff.

step into the void with "suitable" content. Alfred Goldsmith, chief engineer at RCA and an energetic advocate of national broadcasting, repeatedly extolled the benefits of turning radio over to the moneyed interests who could be trusted to provide safe, high-quality content. Unlike amateurs and other "unserious" users of radio, for whom "the quality of the entertainment is almost a matter of indifference," RCA could provide "enjoyment of the best in this field" and "service of a really consistent sort." In other words, he argued, if you want to guarantee acceptable content, leave it to the pros: "To the professional, radio is a grimly serious struggle to extend to the entire public ... the great benefits of modern radio. ... It is increasingly as the result of his efforts that radio will come into its own and render its full service to humanity."³⁰ Such discourses implicitly articulated economic power to trustworthiness on the air. Alfred Waller of the National Electrical Manufacturers' Association called the issue of content "a problem in business morals" and asked, "In assigning authority to broadcast may you not properly give consideration to the social and economic standing in our society at large?"³¹ Such ideas were also expressed by parties who themselves did not stand to financially benefit: *The Literary Digest* expressed the hope that prominent businessmen would be given the airwaves, since that would guarantee that they remain "clean and fit for the common consumption."³² Of course, whether Waller and the *Literary Digest* had the same businessmen in mind is unclear.

³⁰ Alfred N. Goldsmith, "What is Professional Radio?" *Highlights of Radio Broadcasting* (Radio Corp. of America, 1925), 42-44. FRC Correspondence, Box 139, "1732."

³¹ Alfred E. Waller, "Before the FRC: Conference Held at Washington, D.C., (1 April 1927)," 357. Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Conference, 4/1/27."

³² Qtd. in Goodman and Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927," 412.

Ib. Economic Viability and the Radio Trust

Corporate control of content fit neatly into Hoover's business-friendly approach to regulation, and was one of many reasons why the idea of allowing highly capitalized corporations to shape broadcasting in their interests appeared to him as a self-evident good. As Thomas Streeter points out, for Hoover and his colleagues, "[T]he positive value of encouraging the corporate development of broadcasting was obvious."³³ Hoover also wished to guarantee economic viability and a measure of financial security for the fledgling industry, and industry leaders happily agreed, insisting that, "in order to insure financial stability to radio enterprises, capital now invested must receive reasonable protection."³⁴ Such demands were particularly acute in the absence of a politically acceptable solution to the question of who would pay for broadcasting. Hoover was wary of advertising, dismissive of a radio tax, and adamant that the airwaves not be sold—and on all three counts, the public in whose primary interest he was attempting to govern by and large agreed with him.³⁵ By retaining the airwaves in public hands but entrusting their use to large companies, all three conditions might successfully be met. This appeared especially true in the question of advertising as the economic basis of the industry. According to this view, RCA, AT&T, Crosley, Sears-Roebuck, the *Chicago Tribune*, and other corporations were involved in broadcasting as an ancillary business to their primary

³³ Streeter, *Selling the Air*, 226.

³⁴ Legislative Statement, Fourth Radio Conference (1925), qtd. in Streeter, *Selling the Air*, 89.

³⁵ The evidence on public acceptance of advertising is mixed. While Robert McChesney has argued that advertising was extremely unpopular with listeners, Clifford Doerksen has more recently argued that opinions about advertising often differed by class, and cites a survey by Paul Lazarsfeld that working-class audiences actually *liked* commercials. Writes Doerksen: "[W]hat has been taken for unanimous hostility to broadcast advertising was in reality a consensus of the better-off and better-educated." Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, & Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Clifford Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005): 8, 17.

manufacturing, retailing, or publishing concerns; as such, they would have little incentive to risk irritating the public with excessive or aggressive advertising. Hoover once said, "I believe that the quickest way to kill broadcasting would be to use it for direct advertising," and although he has been much mocked over the last seventy-five years for that not-so-prescient statement, his optimistic distinction between "advertising" and "publicity" did not appear particularly specious at the time.³⁶ On the one hand, Hoover believed in the listener's ability to influence programming by changing the channel or turning the radio off; that quotation is nothing if not a testament to his faith in the power of market incentives. On the other hand, Hoover was hearing frequent promises from the industry that they understood the value of goodwill that accrued to their primary businesses through broadcasting, as well as the risk that direct advertising posed to that goodwill. For example, the *Detroit News*' Frank Doremus told the First Radio Conference, "The *News* has established a clear limitation upon the matter that it broadcasts. The *News* has nothing to sell. It has nothing to rent at a price. This service is given to the public without cost. ... It gets nothing out of [broadcasting], gentlemen, except as it may increase the public good will, without which, of course, no great newspaper can long endure."³⁷ It was not necessarily unreasonable for Hoover to believe that the forces of goodwill and competition would keep corporate power in line.

Some suggested that broadcasting could not in fact be run as a competitive enterprise and that radio, like the telephone, was a "natural monopoly." According to this view, "either the government must exercise that monopoly by owning the stations or it must place the ownership

³⁶ Hoover, "Opening Address by Herbert Hoover," 4.

³⁷ Frank E. Doremus, "Minutes of the First National Radio Conference," 91. Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National First, Minutes."

of these stations in the hands of some one commercial concern and let the government keep out of it."³⁸ Indeed, as radio historian Susan Smulyan has pointed out, important pre-World War I institutions such as railroads, telephone, and telegraph were all effectively private monopolies, so certain key precedents for radio were, if anything, hostile to the idea of a competitive basis for broadcasting.³⁹ But the most powerful challenge to Hooverian associationalism was the widespread concern—both within regulatory circles and much of American society at large—about the intersection of corporate power and the mass market. In other words, if some public and much Congressional sentiment opposed a significant role for federal government in the ownership or censorship of radio, suspicion of the "radio trust" monopolizing broadcasting ran even higher. Responding to such concerns (as well as to pressure by RCA's business rivals), powerful voices both within industry and Congress took strong stances against corporate control of radio, from the American Newspaper Publishers' Association (ANPA) to Senator Ewin Davis (whose opposition to the radio system as shaped by the "radio trust" would eventually lead to one of the most important legislative acts of the early broadcasting era, the Davis Amendment of 1928).⁴⁰ This anti-monopoly sentiment was primarily directed at, unsurprisingly, RCA, a company that was indeed doing everything it could to control the radio industry (and a few years later was found—sure enough—to have engaged in illegal monopolistic practices). In particular, RCA's efforts to establish national "super-power" stations of 50,000 or more watts—stations that

³⁸ S. C. Hooper, qtd. in Streeter, *Selling the Air*, 83.

³⁹ Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 33-34.

⁴⁰ For more on the anti-monopoly strain in Progressivism, see Goodman and Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927," 408. On the issue of opposition to RCA as a business strategy by RCA's rivals, see Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 57-58. An example of the American Newspaper Publishers' Association's resistance to monopoly control can be found in the testimony of Elisha Hanson, attorney for ANPA, in "Before the FRC: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (1 April 1927)." 381. Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Conference, 4/1/27." For Davis' anti-monopoly goals, see Jennifer M. Proffitt and Michael Brown, "Regulating the Radio Monopoly: Ewin Davis and his Legislative Debates, 1923-1928," *Journal of Radio Studies* 11, no. 1 (2004): 100-115.

the company hoped would reach the entire country—had provoked considerable concern. At the Third Radio Conference in 1924, the usual congeniality of these gatherings was briefly but sharply disrupted by one speaker who charged that the "Four Horsemen" of the radio industry (i.e. RCA, Westinghouse, General Electric, and AT&T) were scheming to establish a broadcasting monopoly against the will of the public.⁴¹

The public could be especially vociferous in its hostility toward the possibility of monopoly control of radio. The Commerce Department (and later, the FRC) was regularly inundated with passionate letters from listeners who strongly opposed an RCA-controlled cartel in broadcasting and wanted to preserve the amateurs' legacy of individual rights of transmission nearly unique to American radio. Wrote one Barrytown, NY, listener to Hoover, "Will you allow an old Sky Pilot to beg that you will not, for a moment, permit the monopoly of the air by a few high powered stations while smaller stations are driven to such low wave lengths that the poor man will not be able to hear them...."⁴² Along the same lines, a Chicago listener wrote, "I hope you will not forget that the air belongs to the people and I am therefore protesting against any corporation controlling the air."⁴³ In part this opposition to the radio trust reflected not just anti-monopoly sentiments, but a broader concern about the role of the free market and the mass market, including anxiety about chain stores and other economic innovations of modern

⁴¹ C. E. Erbstein, "Statement by Mr. C. E. Erbstein, Representing the Ninth Radio District," in "Report of Proceedings of Sub-Committee No. 3," Third Radio Conference (1924). Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)." Erbstein was refuted or mocked by the other attendees at the conference, and his "Four Horsemen" characterization became something of a running punch line during the proceedings. But the accusation clearly stung, and David Sarnoff himself took to the floor to passionately defend the honor of RCA against the charge of attempting to create a monopoly in radio. It is worth pointing out that, in 1931, the *De Forest Radio v. RCA* case found that RCA indeed was an illegal monopoly: *Radio Corp. v. De Forest Radio Co.*, No. 4354, Circuit Court of Appeals, Third Circuit, 47 F.2d 606; 1931.

⁴² H.S. Smith (?) to Herbert Hoover, 29 September 1924. FRC Correspondence: Box 153, "2678."

⁴³ Charles W. Kelleher to Herbert Hoover, 1 October 1924. FRC Correspondence: Box 153, "2678."

corporate capitalism. Concern about the power of monopolies had been a prominent strain of Progressive thought since the late 1800s, and with the rise of the mass media, public anxiety over the social effects of an unfettered free market in broadcasting grew. As Richard Hofstadter described this concern of the teens and twenties, "The entire structure of business ... became the object of a widespread hostility which stemmed from the feeling that business was becoming a closed system of authoritative action."⁴⁴ In that sense, RCA was a target not solely because of its own anti-competitive practices, but as a symbol of a wider concern about corporate power in modern America, especially among the traditional local middle class. In opposing a "monopoly of the air," these letters were reflecting, in Hofstadter's words, a deeper "resentment against the incursions of business organization upon [their] moral sensibilities and [their] individualistic values."⁴⁵

As it happens, antitrust was one of the topics on which the traditional local middle class and the national class could agree, the latter primarily because trusts represented inefficiencies in the system. Hoover himself had been outspoken in opposing "monopoly" in broadcasting since the beginning of his tenure at Commerce. Just a few months after taking office, he proposed legislation to prevent the emergence of property rights in the ether, fearing that spectrum "will come to have ultimately a commercial or monopolistic value."⁴⁶ It was a theme he returned to repeatedly in the coming years, despite the fact that his policies (such as the approval of license

⁴⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 229.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁶ Herbert Hoover to Sen. Frank B. Kellogg, 23 April 1921. Hoover Papers: Box 501, "Radio, FRC Legislation, 1920-21."

transfers) all but guaranteed the commercial value of a spectrum assignment.⁴⁷ Indeed,

Hoover remained adamant that broadcasting be a competitive field based on temporary licenses to use the public's airwaves:

There should become no vested right to a wave length on the part of a broadcasting station. This would be creating a monopoly of a certain road through the ether and therefore we must limit the use of the ether to a definite period of years or months so that we can under any reasonable conditions return the use of this particular wave length to the Government. . . . The only monopoly that could be developed would be through the restriction on the use of radio instruments; that is, a monopoly of the doors in and out of the ether.⁴⁸

Hoover had little control over the market in radio instruments (and he seemed happy to leave that particular problem to the Federal Trade Commission⁴⁹), but his preoccupation with property rights distracted him from other possible forms of oligopolistic control of radio. In particular, by fighting to prevent an AT&T-style national monopoly in radio, Hoover paid inadequate attention to the growth of a virtual monopoly (soon to be a duopoly) of national content through chain broadcasting. To be fair, broadcast networks began to emerge as a powerful force in the industry fairly late on Hoover's watch, and Hoover could not necessarily have anticipated the degree to which chains would come to dominate content-provision in the coming years. Furthermore, his public statements do hint at his concern about the role of chains as early as 1924. At the Third Radio Conference, he proposed that they should have only a limited role in augmenting local

⁴⁷ Thomas Streeter has written an excellent analysis of the relationship between regulatory policy and commodification of the airwaves. See Streeter, *Selling the Air*, especially 225-232.

⁴⁸ Herbert Hoover, "Radio Talk by Secretary Hoover, Washington, DC, March 26, 1924," 12.

⁴⁹ As Hoover told the House of Representatives in 1924, "The Department of Commerce has no machinery with which to carry on the investigations necessary, nor is its organization suited for the decision of such questions." Qtd. in Proffitt and Brown, "Regulating the Radio Monopoly," 105.

offerings, functioning more like press associations did in the newspaper industry.⁵⁰ A year later he used his bully pulpit to try to keep chains out of routine, non-national programming, insisting that they not offer primary content that could be originated locally: "[S]o-called chain broadcasting has a very useful sphere in the presentation of national events and of entertainment events of unusual national importance, but ... it has no place in presenting the usual musical program, such as could be duplicated in the local station."⁵¹ Hoover clearly expected chains to supplement, not supplant, local programming. As it became clear that NBC and CBS were becoming more than secondary content providers for the occasional "event of national interest," the anti-monopoly rhetoric that was present from the beginning of Hoover's tenure at Commerce intensified, but he does not seem to have taken any actions to curb the trend. Just as in the case of content issues, then, Hoover laid the groundwork for using localist rhetoric to negotiate economic tensions in the emergence of broadcasting. But it is important to emphasize that affirmative localism was never the primary goal; for every murmur of lukewarm praise for local radio, Hoover issued several enthusiastic endorsements of national radio. As I will discuss below, discourses of localism like those above helped Hoover (and later the FRC) navigate competing pressures in order to achieve their primary concern: an economically and technologically viable *national* system.

⁵⁰ Hoover, "Opening Address by Herbert Hoover," 4. See also Elliott Thurston, "Hoover Tells of Steps to Solve Big Problems Created By Rapid Growth of Radio," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (30 November 1924): 1B. Hoover Papers: Box 490, Radio Correspondence, "Press Releases, Misc. 1924 Oct.-Dec."

⁵¹ Harry A. Mount, "Interview for Cleveland Plain Dealer." Hoover Papers: Box 490, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1925 May-Sep."

Ic. National Desires, Regional Differences

One of the reasons that Hoover and the FRC did little to curb the power of the radio trust was because RCA had a vision of national radio that was widely shared by many other industry players, regulators, and especially listeners, a vision that spoke to deep-seated cultural desires of the era. As Michele Hilmes has pointed out of American life in the 1920s, "[T]he underlying common denominator of these years, on all levels, was the fear of fragmentation and the yearning for some kind of national unity."⁵² Many hoped that radio would become the force that accomplished this unity, and the goal of national broadcasting was arguably the single most powerful discourse shaping the social imagination of radio in the 1920s. As RCA's David Sarnoff told the attendees of the Third Radio Conference in 1924:

I share with Secretary Hoover the conviction that ... radio must develop into a national service... a service that will make every home in the country resonant with the music, entertainment and culture that radio can bring; that will enable every man and woman in the United States to receive the word of mouth messages broadcast by our great public men; that will create a vast forum of the air for the discussion and consideration of vital problems⁵³

Sarnoff articulated the goal of national broadcasting passionately and effectively, but the lofty and appealing rhetoric—heavily indebted to the public service missions of the BBC and other European broadcasters—masked an important tension: his vision of "national" radio could not possibly represent or reflect the nation itself in all of its complexity and diversity, nor could a generic desire for unity erase the economic and cultural tensions that divided the country. In other words, not all parts of the nation shared a common understanding of what national

⁵² Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002), 40.

⁵³ David Sarnoff, "Address by Mr. David Sarnoff, Vice President and General Manager of RCA," in "Third Radio Conference Called By and Under the Auspices of the United States Department of Commerce," 10. Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)."

broadcasting meant, how it was to be accomplished, or on whose terms the unification should occur. As discussed in Chapter One, the problem in the mid-1920s was that the ascendant model of national radio through broadcasting chains was in actuality a specifically northern cosmopolitan style of radio that reflected, in Susan Smulyan's words, "a white, urban, middle-class, East Coast sensibility": entertainment from New York and Chicago, or speeches from Washington and Boston, beamed out for the heartland of the country to hear, appreciate, learn from, and assimilate to.⁵⁴ Furthermore, this vision favored the centralized efficiency and national economic structures of the corporate model; while citizens throughout society expressed concern about monopoly, the national class was less hostile to corporate control of radio per se, and more supportive of the establishment of a "national" system. For example, *Radio Broadcast* dismissed the anti-monopoly rhetoric of those "with a local point of view" (specifically naming Ewin Davis among the guilty), claiming, "When chivalry is applied to broadcasting, it means the support of less competent stations against the so-called chain monopoly. But to what stations does the listener turn his dials? He selects the powerful stations offering high-grade programs." In other words, old-fashioned values might lead one to support local stations, but preserving such incompetence was inefficient since listeners want competent, modern, network radio anyway. To drive the point home, the magazine divided the radio world into three categories of stations: chain affiliates, promising independents, and "worthless ether busybodies," noting that the "elimination of 300 small stations, particularly in large cities where powerful locals exist, would give a well-balanced structure of chain and independent stations." As long as there were decent

⁵⁴ Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 30.

independents, the reasoning went, anti-chain cries of monopoly were unfounded and counterproductive.⁵⁵

Unsurprisingly, this model of "national" radio emanating from (and returning profits to) the cities of the northeast and upper Midwest did not appeal to everyone, a point I will discuss further in Chapter Three. To the extent that the urban programming of national radio was enmeshed with the newly emerging consumer culture, this centralized corporate model also represented an increasingly important economic divide as radio became a promising economic sector (worth \$450,000,000 in 1925 alone⁵⁶). Economically as well as culturally, then, other parts of the nation felt cheated out of a piece of the pie. This complaint of unfairness was not baseless: A glance at the geographic distribution of stations at any point in the 1920s illustrates a significant regional imbalance in spectrum allocation (see Figure 1, p. 158). For example, when Commerce created a new class of high-powered stations in 1923, only five of thirty-eight such assignments were granted to stations in the South, with none allocated to Florida, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, or Virginia.⁵⁷ At the time of the passage of the Davis Amendment, New York state alone had almost three times the total combined authorized wattage of the entire South.⁵⁸ Powerful voices, especially from the South, began insisting on greater representation for their constituents and their culture in the developing broadcasting landscape. The Congressional delegation from Mississippi was particularly vocal

⁵⁵ "Broadcasting Needs Capable Leadership," *Radio Broadcast* 13, no. 2 (June 1928), 68-69.

⁵⁶ Proffitt and Brown, "Regulating the Radio Monopoly," 105.

⁵⁷ "Tentative Assignment of Territorial Wave Lengths for Class A Broadcasting Stations as Recommended by the Second National Radio Conference." Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National Second." See also Thomas H. White, "Building the Broadcast Band," *United States Early Radio History*, 12 February 2004, <<http://earlyradiohistory.us/buildbcb.htm>>, 20 June 2005.

⁵⁸ "Battle in Congress Opens on Radio Bill," *New York Times* (2 March 1928): 32. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

in complaining about such imbalances, with Senator Pat Harrison and Congressman Ewin Davis fighting for greater radio facilities for their state and region.

The broadcast chain quickly became the primary symbolic locus for the fears of economic and cultural control from the northeast. Regionalism was thus often characterized as an anti-monopoly effort, and opposition to NBC certainly played a large role in advancing the goal of greater regionalism in the system. As Davis wrote to the FRC regarding their

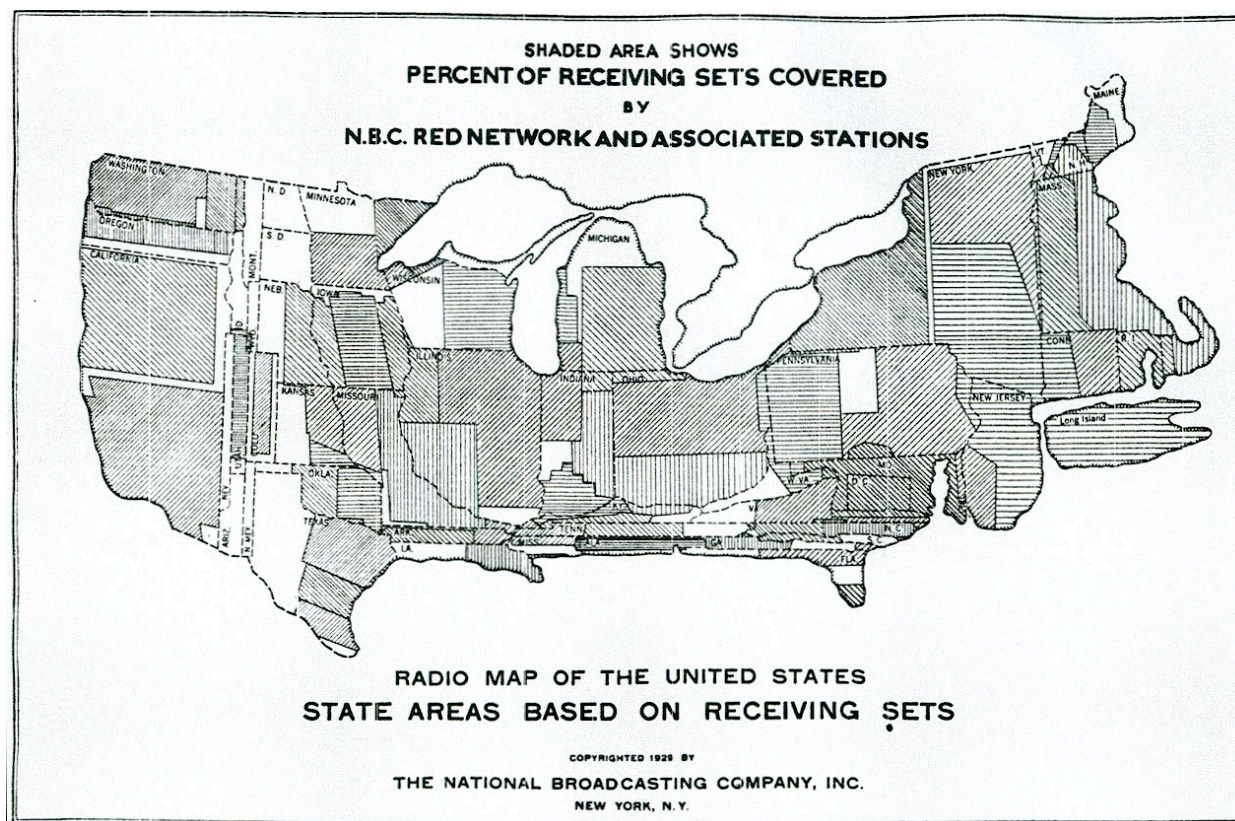


Figure 1: Proportional map showing the reach of NBC. Although the map is based on receiving sets rather than broadcast stations, it does give a good visual indication of the regional disparities that motivated complaints by Southern Congressmen and representatives from other radio-poor areas. National Broadcasting Company, *NBC Networks Facts and Figures* rev. ed. (NBC: 1 January 1929), 10. E. P. H. James: Box 20, Folder 2 ("Sales Promotion Report of 1929 and Plans for 1930").

implementation of the Davis Amendment, "No generally satisfactory result can be obtained without recognizing and dealing in a fair and scientific manner with the chain broadcasters."⁵⁹ Indeed, as radio historians Jennifer Proffitt and Michael Brown have shown, Davis' concern with monopoly dominated his efforts in radio (as well as his later career on the Federal Trade Commission).⁶⁰ But it would be a mistake to allow (as Proffitt and Brown and other writers on the Davis Amendment tend to do) the anti-monopoly rhetoric of Davis and his allies to cloud the cultural tensions that also drove their concerns. They did not merely oppose monopoly; they "felt aggrieved" (in the *New York Times*' words) by the cultural power of the Northeast, feeling that the urban cosmopolitanism reflected in early network programming was both an affront and a threat to "traditional" values.⁶¹ It did not help that northerners were often either hostile or deaf to such complaints. For example, Democrat Emanuel Celler of New York, one of the main Congressional opponents of the Davis Amendment, expressed bewilderment at Southerners' contention that the "the farm population of the South is inadequately served." After all, he argued, "all the largest stations like WEA, WJZ, and WOR, actually serve the South as well as the North."⁶² These three stations, naturally, were all chain stations based in the New York metropolitan area.

Ultimately, regionalism did become part of the regulatory scheme for radio, at least as a legal fiction: the 1927 Act, the 1928 Reauthorization bill (i.e. the Davis Amendment), and the

⁵⁹ Ewin L. Davis, "Copy of a communication from the Hon. Ewin L. Davis, Congressman from Tennessee, 6 April 1928." Federal Radio Commission, *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports, Numbers 1-7, 1927-1933*, 2:133-135.

⁶⁰ Proffitt and Brown, "Regulating the Radio Monopoly," 101ff.

⁶¹ Confirmations Fill Radio Commission," *New York Times* (31 March 1928): 22. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

⁶² "Battle in Congress Opens on Radio Bill," *New York Times* (2 March 1928): 32. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

1934 Act all contained provisions intended to limit the domination of radio by New York and Chicago by distributing radio service more equitably throughout the country. Again, it is worth keeping in mind that Congress was firmly in the hands of Republican representatives of the traditional local middle class during most of this time, and the Davis Amendment in particular represents a triumph of the local middle class over the national class in the legislative arena. In the regulatory arena, however, things would play out quite a bit differently.

Summary of Part I

Hoover and the FRC faced at least three significant tensions that mapped out the terrain of their policy choices. First, they felt compelled to guarantee ideologically safe content, but faced competing opinions about the kind of content that needed to be controlled, and they were reluctant to assume that task themselves through governmental station ownership or direct censorship of programming, influenced largely through cognizance of First Amendment rights and a structuring opposition to public service systems like the BBC. Second, they felt obligated to ensure the industry's economic viability while tempering the monopolistic ambitions of RCA and allaying public anxiety about the emerging mass market. Third, regulators and much of the public were pre-disposed to establishing a national radio service (and corporate leaders were happy to provide one), but the urban, cosmopolitan programming that emerged under the label of "national radio" failed to speak to large segments of the American population at the same time that powerful representatives of the traditional local middle class were lobbying (and legislating) for regional parity in the allocation of broadcasting facilities. In the next two sections, I will demonstrate how a local-national dichotomy emerged within this political context, and how discourses of localism proved useful to regulators in negotiating all three of these tensions.

Part II: Localist Discourses, National Radio

IIa. The Emergence of "Local" and "National" Stations

Any regulator of a new industry would probably wish to begin with a *tabula rasa*. Unhampered by vested political and economic interests, perhaps a reasonably fair, efficient, and rational plan could be created and implemented. But when broadcasting emerged unmistakably in the early 1920s, regulators instead found their maneuvering room severely constricted by already well-established facts on the ground, in particular a thriving amateur sector that (unlike in war-torn European countries) rebounded from its wartime hiatus with tremendous vibrancy and assertiveness, successfully organizing to resist continued centralized governmental control of radio.⁶³ The Commerce Department found itself responsible for this field, but without clear legislative authority to shape it. Under the 1912 Act, it was required to grant licenses to any qualified licensee while minimizing interference through frequency assignments, but could not deny licenses nor even force an operator to remain on the assigned wavelength.⁶⁴

At first, "local" stations were merely the ones closest to you, whatever their power level, institutional affiliation, economic base, or programming quality, in contrast to "distant" stations. Locals were the stations whose signal was the most reliable and static-free (or, more

⁶³ For more on the post-war struggle to control radio, and the role of amateurs in asserting private-sector rights in the ether, see Hugh Sloten, *Radio and Television Regulation: Broadcast Technology in the United States, 1920-1960* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), esp. 1-67.

⁶⁴ For an excellent overview of the Commerce Secretary's obligations and the limits of his authority, see Charles Tillinghast, "Origins of American Broadcast Regulation: A Revisionist Theory," *Journal of Radio Studies* 13, no. 1 (2006), 129-145. An alternative interpretation, that there were fewer limits on Commerce's authority than Hoover pretended, is provided by the article that Tillinghast is arguing against: Thomas W. Hazlett, "The Rationality of U.S. Regulation of the Broadcast Spectrum," *Journal of Law & Economics* 33 (1990): 133-175. See also Thomas W. Hazlett, "The Wireless Craze, the Unlimited Band Width Myth, the Spectrum Auction Faux Pas, and the Punchline to Ronald Coase's 'Big Joke': An Essay on Airwave Allocation Policy," *Harvard Journal of Law & Technology* 14 (2001): 337-556; Marvin R. Bensman, *The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation in the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2000).

derogatorily, whose signal prevented the annoyed "distance hound" from picking up faraway stations), not necessarily those speaking to a local community. In the mid-1920s in New York, for example, both 50-watt WOKO and 3000-watt WEAJ were initially "locals" to New Yorkers. In that sense, "local station" began as a relative rather than a categorical term. When Hoover refers to local stations in his various speeches, that is the sense in which he is usually using it.⁶⁵ At no point did Herbert Hoover or his staff sit down and say, "We need local stations serving local communities, fostering local identities, and serving as local public spheres." Instead, the category of "local station" evolved fairly slowly over the course of the 1920s, and only gradually came to be identified primarily with low-powered independent stations.

"Local" stations as a categorical rather than a relative term began not as the result of explicit policy decisions designed to create a tier of stations dedicated to community service, but rather as a way of understanding and legitimating class differences among stations. Many of these differences were born of broadcasting's outgrowth from the amateur era; station operators could be vastly differently situated—financially, institutionally, technically, and geographically—and these differences profoundly affected that station's future standing and prospects. For example, a garage owner in Kansas in 1923 could broadcast a few hours a week on a jerry-rigged ten-watt transmitter for fun or publicity, operating as a quasi-hobbyist or part-time publicist next to his primary business. But he was unlikely to be able to afford the \$150,000 it could cost to trade up his rig to a new one-kilowatt station, nor the not-insubstantial costs of keeping that station running (including significant electrical and maintenance charges, as well as

⁶⁵ See the Introduction for an example of this use of "local station" by Hoover.

the expense of airing a steady stream of programming).⁶⁶ Those who could afford these start-up and operating costs for higher-powered stations thus enjoyed an enormous advantage in building an audience and establishing a foothold in the industry; the unsurprising result was that large institutional actors such as newspapers and prosperous nationwide retailers quickly distinguished their broadcasting efforts from those of individuals and small companies.⁶⁷

These differences were further fostered by radio patent holders, who were able to decide who could purchase radio transmitting equipment and at what price. While there is little hard evidence of RCA abusing its position vis-à-vis broadcasters (unlike the well-documented evidence of RCA abusing its position vis-à-vis other radio manufacturers), the anecdotal record nonetheless lists many complaints against the sales policies of the "radio trust." For example, a broadcaster from Elgin, Illinois, accused RCA of refusing to sell him a one-kilowatt transmitter while selling (not-yet-legal) five-kilowatt transmitters to its partners.⁶⁸ According to broadcast historian Clifford Doerksen, such abuses of power were not uncommon: several independent broadcasters reported receiving "threatening visits" from representatives of Western Electric and RCA, who demanded, for example, that the broadcasters buy new transmitting apparatus or have their supply of vacuum tubes cut off.⁶⁹ While New York's WHN and other small stations fought back against these alleged abuses, it is impossible to know how many other stations, unable to meet RCA's demands or its exorbitant (and patent-protected) prices, may have limped along with third-rate equipment, or simply thrown in the towel. Either way, advantages in control of radio

⁶⁶ For estimates of the cost of a new station, see "Radio Relay System Tested," *New York Times* (14 October 1923): X11. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

⁶⁷ For more on these financial differences, see Hugh G. J. Aitken, "Allocating the Spectrum: The Origins of Radio Regulation," *Technology & Culture* 35, no. 4 (October 1994): 696-697.

⁶⁸ "Statement by Mr. C. E. Erbstein," 14.

⁶⁹ Doerksen, *American Babel*, 38-39.

apparatus translated into advantages in broadcasting apparatus that helped stations like WEAJ, WJZ, and KDKA grow stronger relative to other broadcasting ventures. This in turn translated into further advantages for the better equipped stations. For example, instead of sharing time equitably with other stations in their area, large stations could parlay their popularity into more and better broadcast hours. "It would be sheer nonsense," wrote one observer in 1922, "to stop the operation of WJZ for one minute, so that some dry goods store might send out a scratchy fox-trot phonograph record."⁷⁰

The growing financial gap between large corporate broadcasters and "the smallies" (as *Variety* liked to call them) was further exacerbated by policy decisions taken by the Department of Commerce.⁷¹ Most significantly, Hoover granted special privileges to those broadcasters who could afford to meet certain standards; these were the "Class B" stations that were not allowed to air phonograph records but were allowed to increase their power and escape the wireless sardine can at 360 meters, the frequency that all Class A stations throughout the country had to share. Many Class B's were run by deep-pocketed corporations, and their offerings quickly became articulated to higher social value. Although one of the committees at the Fourth Radio Conference lamented that Class A stations were unfairly regarded as second-rate ("It seems objectionable to place these fine wave lengths in a class which implies inferiority"), most of the participants at that conference in fact had a financial stake in furthering the association of Class A with inferiority, since their own Class B stations could only benefit from the comparison.⁷²

⁷⁰ "War Between Broadcasting Stations," *Radio Broadcast* 1, no. 6 (October 1922): 458.

⁷¹ "A. R. A. Alarmed By Scheme For Radiocast Chain," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (6 July 1924): D7. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

⁷² The committee's solution, however, was merely to abolish the "A/B" terminology but otherwise let the current system stand. "Reports of Committees: Committee No. 3: Licenses and Classification," *Proceedings of the Fourth*

Regardless of reputation, the two-tiered regulatory system would have profound effects on the growth of the industry, in part by greatly accelerating the move toward advertising-based financing.

While economic inequalities within the industry might not be surprising, the fact that they came to be explained and legitimated through discourses of localism is more intriguing. That is, although observers outside as well as inside the industry obviously recognized these economic differences among broadcasters, it was far from inevitable that financial disparities would come to be understood primarily in "local" and "national" terms. Yet over time, the relative descriptor "local" became a categorical descriptor: the local station was the one with the weak signal and the cheap programming, while the national station was the one with the strong signal, good programming, and growing reputation. Such geographical terms soon became naturalized by articulating them to radio's commercial foundations, gradually establishing a "common sense" linkage between economic base, geographical purpose, and spectrum allocation. For example, the *New York Times* wrote in 1923, "Obviously many enterprises, supported largely by local trade, cannot afford to broadcast far outside of the area it serves [*sic*]. Such stations will naturally be short-lived unless they limit themselves to low power and short programs."⁷³ The *Times*' assessment was not necessarily factual, as it understated the role of non-local advertising in supporting many ostensibly "local" stations, but it exemplifies the rhetoric that was strengthening the idea of a "natural" connection between a station's economic situation and its programming purpose. In other words, many observers, rather than supporting solutions that

| *National Radio Conference and Recommendations for Regulation of Radio* (1925), 19. Hoover Papers: Box 490, Folder "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1925 October-December."

⁷³ "Radio Relay System Tested," X11.

might change the economic base from which these class differences emerged, instead came to justify those differences as "natural" by articulating them to the "local."

What was emerging was a kind of "class-localist" system that made it increasingly difficult to separate a station's economic and social standing from its range and function. Wealthier broadcasters, especially those backed by RCA, were arrogating the term "national" for themselves as part of their commercial ambitions, leaving smaller broadcasters to become, practically by default, local. It would be misleading, of course, to suggest that all of those stations that were becoming known as "local" were necessarily poor. In fact, many such stations were doing quite well for themselves, particularly through direct advertising and inexpensive programming aimed at a "mass," rather than "class," audience: bawdy humor, fiery populist politics, "hillbilly" music, fortune-tellers, ads for quack medicine, etc.—most of it anathema to their self-consciously cosmopolitan critics. But their profitability was no substitute for legitimacy, and often this cultural class dimension also worked to marginalize such stations and further justify their second-class status as locals. Clifford Doerksen, in his excellent study of "rogue broadcasters" like New York's WHN, demonstrates that many middle- and upper-class citizens were offended by what they considered the blatant hucksterism and low-brow content on these stations, and were bewildered by their popularity with working-class and rural audiences.⁷⁴

It is important, however, to extend Doerksen's analysis to understand why these class differences were so effectively expressed in ostensibly geographic terms like "national" and "local." Thomas Streeter, in his work on the terminological shift from "community antenna television" to "cable" in the 1960s, has persuasively demonstrated the power of labeling to shape

⁷⁴ Doerksen, especially Chapter Two.

technology and policy.⁷⁵ Likewise, the emergence of the local-national terminology in radio in the mid-1920s was an important development in the understanding of what radio should be and how its growth should be managed. In other words, class disparities were both enabled and legitimated by the discourses of localism discussed in Chapter One. While local stations might have the potential for positive localism, functioning as a local public sphere the way that the community newspaper was supposed to do, they also suffered the stigma of negative localism, easily characterized as inefficient, technologically deficient, and culturally degenerate. At the very least, they were entirely insufficient; as radio mogul Powel Crosley put it, "It is very well to say that a local broadcasting station can perform the entire service required by the listening public. My finger on the people's pulse tells me, however, that this is not true."⁷⁶ This association of the inadequacy of the local made the label an easy retrofit for independent stations that catered to the immigrant working class or other audiences outside the cosmopolitan corporate elite, as well as those that were run in a more artisanal fashion with a one-person staff, low power, and outdated equipment. Localism, as I have argued, often functioned as a general marker of exclusion from the "modern," and thus as a tool of cultural delineation between the national class and other class identities; applied to radio, localism was less a geographical or social value than a way to understand and explain (and contain) opposing cultural and economic formations. For example, *Radio Broadcast*, the unapologetic voice of the national class in radio matters, described localism as fundamentally "other" to the urban sophisticate: "The very fact that the program is local must give it a certain interest to those in the hinterlands--who take a

⁷⁵ Thomas Streeter, "Blue Skies and Strange Bedfellows," *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997): 220-240.

⁷⁶ Powel Crosley, "Report of Proceedings of Sub-Committee No. 3," Third Radio Conference, 6 October 1924. Hoover Papers: Box 496, Folder "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)."

keen interest in local things, in contrast to the city dwellers who don't know their alderman's name nor the people in the apartment below."⁷⁷ Although cosmopolitans might acknowledge that they had a locality and sense of place, through such tropes they frequently vehemently denied that this made them "local."

As the rhetorical linkage between small/poor/local gained traction, it was but a short leap from description to prescription, using the "local" character of these stations not merely to categorize them, but to contain them. Thus David Sarnoff assured the decision-makers at the Third Radio Conference, presuming to speak for the (mostly absent) small broadcasters, "The local station is interested in maintaining the interest only of its local audience, and therefore has no need for higher power."⁷⁸ Others were less polite than the diplomatically savvy Sarnoff; one industry insider compared local stations to kids on roller skates out on the superhighway, adding, "The little local fellow may have his small place in the sun, but he must be contented to occupy a very small place indeed and not to put out too many claims as to his supposed rights in radio."⁷⁹ General Electric's Director of Broadcasting Martin Rice promoted the emerging dichotomy even more explicitly:

[A] department store or a local newspaper in Natchez, Mississippi, can have very little interest in broadcasting to Portland, Ore. Thus, three years of broadcasting have resulted in a rough classification of stations, local and general, the former being of interest in a limited range and the latter having national or, at times, international interest. The future will probably see this principle more generally

⁷⁷ John Wallace, "Should The Small Station Exist?" *Radio Broadcast* 11, no. 6 (October 1927): 373.

⁷⁸ David Sarnoff, "Report of Proceedings of Sub-Committee No. 3," Third Radio Conference (1924), 43. Hoover Papers: Box 496, Folder "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)."

⁷⁹ Henry M. Neely, "Editorially Speaking: High-Power Station WJZ Makes Good," *Radio in the Home* (undated): 27. FRC Correspondence: Box 139, Folder "1732."

recognized and if so, unwise investment in broadcasting apparatus will be saved and the problem of allocation of wave lengths will be simplified.⁸⁰

The equation established in these discourses was far from subtle: poor and small-town stations = local stations = second-class citizens who ought to keep their mouths shut when it comes to policy, so as to simplify the allocation of wavelengths. The power of this equation became clear when, as Rice predicted, it began to be picked up by policymakers. In 1926, for example, Senator Clarence Dill suggested "a new division of stations, according to their power into 'national' and 'local.'" He recommended that "national" stations should be protected from interference on clear channels, while local channels should get along fine sharing three or four frequencies at most. As *Radio Broadcast* summarized Dill's position, "The local stations will in general send out material of especial interest to those in its vicinity; the amount of power required is small and as a result many such stations ... could operate on the same wavelength." In a telling indication of the way that the national-local discourse was developing, the article went on to say: "It is interesting to observe that Senator Dill's idea regarding the division of stations into the two classes mentioned above is already working itself out. A few of the stations of the class of WEA, WJZ, WGY, KDKA, and similar ones are rapidly becoming known among listeners as national stations whether they are so legislated or not."⁸¹

This is not to suggest that small stations were not partially complicit in reinforcing these emerging categories—in Chapter Four I will discuss how many small stations found protection and economic security in the "local" label, as well as the ways in which the "local" label could also serve the interests of the traditional local middle class and the urban working class. But

⁸⁰ Qtd. in "Suggests Special Waves for Advertising By Radio," *New York Times* (22 February 1925): XX14. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 January 2005).

⁸¹ "Pending Radio Legislation," *Radio Broadcast* 9, no. 2 (June 1926): 117.

despite the ability of the relatively disempowered to derive some benefits from these discourses, for now the important point is that the national class stood the most to gain from the national-local distinction. Small stations could react to this distinction and occasionally find tactical opportunity therein, but it was national-class voices—in the press, in government, at Hoover's radio conferences—that essentially retrofitted locality onto poorer stations and thereby stripped them of equal access to the spectrum. Now, because small stations were "local," their chance of increasing their power or improving their frequency (and therefore expanding their economic base) was severely curtailed: they would be forced to keep their roller skates, while wealthier broadcasters continually improved their positions on the superhighway. And if the roller-skaters refused to stay out of the way, they faced the threat of simply being run over and killed: "[Eliminate] poorer and weaker stations which broadcast inferior programs," demanded Grover Whalen in *The Nation* in 1924. "The progress of radio is not helped by stations of little power broadcasting programs that are not worth while."⁸²

As argued in the previous section, however, the discourse of national vs. local stations also presented a potential threat to wealthy broadcasters, as opponents of the "radio trust" and higher-powered broadcasting used positive localism as a rhetorical tool against the specter of monopoly in American radio. In these oppositional tropes, "national" was identified as a stalking horse for corporate power and oligopoly control, while "local" was championed as a hedge against monopoly domination of broadcasting. This was a debate that was occurring throughout society as part of the larger battle over nationalizing economic structures like chain stores and mail-order retail as discussed in Chapter One. The national class generally welcomed chain

⁸² Grover A. Whalen, "Radio Control," *The Nation* 119, no. 3081 (23 July 1924): 90.

stores as modern and efficient, putting an end to "old-fashioned merchants, whose inefficiency used to levy a substantial cost on the community in which they operated."⁸³ The so-called old-fashioned merchants, needless to say, saw things a little differently. But the important point here is that the national-local categorization of stations could also serve the traditional local middle class's political agenda, albeit not without further reifying the categories themselves as a way of understanding radio.

Perhaps the best example of this struggle was the RCA plan for "super-power," and because this episode reveals much about the emergence of national and local categories, it is worth examining in some detail. In essence, RCA's stated goal was to broadcast to the entire nation through high-powered stations of five thousand or even fifty thousand watts (at a time when the legal limit was still one thousand watts). Although scholars have questioned how serious RCA was about this plan,⁸⁴ the reaction at the time was immediate and widely negative. One listeners group, the American Radio Association, saw a "Move to Drown Out 'Little Fellows,'" as a headline in the *Chicago Tribune* put it.⁸⁵ More powerful opponents to the super-power plan also chimed in: speaking for the Newspaper Publishers Association, a not-disinterested group of locally based media companies that opposed centralized control of radio, Walter Strong argued that "increased power will destroy the ability of the radio listener to select his programs of either local or national interest, and tend toward the monopolistic control of broadcasting." Suggesting that RCA's plan would inevitably lead to many fewer stations, Strong

⁸³ Merrylye Stanley Rukeyser, "Chain Stores: The Revolution in Retailing," *The Nation* 127, no. 3308 (28 November 1928): 670.

⁸⁴ See for example Michael J. Socolow, "To Network a Nation: N.B.C., C.B.S. and the Development of National Network Radio in the United States, 1925-1950" (Ph. D. diss., Georgetown University: 2001), 30-32.

⁸⁵ "A. R. A. Alarmed," D7.

called super-power "most dangerous in the same way that the elimination of all but a few newspapers would be most dangerous."⁸⁶ As for the public at large, Hoover's office was deluged with he said were "thousands of letters ... protesting against what they honestly believe would result in depriving them of the chance to listen to the local stations.... They fear a monopoly of the air."⁸⁷

It is worth noting, as Hoover's comment about fear of monopoly suggests, that even in these localist anti-monopoly discourses, rarely did anything like a plea for affirmative localism emerge: this was not a campaign to rescue the possibility of local public spheres in radio *per se*, but rather an effort to pit independent broadcasting against the anti-competitive ambitions of the "radio trust." For example, a petition sent to Commerce from the Citizens Radio Committee opposing super-power listed six "whereas-es" in its list of concerns—increased interference, monopoly, corporate propaganda, etc.—but made no mention of the importance of localism or the role of radio in local communities; its only expressed concern for "smaller stations" was as a bulwark against RCA's attempts at domination.⁸⁸ *Radio Digest* also warned that stricter regulations proposed for the Third Conference would, if adopted, force smaller, poorer stations "to submit to those that can meet the need."⁸⁹ Nor was this concern that RCA wanted to wipe out independent stations just a paranoid delusion or the result of populist demagoguery: Sarnoff himself, just a few months earlier, had said that a few super-power stations linked together would

⁸⁶ Walter A. Strong, "Report of Proceedings of Sub-Committee No. 3," Third Radio Conference, 13. Hoover Papers: Box 496, Folder "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)."

⁸⁷ Herbert Hoover, "Opening Address by Herbert Hoover," 6.

⁸⁸ Citizens Radio Committee, "A Petition to Oppose the Erection and Operation of 'Super' Power Radio Broadcasting Stations" (1924). FRC Correspondence: Box 153, Folder 2678.

⁸⁹ "Hoover Asks Radio Aid," *Radio Digest*, 10, no. 12 (27 September 1924), 1.

eventually become a "national broadcasting service" and that most other stations would go out of business, a statement that couldn't help but send chills down the spines of local and independent broadcasters.⁹⁰ As to the issue of program choice, on another occasion Sarnoff had seemed to threaten local programs by reducing small stations to a limited role as repeaters: "Smaller broadcasting stations might supplement their work [i.e. the work of super-power stations] by automatically repeating the national programs so that every city, hamlet and village in the country might hear them."⁹¹

At the Third Radio Conference, the debate over super-power came to a head when Illinois broadcaster Charles Erbstein, positioning himself as "just a common, small-town lawyer, that's all," accused RCA and its patent partners of attempting to dominate broadcasting. Sarnoff skillfully responded with new metaphors and arguments to reassure the assembled participants that super-power was not tantamount to monopoly, using national and local discourses to downplay the threat. Noting RCA's own heavy investment in local stations, apparently using "local" here in its relative sense to mean WJZ and other broadcasting powerhouses, Sarnoff claimed that his company had no desire "to destroy the usefulness or restrict the opportunity of the local broadcasting station." Contradicting his earlier statements quoted above, he added that super-power would merely enhance the local station's offerings by creating a national service, promising that "the local station will remain the voice of the community which it serves, just as the local newspaper is the expression of its interests. ... A national highway [does not] obviate the need of local roads." He suggested that AT&T was the real monopoly threat in radio since it

⁹⁰ "Continuance of Broadcasting Depends Upon Paying Talent," *New York Times* (3 February 1924): X9. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

⁹¹ "Radio Control Bill Opposed By Weeks," *New York Times* (14 March 1924): 21. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

controlled the wires needed for interconnection. Finally, repeating what would be a common strategy for large broadcasters and their allies, he asked how RCA could possibly monopolize broadcasting when it owned only a handful of the hundreds of stations on the air?⁹² In other words, he used discourses of positive localism not to back away from his plans in favor of a more localist system, but to further entrench a national-local dichotomy that legitimated the power of larger stations.

RCA's "super-power" plan was ultimately shelved in favor of interconnection, meaning that there would never be any stations with a truly nationwide reach (the closest to come to that was WLW, which operated with 500,000 watts for several years). But the discourse of "national" and "local" stations emerged from the super-power battle stronger than ever.⁹³ Indeed, among the many reasons that RCA ultimately pursued interconnection rather than super-power—reliability, feasibility, improved relations with AT&T, the high barriers to entry it represented to help reduce competition, etc.⁹⁴—it is reasonable to suggest that one of them may have been interconnection's ability to resolve (at least temporarily) these anti-monopoly national-local tensions in a politically viable way by preserving both national and local broadcasting structures. There is in fact some evidence for this; for example, Joel Michaels, the energetic if ineffectual media reformer behind the aforementioned Citizens Radio Committee petition against super-power, wrote that interconnection is effective and "serves its purpose admirably," suggesting that RCA's critics were willing to accept—at least in 1924—a solution preserving a plethora of

⁹² David Sarnoff, "Address by Mr. David Sarnoff," 10, 13.

⁹³ For an especially thorough examination of the alternatives to interconnection over dedicated phone lines, and how and why those alternatives turned into "roads not taken" in the development of American radio, see Socolow, "To Network a Nation," especially Chapter One.

⁹⁴ Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 30-32.

stations.⁹⁵ Either way, long after Sarnoff dropped his rhetoric of "super-power" stations, the national-local terminology continued to act as the most important framing device for debates over spectrum allocation. When the Federal Radio Commission began exploring its options for reorganizing the broadcast band, then, they already fully understood the situation in terms of national and local stations serving differently sized and differently valued communities, as opposed to other potential frames that might have been adopted for the task—a profound legacy.⁹⁶

IIIb. "Local" and "National" Become Official Policy Categories

The 1927-1929 period of radio allocation formalized the categories of local and national stations, again without any deliberate and systematic interrogation of these distinctions or their consequences. This process illustrates the back-and-forth political negotiations over localism between the national class and the traditional local middle class as represented by Congress, as well as the concretization in policy of common-sense ideas about local and national radio.

The "chaos"⁹⁷ on the airwaves that led to the 1927 Act might have provided the pretext for a radical redesign of American broadcasting away from the class-localist system described

⁹⁵ Joel Michaels to Dr. J. H. Dellinger, 15 November 1924, 1. FRC Correspondence: Box 153, "2678."

⁹⁶ For example, WCFL had proposed a system of assignments based on listener base, whereby the number of "subscribers" that a station could demonstrate determined the favorability of its frequency and allotted power. The idea, of course, was intended to benefit large, well-organized institutions like labor unions, but the plan did attempt to redirect policymakers toward a consideration of audience and programming interests as the primary basis for allocation. Even this plan, however, was expressed using the national-local framing that had been established over the 1920s: "A small local group of listeners [is] financially able and numerically entitled to a broadcasting station of low power while a great national group of listeners is proportionately above and entitled to support a broadcasting station to serve its need and desires." Edward M. Nockels, "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (30 Mar. 1927)," 153. Hoover Papers: Box 491, Folder "Radio: Conference, 3/30/27."

⁹⁷ Recent scholarship has begun to question the extent and intractability of the chaos on the airwaves that led to the 1927 Act, arguing that a variety of factors—not simply the overcrowding of the spectrum—led to the reception

above. But despite being prepared to eliminate hundreds of (mostly local) stations to deal with the grossest inefficiencies,⁹⁸ the newly minted Radio Commissioners were less fond of the idea of totally revamping the system to eliminate its inequalities, despite sporadic congressional pressure to do so.⁹⁹ As the FRC wrote in its "Plan of Procedure" a month after the Commission's creation, "[I]t is not advisable ... to tear down the whole structure of frequency assignments built up during the past six years, and to attempt arbitrarily to create an ideal broadcasting situation by an entirely new allocation of frequencies."¹⁰⁰ Nor had the 1927 Act encouraged such radical action; as Thomas Streeter has pointed out, "Nothing in the 1927 act departed substantially from the established patterns. The act's immediate practical function was largely to iron out a kink in the existing system."¹⁰¹

The FRC began its work by calling a conference in March, 1927 at which the local-national discourses that had shaped radio throughout the 1920s were given renewed energy as broadcasters at all levels scrambled to gain favor with the new regulatory body. One prominent trope at the conference was the negative localism with which corporate representatives tried to

problems of the late 1920s. This view casts into doubt the necessity of later FRC actions eliminating dozens of stations. See Steven Phipps, "Order Out of Chaos: A Reexamination of the Historical Basis for the Scarcity of Channels Concept," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 57-74; Hugh G. J. Aitken, "Allocating the Spectrum," 686-716.

⁹⁸ "The Commission recognizes that no scheme of reallocation which does not at the very outset eliminate at least four hundred broadcasting stations can possibly put an end to interference." Federal Radio Commission, *Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission to the Congress of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1927* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1927), 9; reprint, *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports, Numbers 1-7, 1927-1933*, History of Broadcasting: Radio to Television, ed. Christopher Sterling (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971).

⁹⁹ For example, Rep. Tom D. McKeown (D-OK), argued for a *tabula rasa* approach in early 1926, saying, "There ought to be an entire new deal regarding these wave lengths." Qtd. in "Bill Provides for Control of Radio Motion Pictures," *New York Times* (17 January 1926): XX15. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (2 March 2006).

¹⁰⁰ Federal Radio Commission, "Plan of Procedure." FRC Publications: Box RC2.

¹⁰¹ Streeter, *Selling the Air*, 96.

persuade the FRC to kill off dozens if not hundreds of small stations, and to continue to favor the large broadcasters with higher power and premium wavelengths. For example, Alfred E. Waller of the National Electrical Manufacturers Association, arguing that "originality, courage and good taste deserves preferred consideration in license renewal," urged the FRC to license "the 150 most eligible and best stations" and let the remaining stations—the "electro-static katydid and worse"—pick up the scraps.¹⁰² Regarding the charge that higher power and networking would lead to monopoly, a representative of the Radio Manufacturers' Association assured the Commissioners that listeners would prefer fewer programs "of greater entertainment value than local programs," and therefore the FRC need not worry about eliminating local stations.¹⁰³

RCA and other wealthy broadcast interests, in addition to hammering home the national-local dichotomy at the conference, also helpfully outlined the different fates that they felt should befall the two categories of stations. Most prominently, the Committee on Radio Broadcasting of the American Engineering Council (AEC), an industry group that included RCA's Alfred Goldsmith, David Sarnoff, and the well known industry consultant Cyril Jansky, offered a plan to the FRC that called for sixty-four cleared "national" channels of unlimited power, to be given to "competent" broadcasters.¹⁰⁴ This was one-third again more channels than had been reserved for Class B stations. At the same time, the AEC plan called for strictly capping power on the

¹⁰² Alfred E. Waller, "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (1 April 1927)," 357, 385. Hoover Papers: Box 491, Folder "Radio: Conference, 4/1/27."

¹⁰³ G. C. Furness, "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (31 March 1927)," 334-336. Hoover Papers: Box 491, Folder "Radio: Conference, 3/31/27."

¹⁰⁴ "A Statement on Engineering Principles prepared for presentation to the Federal Radio Commission by the Committee on Radio Broadcasting of the American Engineering Council" (1927). Hoover Papers: Box 490, Folder "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1927 January-April."

"local" channels, and there was general agreement that many of those "less capable" stations needed to be eliminated altogether—up to two hundred local stations.

The AEC proposal, as the most fully developed plan with the most powerful backers, helped set the terms of the debate for the rest of the conference, but it was not the only plan to be introduced. The editor of *Radio Broadcast*, claiming to represent more than 4.5 million readers, submitted a plan that he claimed would allow all stations then broadcasting to stay on the air, with enough room to spare "so that every small city that wants its own station can have it.... In that way you may meet the needs of specialized communities and special service, and yet give us the National coverage that we need in rural and sparsely settled districts."¹⁰⁵ The plan was atypical of *Radio Broadcast* in being so solicitous of local radio: it devoted just eleven frequencies to high-powered clear-channel stations, while reserving thirty frequencies for low-powered local stations (330 full-time equivalents), with the rest of the frequencies allocated to a range of stations at 500 watts and 5 kilowatts.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, it dismissed the AEC plan, with so many unlimited-power national channels and so few local channels, as "a satisfactory engineering solution of a problem which has more than an engineering side to it."¹⁰⁷ Estimates of the total number of stations under various plans ranged from a realistic 240 to a hypothetical 3000.

As these different plans indicate, discourses of localism pulled the FRC in two directions as the Commission tried to strike the "right" balance between local and national channels.

¹⁰⁵ E. H. Felix, "Before the FRC: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (29 March 1927)," 83. Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Conference, 3/29/27."

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 235-236.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

Advocates for local radio (including the American Newspapers Publishers' Association and many owners of small stations) promoted tropes of the small town and presented a local service argument on behalf of more support for localism. The representative of Kansas station KFKB (soon to be famous as Dr. Brinkley's station) told the FRC that "any attempt to limit our stations to only those which can obtain the large revenues through advertising will mean that we are in danger of destroying some stations which serve a public need along other lines." He drew an analogy to large newspapers, which are important, but which "do not have the local news that appeals to the people in local communities."

No one would say, "Let us abolish the country weekly or the small town newspapers because they do not have as good a public as the large City newspapers." Neither should you destroy the small radio broadcaster if he does serve a need ... the needs of a rural community that are interested in matters such as better health, better education, sanitation, and such problems which the stations situated outside of the City best meet.¹⁰⁸

In the 1927 debate over spectrum allocation, then, two competing views of the local were at stake; more precisely, two competing views of the economic structure of the industry were at stake, both using shades of localist rhetoric to make their case. One question that seems to have attracted surprisingly little scrutiny was the distinction between local and national stations itself, or what sort of "community of license" they were expected to serve. As media historian John Armstrong points out, "Although the nomenclature of the radio classes--clear channel, regional and local--suggests a systematic theory of community and audience types, in fact, the FRC, and then the FCC, provided little explicit discussion of what was meant by a 'regional' or 'local'

¹⁰⁸ George E. Strong, "Before the FRC: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (31 March 1927)," 313-314. Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Conference, 3/31/27."

community."¹⁰⁹ The American Newspapers Publishers' Association (ANPA), representing many smaller stations, did seem to call these terms into question, claiming that the AEC's plan was nothing more than "favoritism for the high powered or *so-called* national stations."¹¹⁰ Also, one educational broadcaster from Lincoln, Nebraska tried to point out a disconnect between the labels with which regulators comprehended and manipulated the radio system and the actual needs of various broadcasters, stating, "The question is: what does constitute a local station?" Given that the University of Nebraska's "locale" was the entire state, his station required a service area that, were he located in New York City, would reach from Maine to North Carolina. "That is what we would have today as a local station in order for the University of Nebraska to reach our constituency, gentlemen of the Commission." He asked the FRC to allocate power on a case-by-case basis depending on programming mission, not on a station's financial status or some putative geographical purpose.¹¹¹

Despite the smattering of such voices, however, it was the national-class attitude that most influenced regulators, who by the end of the conference had decided to eliminate dozens of smaller stations. Commissioner Henry Bellows—a Minneapolis broadcaster who, following his stint on the FRC, returned to WCCO and became a powerful figure in CBS and the NAB—and Orestes H. Caldwell were particularly staunch in their desire to privilege large, powerful stations at the expense of smaller, local ones. Scholars such as Hugh Sloten and Hugh Aitken have persuasively demonstrated the ways in which ostensibly technical negotiations over radio

¹⁰⁹ John Stevenson Armstrong, "Localism, Community, and Commercial Television, 1948-1960: A Value Analysis" (Ph. D. diss., University of Utah, 2002), 52.

¹¹⁰ Elisha Hanson, "Before the FRC: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (1 April 1927)" Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Conference, 4/1/27." Emphasis added.

¹¹¹ J. C. Jensen, "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (31 March 1927)," 240-241. Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Conference, 3/31/27."

regulation were deeply embedded in social and political contexts, and it is by now a well accepted academic tenet that even the most technical discourses cannot be regarded as socially neutral.¹¹² For all the discussion about radio policy as a technical problem, then, this debate was less about technological questions of interference and the like, and more about the social, political, and cultural underpinnings of spectrum allocation, with the national class asserting its economic and cultural interests at the expense of the "local." Still, it is striking to read Bellows' summary of the 1927 FRC conference, with its hostility toward local stations and its metaphors of violence and punishment, which he twists and squirms to conceal with a veneer of political delicacy:

We called for suggestions as to the motives for reducing the number of stations. None of the gentlemen seemed to be anxious to preside at the operation, or murder, if you want to call it that, or to recommend methods by which it could be carried on as painlessly as possible; but it was suggested that ... it might be desirable and possible to create a limbo, which was described as a penitentiary, or in other ways setting aside one or two wave lengths, which admittedly would be overcrowded, for the benefit, if you can call it that, of broadcasting stations which did not seem to be entitled to more considerate treatment.¹¹³

Following this conference, the FRC made clear both its sympathy toward large broadcasters and its hostility toward smaller ones in a statement on allocation in April 1927. Outlining its plan on how to proceed, the Commission pledged preferential treatment for "stations which, because of power, priority, past conduct and program quality, appear best qualified to serve the public," while vowing to "relegate those stations which seem to be of little

¹¹² Hugh Slotten, *Radio and Television Regulation*; Aitken, "Allocating the Spectrum," 686-716. See also Mary S. Mander, "The Public Debate About Broadcasting in the Twenties: An Interpretative History," *Journal of Broadcasting* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 167-185.

¹¹³ Henry A. Bellows, "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (1 Apr. 1927)," 351. Hoover Papers: Box 491, Folder "Radio: Conference, 4/1/27."

or no value to frequencies on which they can make little trouble."¹¹⁴ The Commission may not have been entirely unanimous on this issue, but any dissenters were either outvoted or persuaded; as Caldwell reassured a General Electric executive in private correspondence:

As the public learns that it is better served by one great station like WGY, than by the two or three 500-watt stations which consume the same wavelength, and this realization is brought to members of Congress, (who have heretofore generally opposed large stations and as many exclusive channels as engineers want,) the other members of the Commission will undoubtedly reverse their views into favoring the large stations as the instruments of greatest public service.¹¹⁵

The Commission began cutting power assignments for dozens of stations and justifying it in terms that could have come straight out of the mouths of the large broadcasters. Just as Sarnoff had said that the "local" station serves only its community and therefore has no need for more power, so too the FRC said, in reducing the power of a Cedar Rapids, IA, station, "The continued operation of distinctly local stations with greater power than is absolutely necessary in carrying out the actual service of the station is felt to be one of the causes for unnecessary interference." After all, the Commission added, as a local station its programs would have—presumably inevitably and invariably—nothing more than "a limited appeal."¹¹⁶

National-class allies in the press helped the FRC make the case that small stations were inefficient and should therefore be discouraged, as when *Variety* offered a timely article on the

¹¹⁴ Federal Radio Commission, "Plan for Frequency Reallocation" (29 April 1927): 27. FRC Minutes: Minutes Film 1, Reel 1.1.

¹¹⁵ O. H. Caldwell to Martin P. Rice, 17 October 1928. Caldwell Papers: Box 1, Folder 2 ("Correspondence 'WGY Personal Correspondence' 1928").

¹¹⁶ Federal Radio Commission, "Second Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission for the Year Ended June 30, 1928, Together With Supplemental Report for the Period From July 1, 1928, to September 30, 1928," 161. Reprinted in *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports, Numbers 1-7, 1927-1933*, History of Broadcasting: Radio to Television (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971).

death (grossly exaggerated, it turned out) of local radio advertising.¹¹⁷ *Radio Broadcast* rode the anti-local horse particularly hard, deeming locals "economically doomed"; running articles with titles like "Should the Small Station Exist?" (answer: mostly not); contrasting the "bigger and better" stations with the poor programming of the "jerkwater" stations in the boondocks; and approvingly recounting the tale of KUY, a station that voluntarily closed its doors when it saw it couldn't compete with larger stations, like a sick elephant lumbering away from the herd to die.¹¹⁸

If negative localism colored the FRC's actions during its first year, Congress bit back with discourses of positive localism during the spring of 1928, passing the Davis Amendment to require equal distribution of broadcast facilities by population in each state and in each of the five radio zones throughout the country.¹¹⁹ Although sometimes mistaken for an effort to encourage affirmative localism, the Davis Amendment is best understood as the revenge of the traditional local middle class, an effort by a conservative Congress to level the economic and cultural playing field vis-à-vis the national class. The months leading up to the Davis Amendment were particularly stormy, with several vocal members of Congress and Commissioners such as Orestes Caldwell loudly expressing their mutual disrespect, an episode I return to below. For now the point is that the Congressional efforts to mandate a more equal

¹¹⁷ "Local Accounts Not Renewing Contracts for Air Publicity," *Variety* 10 October 1927, 3.

¹¹⁸ John Wallace, "What Stations Shall Be Eliminated?" *Radio Broadcast* 11, no. 3 (July 1927): 139-140; John Wallace, "What Radio Programs Chiefly Need," *Radio Broadcast* 8, no. 4 (February 1926): 445.

¹¹⁹ See for example Proffitt and Brown, "Regulating the Radio Monopoly"; Fritz Messere, "The Davis Amendment and the Federal Radio Act of 1927: Evaluating External Pressures in Policymaking" (Unpublished paper delivered at the Broadcast Education Association Annual Convention, 19 April 2001, Las Vegas, NV).

distribution of radio facilities among various regions of the country further emphasized a geographical approach to spectrum allocation.¹²⁰

Following the passage of Davis, the FRC returned to work in the summer of 1928, and it was at this stage that the categories of "local" and "national" stations, so long a feature of thinking about radio, became official policy designations. Once again they faced the question of balance between these categories; one plan submitted in 1928 by the FRC's own engineers included fifty clear channels and just four frequencies for low-powered locals. Ultimately, with General Order 40 in November, 1928, the large broadcasters would settle for only forty clear channels for "national" stations, rather than the sixty-four they had originally proposed in 1927. But the number of channels reserved for "local" stations was a mere six (the remaining channels were given to medium-power "regional" channels). The low number of local channels meant that dozens of stations throughout the country would be required to share time, further weakening their economic viability and audience potential. Furthermore, the local channels were

¹²⁰ Congress included language to ensure equitable geographical distribution of spectrum assignments in the Radio Act of 1927 in response to regional pressures described elsewhere in this chapter. When the FRC failed to implement that clause to the satisfaction of key legislators, the Davis Amendment of 1928 spelled out Congress' wishes more precisely and emphatically. There is some debate in the literature over whether the Davis Amendment is a "localist" law; that is, was its intent and effect to encourage localism? The "effect" part of that question is easy: the Davis Amendment did not have the effect of increasing localism as I defined it in the introduction: an affirmative effort to foster geographically-based local identities and public spheres through a licensee's program service. In fact, the Davis Amendment actually hurt localism in numerous ways, such as preventing more local stations in sparsely populated areas.

As for the law's intent, that is a trickier question to answer. For the purposes of this study, I have allowed daytime service area to function as a rough approximation of any given station's locality, since that is how regulators at the time tended to think about it. By that metric, the Davis Amendment was intended, at best, to foster regionalism, not localism. But the localism/regionalism aspect is a red herring for two reasons. First, as various scholars have convincingly demonstrated, terms like local/regional/national/global are discursive constructions of space with no stable correlation to actual place. Our "local" thus shifts constantly, expanding and contracting as we negotiate our identities within a range of spatial possibilities and interpellations. I discuss the issue of regionalism near the end of this chapter. Second, I would argue that the primary motivations behind the Davis Amendment were cultural and economic, not geographic. The Amendment was designed to put a brake on the cultural hegemony of northeastern urban culture, as well as to act as a check on monopoly power in the industry. Regional identities were obviously integral to this struggle, but only to the extent that those identities coincided with or reinforced a larger struggle over culture in the U.S. For a view of the Amendment that recognized some of these problems at the time, see Keith Masters, "Construction of the Equality Clause in the Davis Amendment," *Journal of Radio Law* 1, no. 1 (April 1931): 1-27. HeinOnline. 22 June 2006.

unquestionably the least desirable frequencies in the broadcast band: they were assigned to the wavelengths that were most difficult for the broadcasters to maintain in transmission, and most difficult for the listener to pull in reliably during reception. At the end of the process, small broadcasters, now officially categorized as "local stations," were more disadvantaged than ever before. In that sense, the circle was now complete: the notion that poorer stations were "local," and therefore did not need or deserve decent spectrum assignments, became a self-fulfilling prophecy, with large broadcasters and their national-class allies serving as the oracles.

In the meantime, however, the Commissioners has learned a thing or two about how to use localism to advance national radio. In contrast to 1927, when discourses of negative localism dominated the Commission's pronouncements, they used discourses of positive localism to justify the new system. In a statement accompanying the reallocation plan, the FRC tried to appeal to Congress by emphasizing the large number of low-powered local stations it had provided, "equaling in number the total of all other classes of broadcasters put together."¹²¹ They also used the localist rhetoric of the rural community to defend the plan: Commissioner Orestes Caldwell argued that rural listeners are the "chief beneficiaries of the new arrangement," while also stressing that the "great class of local 100-watt stations has also been given particular consideration." And to the potential objection that six local frequencies were simply too few—

¹²¹ The statement lists one hundred fifty positions for fifty- and hundred-watt stations, and one hundred sixty-five positions for all others, so I am not certain how the math works here. My best guess is that the statement sloppily mixes daytime and nighttime allocations, listing actual spectrum positions in terms of nighttime but trumpeting the greater number of daytime slots for local stations who often had to reduce power or cease broadcasting at sunset. Federal Radio Commission. "Statement to Accompany General Order No. 40." Federal Radio Commission, *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports, Numbers 1-7, 1927-1933*, 2:50.

just a handful more frequencies would have allowed hundreds more local stations around the country—Caldwell pointed out that six still left "room to spare" in most zones at the time.¹²²

General Order 40 thus advanced the interests of the national class with full-powered, clear-channel "national" stations receiving the prime assignments, and as few local stations as politically possible, pushed to the literal margins of the system. At the same time, the Commission used positive localism to defend its actions to Congress and the traditional local middle class, playing up the space for local communities and the benefits to rural folk that the new plan provided. The words of Caldwell best captured this tension in the run-up to the release of General Order 40. In a letter to the president of a local Chamber of Commerce, who had expressed concern about the demise of small local broadcasting stations, Caldwell is clearly attempting to negotiate his prejudices against amateurish local radio, his desire to preserve the best assignments for national radio, and his perception of the political need to use the rhetoric of positive localism:

I am a hearty supporter of such small stations and the useful service which they can render ... [E]very community of 10,000 population and above should have its voice on the air for a time each day, without interfering with the important general service rendered by the larger stations ... which will always be the backbone of radio service. ... [I support] at one end of the dial, out of the way of present popular programs, a "local band" where the listener can tune in his town or county transmitter, and hear events and ceremonies of strictly local interest. Such features would be local basketball and baseball games, high-school events, town meetings and debates of local issues, and so on. Of course none of these events would have any interest more than a few miles away, and as program material they could hardly be accepted by the ordinary broadcaster. Yet, like the home-town weekly paper--or amateur theatricals among friends--they would have a local interest all their own, and any crudities of presentation or reproduction would be readily forgiven.¹²³

¹²² "New Allocation Plan to Reduce Radio Interference Made Effective," *New York Herald-Tribune* (?), n.d. (1928), n.p. FRC Correspondence: Box 23, "Re Allocation of Wave Lengths by Radio Commission."

¹²³ "Radio Stations Advocated for Smaller Cities," *The United States Daily* (?), 9 August 1928, 1. Caldwell Papers: Box 1, "1928 Clippings & related."

Robert McChesney points out that General Order 40 came down clearly on the side of large commercial broadcasters,¹²⁴ but given the often contentious back-and-forth between the FRC and Congress, my interpretation is that the FRC tried to split the difference at least somewhat between local and national stations, pulled as they were between the interests of competing class formations. Certainly they "erred" on the side of high-powered clear channels with forty, but that was only around sixty percent of what the AEC had asked for, and they also allocated six local frequencies instead of the four that their own engineers had recommended (sparing around one hundred additional stations). The plan also provided twenty-four "regional" frequencies that were, in terms of practical service area, just higher-powered local stations for larger metropolitan areas, extending a few hundred miles at night. Therefore, General Order 40 was not simply a giveaway to corporate commercial radio. Instead, I argue that the reallocation must be situated within conflicting pressures on policy, trying to achieve "national" coverage while appeasing the representatives of the traditional local middle class in Congress. Whatever the Commission's real intent, however, the effect was undeniably to set in concrete once and for all the economic disparities that had developed during the 1920s, now naturalized in geographic terms that perpetuated the advantages of larger commercial stations over smaller commercial and nonprofit broadcasters.

IIc. Coda: A Note on Regionalism

Thus far in the dissertation, I have been using localism to refer in a geographic sense to smaller political units such as towns, cities, and villages. But one wrinkle deserves brief

¹²⁴ McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, 34-37.

mention: as discussed previously, much of the push for "localism" was in fact coming from Southern representatives of the traditional local middle class, such as Ewin Davis of Tennessee and Lawrence Ellzey of Mississippi, whose primary concern was with a Southern regional identity and the Southern economy, rather than localism per se. Responding to such pressures, Hoover at various times proposed new structures to grant different regions of the country more control over the radio system. In particular, the Fourth Radio Conference discussed the question of regional licensing boards, a solution nominally endorsed by Hoover. Under one version of the plan, the federal government would determine which frequencies and power levels were to be apportioned to each zone, and a committee in that zone would then decide where to locate stations and who would run them. As usual with the national class, questions of efficiency were paramount. As Commerce Solicitor S. B. Davis wrote of the advantages of regional plans, "Assuming the necessity of limiting stations, I can think of no better plan for doing so. I do not believe it can be efficiently done from Washington." Comparing the principles of federalism behind this idea to the precedent of state regulation of public utilities, he added, "It is of small concern to New York or Washington whether one or a dozen stations operate in Minneapolis, so long as they occupy only one channel."¹²⁵ Industry leaders, however, were adamant in their opposition to such schemes, in part to secure the efficiency of their own operations, and the Fourth Radio Conference ultimately rejected regional boards in favor of national licensing. As the Chairman of General Electric wrote to Hoover, "I should be very sorry to have regional committees dealing with any questions affecting broadcasting. There is no such thing as a region

¹²⁵ S. B. Davis to Alfred N. Goldsmith, 2 July 1925. FRC Commerce: Box 130, "67032/7."

in broadcasting, and it seems to me that the regional committees would result only in providing a new crop of controversies and problems."¹²⁶

Despite industry opposition, however, Hoover saw some form of regionalism in the system as inevitable given the political power of the traditional local middle class. "[T]he country would not be content," he wrote, "unless there were either regional boards or boards of regional representation."¹²⁷ Of course, by 1926, Hoover was powerless to affect the distribution of facilities throughout the country, intensifying regional resentments. Ever the consummate politician, he therefore channeled the desire for regionalism into his efforts to pass new radio legislation. For example, responding to Senator Pat Harrison's complaints about the lack of stations in Mississippi in 1926, Hoover agreed that the region was poorly supplied with broadcasting, but pointed out that he could not do anything until his authority over radio was re-established: "I have no doubt that, assuming the passage of pending legislation, whoever may have the duty of readjusting the broadcasting situation will give full consideration to the needs of this part of the country."¹²⁸ That legislation ultimately did include regionalist features, most notably in the "equal service" provision, but also in the five-zone system, each zone with its own Commissioner. Interestingly, in Hoover's State of the Union Address in December, 1929, he

¹²⁶ Owen D. Young to Herbert Hoover, (2 December 1925). Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National Fourth." Thomas Hazlett has suggested that wealthy broadcasters wanted federal regulation rather than local or regional regulation because they believed that a federal body would be more sympathetic or manipulable. Thomas Hazlett, "Is the 'Public Interest' in the Public Interest? The Broadcast License Bargain of 1927," *Telecommunications Policy: Have Regulators Dialed the Wrong Number?*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 49-74.

¹²⁷ Herbert Hoover to Owen D. Young, 4 December 1925. Hoover Papers: Box 496, "Radio: Conferences--National Fourth."

¹²⁸ Herbert Hoover to Sen. Pat Harrison, 21 May 1926. Hoover Papers: Box 490, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1926 May-December."

called for a return to pure, centralized national radio regulation by abolishing the zone system within the FRC:

Despite the effort of the commissioners, the present method develops a public insistence that the commissioners are specially charged with supervision of radio affairs in the zone from which each is appointed. As a result there is danger that the system will degenerate from a national system into five regional agencies with varying practices, varying policies, competitive tendencies, and consequent failure to attain its utmost capacity for service to the people as a whole.¹²⁹

In other words, Hoover believed the public was clamoring for more regionalism in the system, and he felt that clamor was hurting the Commission's efficiency. So despite the recent stock market crash and everything else of importance going on in the country, he found time to try to optimize the Federal Radio Commission through greater centralization. Now *that's* a national-class figure.

Despite the perpetuation of FRC's zone system, that body did not take radical steps to even out regional disparities, blaming underserved regions themselves for their failure to effect greater equalization. As one Commissioner wrote:

It is a fact that the Southern States are not particularly well represented in the broadcasting field, but it is also a fact that this Commission can not be held responsible for that state of affairs, because if the people of the South do not want broadcast stations and do not make application for them the Commission can not take any action whatsoever.¹³⁰

A response to what it perceived as FRC inaction, the Davis Amendment of 1928 was clearly the most important Congressional effort to enforce more regionalism in the radio system. But as southern Senators and representatives never tired of pointing out, the Davis Amendment neither achieved its sponsors' goals, nor reversed (or even necessarily slowed) the growth of

¹²⁹ Herbert Hoover, "State of the Union," 3 December 1929. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (18 August 2006).

¹³⁰ "Admiral Bullard's Letter of August 24, 1927." Federal Radio Commission, *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports, Numbers 1-7, 1927-1933*, 2:82.

chains in American broadcasting. In part this was due to contradictions between the terms of the act and the political and legal realities of disturbing well-established institutions. Despite the absence of formal property rights in the spectrum, neither listeners, nor the courts, nor the particular politicians whose constituents' wireless ox was getting gored were willing to simply allow the FRC to delete wealthy, popular stations without a fight. As the D.C. Court of Appeals ruled in one prominent case:

It is not consistent with true public convenience, interest or necessity, that meritorious stations ... should be deprived of broadcasting privileges when once granted to them, which they have at great cost prepared themselves to exercise, unless clear and sound reasons of public policy demand such action. The cause of independent broadcasting in general would be seriously endangered and public interests correspondingly prejudiced, if the licenses of established stations should arbitrarily be withdrawn from them, and appropriated to other stations.¹³¹

But the greater impediment to the success of the Davis Amendment was the FRC itself. The Commissioners had argued against it from the beginning, with Orestes Caldwell so vehemently and vocally opposed that during Congressional hearings, "he added to the gayety of the situation by bawling out Congress and this caused such a melee that he came within a couple of votes of being thrown out."¹³² Once the law was forced upon them, the Commissioners violated its spirit and letter on a regular basis. They eagerly used the over-quota status of a state or zone to justify denying additional facilities if they did not want to grant an application, but then just as happily added facilities to over-quota zones whenever it suited them. For example, an application for a new station in Eureka, California was approved despite California's over-quota status (and despite a poor transmitter location, the absence of arrangements for

¹³¹ *Chicago Federation of Labor v. Federal Radio Commission*, 41 R. (2d) 622. Qtd. in Federal Radio Commission, "Answers to Interrogatories Propounded to Federal Radio Commission By Senator Hatfield," 14 March 1932. FRC Correspondence: Box 38, "15-2."

¹³² "Caldwell in Glee as He Leaves Job," n.s., n.d. (1929). Caldwell Papers: Box 1, Folder 5.

programming, and only a tentative location for a studio—factors that would have sunk another application), while an application for a station in Maine was denied because Maine's quota was "just about filled."¹³³ On one particularly absurd day in 1930, the FRC approved one application despite it exceeding one zone's quota, then turned around and denied another application because it would have exceeded a different zone's quota.¹³⁴ The Commission's implementation of Davis, in other words, was maddeningly inconsistent.

Despite that, the Commission did manage to balance out some of the worst inequalities of the system, at least on paper using their own quota system. No stations in the South were targeted for deletion under General Order 32, an early wavelength-clearing exercise that eliminated dozens of small stations in 1928, and applications for new stations in the under-quota

¹³³ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Harold H. Hanseth, Docket 1625." FRC Minutes: Box 19, "9/13/32 #602"; Federal Radio Commission, "Re Docket #757, Albert S. Woodman" (Memo), 9 April 1930. FRC Minutes: Box 5, "5/9/30 #209."

Without in-depth investigation into each case, it is nearly impossible to reconstruct why a given application was "really" denied or approved when seemingly similar applications under seemingly similar conditions met the opposite fate. For instance, it is plausible that the FRC denied certain worthwhile applications simply because approving them would use up valuable quota, thereby preventing the later approval of another, unrelated application that the Commissioners knew they wanted to grant in the same zone. Such a scenario would be very difficult to detect, much less prove, since applications could be in the pipeline for months (meaning that the two decisions could be months apart and in different states). Likewise, the occasional discreet phone call from a senator to a Commissioner urging the FRC's special approval of a given application cannot be ruled out, but it would in all likelihood be lost to the historical record. Furthermore, prior to 1931, the FRC did not publish reports on its decisions except in rare occasions. Due to criticism of this practice, they began issuing reports in all but routine cases. Therefore, the documentary record and reasons for decisions are largely lost prior to mid-1931.

In the case of the Eureka station, my suspicion is that the applicant, Harold Hanseth, was known personally to the Commission and that they wanted to approve this application as a favor to him (or his patron). Certainly the leeway allowed to the applicant and the uncharacteristic language of the FRC's report hints at that possibility. For example, the applicant failed to present information on the planned program service, a fact that was a contributing ground for denial in the Maine case and that in other cases was by itself the sole cause for denial (see below). Yet the report assures readers that the "past experience of the applicant has been such that it may be assumed that the programs would be adapted to the needs of the community." That might not sound unreasonably generous to a reader not steeped in FRC bureaucratism, but in the context of hundreds of these reports—demonstrating the FRC's boundless capacity for nitpicking, faultfinding, and assuming nothing—that sentence qualifies as a significant free pass. Although I cannot prove it, the anomalous approval otherwise defies explanation.

For an example of the Commission denying an application based solely on the applicant's failure to describe the planned programming, see George Porter, Acting General Counsel, to the FCC "In re: Application of Abraham Shapiro, Docket 2385" (Memo). FRC Minutes: Box 28, "Minute #6: 7/24/34, Broadcast Division."

¹³⁴ See "Re Docket #770, J. C. Liner" and "Re Docket #776, W. Telfer Hogg," both 6 May 1930. FRC Minutes: Box 5, "5/9/30 #209."

zones stood a very good chance of approval. Within the zones, enormous inequalities remained, but by 1933, both the South and the West were heavily over quota, while the East and Northeast were under quota on facilities. Of course, it was not the geographical allocation (or misallocation) that continued to anger the FRC's critics: when Representative Ellzey of Mississippi introduced an angry resolution in 1933 calling for an investigation of the FRC's implementation of the Davis Amendment, his zone was some sixteen percent *over* quota. Rather, it was the character of those stations and the continued power of commercial network radio despite a more equitable distribution of stations that concerned Ellzey and his allies, including broadcaster William K. Henderson, who called the FRC the "illegitimate child of the Hoover Administration," and accused it of "denying the South free speech by denying the Southern stations power when they want it."¹³⁵ The 1933 resolution's enumerated grounds for the investigation focused almost entirely on the rise of broadcast chains and the preference given to network affiliates over independent stations.¹³⁶ I will discuss the FRC's actions in this regard at greater length in the next chapter; here, the point is that the FRC's crime was not the failure to produce relative parity among the various regions, but the failure to contain the hegemony of northern, urban culture. There were other factors in play as well—most notably the rise of advertising and the perception of FRC discrimination against independent stations like WCFL—but it was no accident that many of these complaints and resolutions were introduced by Southern legislators who had long opposed the influence that New York and Chicago broadcasters wielded over the emerging modern culture of the country.

¹³⁵ Qtd. in Derek Vaillant, "Bare-Knuckled Broadcasting: Enlisting Manly Respectability and Racial Paternalism in the Battle Against Chain Stores, Chain Stations, and the Federal Radio Commission on Louisiana's KWKH, 1924–33," *Radio Journal* 1, no. 3 (2004): 49.

¹³⁶ H. Res. 181, 72d Congress, 9 June 1933. FRC Correspondence: Box 38, "15-2."

These legislators were discovering too late that the pressures exerted on the FRC to implement Davis were actually *hurting* efforts to foster regional identity through broadcasting and to contain national chains. There were several reasons for this. First, the Davis Amendment put quantitative, not qualitative, constraints on the FRC, which encouraged—even forced—Commissioners to regard any service in an underserved region as "good" service. It therefore did not matter whether the station was a chain affiliate airing programs out of New York or a regional station run by a civic booster committed to locally originated programming: the watts and hours counted just the same in the ledger. Second, what might be called the "infrastructural fallacy" applied: the idea that regulators can reasonably anticipate a correlation between ownership and content. This concept is still an important point of debate in considerations of localism, as discussed in the introduction of this study. But because the local licensee was still the primary unit of spectrum allocation, increasing the number of licenses within a given region did not necessarily lead to local or even regionally inflected programming. In particular, musical recordings and a booming trade in radio transcriptions enabled unaffiliated local stations to air professional-sounding programs with little or no local representation beyond the spot advertising of local sponsors. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that transcriptions displaced locally originated programming that might have reflected and fostered a local identity, even at this early date.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the system still pitted the individual station against its competitors, enabling the proliferation of stations in a region without necessarily encouraging the aggregation of regional power, meaning that the Davis Amendment may have simply helped accelerate the

¹³⁷ Alexander Todd Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth: Audiences, Aesthetics, Economics, and Technologies of American Broadcasting, 1926-1951" (Ph. D. diss., Brown University, 2004), 97-98.

spread of national radio.¹³⁸ Third, since the FRC's criteria for awarding stations tended not to change based on the region—they were interested in finances first, appropriate content second—applicants with chain backing almost invariably prevailed over independent stations, regardless of region. It is true that the FRC did pay some attention to whether a station's programs were "well-suited" to the needs of the listening area to be served, and a station like WSM in Nashville might play more "old-timey" music than an NBC affiliate in Los Angeles or Boston. But in the absence of a countervailing imperative to specifically privilege certain kinds of content in certain areas, the same content- and finance-related pressures described in the previous sections of this chapter led the FRC to favor national radio irrespective of regional identities. Finally, given the disparities in prosperity between the South and other regions of the country, independent stations there had greater difficulty staying on the air, since the local advertising base was often simply inadequate to run a station in accordance with the FRC's technical and procedural regulations. This further encouraged chain affiliation as a way to survive in a brutal economic climate. In other words, the equalization provisions of the various radio laws did nothing to alter the balance of forces that led the FRC to use discourses and structures of localism to advance national radio. In fact, Davis Amendment actually helped kill off non-chain stations that might have been more supportive of locally originated programming and more invested in local or regional identities and public spheres, and ultimately favored national broadcasting.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the political constraints and ideological tensions within which regulators attempted to establish a viable radio system. I hope to have shown that

¹³⁸ Barry Mishkind, "Network Histories," *The Broadcast Archive*. <http://www.olderadio.com/archives/prog/nets.htm> (15 June 2005).

localism was not a bedrock concept driving the creation of media policy, but a situational response to political pressures, class divisions, economic ambitions, and the inherited structures of radio. Indeed, if affirmative localism had been a main priority of policymakers and regulators, two simple decisions might have moved the media system decisively in that direction: capping transmitter power at 250 or 500 watts early in the broadcasting era, and mandating local ownership. This would have significantly increased the number of possible broadcasters, decreased the range of stations, and alleviated some of the pressures toward commercialization that marked the U.S. radio system as it actually developed. Such severe power limits would not have contained the economic potential of and social desire for national radio through interconnection and transcriptions; however, they might have slowed the class-localist system that did emerge and preserved more space for non-profit and municipal broadcasting initiatives.

At the same time, it is important not to understate the nationalizing and modernizing trends and impulses within which radio policy was embedded. While it is easy to imagine specific policies that might have encouraged more affirmative localism had they been implemented before non-local interests became entrenched, my argument is that the social context of class difference and other pressures toward centralization and nationalism were constitutive of the ways in which radio developed. In that sense, it is not that radio policy was *determined* by class conflict, cultural clashes, and the corporate economy, but that it cannot be extracted from or understood apart from those larger struggles. In the next chapter, I will examine instances in which those struggles were translated into specific regulatory decisions as implemented by national-class regulators, most importantly the Federal Radio Commission, and provide a closer analysis of the role of discourses and structures of localism and nationalism in that process.

Chapter Three

Localism In American Media Policy, 1920-1934: Modernizing the Local Through Media Regulation

In the previous chapter I outlined the most prominent pressures that regulators faced as they sought to oversee the development of radio: controlling content without exercising censorship, keeping the industry economically viable while containing monopolistic forces, and balancing local, regional, and national interests. These pressures, together with an inherited licensing structure and growing financial disparities among broadcasters, provided a context within which a system of "local" and "national" stations emerged, a system that was officially ratified in 1928 with the issuance of General Order 40. All along, however, and for the remainder of the FRC's existence, regulators pursued an agenda of modernizing the local through radio, in part by using discourses and structures of localism. In this chapter, I will examine a wide range of cases and decisions to demonstrate this process at work, showing how regulators used localist policy to achieve national-class ends.

As I have argued throughout this study, the notion that U.S. media has many localist features because regulators were harboring nostalgic social fantasies of local community is not born out by the record. Instead of utopian dreams of recovering the small town through localism in radio, the overwhelming impression policymakers left behind is that they mostly considered local broadcasting a pale shadow of what the medium could be at its best. They generally regarded local programming—which, in keeping with the class-localist categorization that emerged in the 1920s, they regularly conflated with low-powered, low-budget, non-network broadcasting—as amateurish and low-rent to a degree that was nothing short of dangerous for the well-being of industry as a whole. As Hoover flatly stated, "The local material available for the

local program is not in my view enough to maintain assured interest, and therefore the industry, or to adequately fulfill the broadcasting mission." In case any doubt remained about the inadequacies of the local broadcaster, Hoover added that stations needed to air "material beyond the capacity of local station directors if the art is to emerge entirely from the curio and entertainment stage."¹ As discussed above, this attitude continued under the new regime after 1927. A typical example is the case of WMAL, a Washington, D.C. station that wished to transfer its license to NBC and become a Blue Network affiliate. In granting the license, the FRC opined:

It appears, with justification, that a more desirable program service can be rendered by the station under network affiliations than is possible with WMAL broadcasting purely local features. ...Although the service now rendered by WMAL ... is generally good the programs as a whole are undoubtedly inferior in quality and point of interest to those which would be presented by [NBC].²

It should be pointed out that the WMAL case was not just another ordinary license transfer: by ruling on the D.C. market, the Commissioners were also deciding what kind of radio they themselves would get to listen to when they went home at night. It certainly appears that they had little sympathy for WMAL's "undoubtedly inferior" local features.

One popular explanation for this lack of concern with local identities and local public spheres in radio is some version of the "capture" thesis: the idea that regulators wanted to incorporate more support for localism into the system, but were too institutionally weak to do so

¹ "Secretary Hoover Addresses Third National Radio Conference." Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Advertising, 1924-1927."

² Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of M. A. Leese Radio Corp. and National Broadcasting Company (WMAL), Dockets 1934-1935." FRC Minutes: Box 21, "2/28/33 #650."

or repeatedly buckled under pressure to the radio trust.³ Given the opinions of the historical actors themselves, such an argument is, in fact, closest at hand. Indeed, no history of the FRC is complete without recognizing that the Commission continually came under fire—from Congress, the public, and small independent broadcasters—for selling out to RCA and otherwise cynically favoring large broadcasters in their rules and decisions. Many of its fiercest critics were the Senators and Representatives who created the FRC in the first place; as one scholar put it with some degree of understatement, "Congress took no pity on its stepchild."⁴ Furthermore, for some of the Commission's rules and decisions, the "capture" hypothesis occasionally appears fairly persuasive.⁵ The revolving door between the FRC and the industry further contributed to the impression that regulators were too close to the corporations they were overseeing. To this day, the FRC has a reputation as a weak and ineffectual board that constantly caved to RCA and other large broadcasters.

But despite the weight of seventy-five years of condemnation of the FRC, I am suspicious of "capture" (or worse, cynicism) as a wide-scale explanatory framework for the FRC's actions. Instead, I much prefer the approach adopted by Thomas Streeter in *Selling the*

³ See for example historian Robert Sobel: "In common with most regulatory bodies, the FRC became a captive of the industry it was supposed to guide but did so faster than most." Robert Sobel, *RCA* (New York: Stein and Day, 1986), 74.

⁴ Fritz Messere, "The Davis Amendment and the Federal Radio Act of 1927: Evaluating External Pressures in Policymaking" (Unpublished paper delivered at the Broadcast Education Association Annual Convention, 19 April 2001, Las Vegas, NV), 6.

⁵ For example, in 1931, a federal court ruled that RCA had attempted to monopolize the radio industry by controlling the manufacture and sale of radio apparatus (specifically vacuum tubes). Section 13 of the 1927 Radio Act clearly states that any company adjudged guilty of such acts should be denied a broadcasting license. According to law, the Commissioners should have stripped RCA of its licenses, but they did not, voting 3-2 that Section 13 did not apply in the case (the dissenters were Eugene Sykes and Charles Mck. Saltzman). The legal parsing of the majority was unpersuasive then and remains unpersuasive now; the best explanation for not invoking Section 13 is that a three out of five Commissioners simply didn't have the stomach for the protracted battle with RCA nor the resulting fallout within the industry that would have almost inevitably occurred. Federal Radio Commission, "Opinions of the Commission on the RCA Case." FRC Minutes: Box 11, "6/24/31."

Air. Looking beyond the capture thesis, Streeter argues that the FRC acted so frequently in accordance with corporate desires because they largely shared frames of social reference and a common general worldview. But, he continues, regulators were also answerable to multiple constituencies and were required to justify decisions in terms acceptable to various parties. It is in charting the tensions produced by these habits of thought and conflicting pressures, Streeter argues, that policy responses—and thus broadcast policy history—can most persuasively be grounded.

In applying Streeter's approach to the issue of localism, I argue that the shared frame of reference that tended to align the regulators of the FRC and the national broadcasters was the desire to bring a corporate-commercial vision of modern, national radio to the rest of the country. This project of stitching the local into the modern was expressed in a range of regulatory procedures and policy decisions that had the cumulative effect of suppressing affirmative localism. These included one that I have already discussed: the marginalization of small "local" stations through disadvantageous power and frequency allocations. But the FRC also worked to modernize the local in numerous ways: by retaining content control at the federal level through a trusteeship system that denied standing to the ostensible benefactors and guarantors of that system, the local radio audience; discouraging local idiosyncrasies and subcultures while encouraging a narrow range of acceptable programming through acts of both commission and omission in the licensing process; enforcing corporate norms of financial and administrative practice that privileged modern capitalism at the expense of traditional forms of economic exchange rooted in informal social networks; and decreeing standards of broadcasting operation that effectively imposed national-class expectations of professionalism and technical modernization on many previously artisanal or "mom-and-pop" broadcasters.

In the following section, I will demonstrate these regulatory procedures at work, showing how regulators used discourses and structures of localism in specific cases and argue for their cumulative effect of modernizing the local through radio.

Part I: Modernization Through Content Control

One tension that localism allowed regulators to negotiate was the question of who would control broadcasting content. As discussed in Part I of this chapter, first Hoover and then the FRC came under pressure to regulate content on the radio, but the public's appetite for direct censorship or ownership by the government was waning even as social anxieties about corporate responsibility in a mass market were rising. Caught between these conflicting trends, policymakers responded in two ways relevant to a discussion of localism. First, they delegated legal responsibility for content onto individual licensees, avoiding the government-market bind by positioning local audiences as the guarantor of the licensees' performance. They thereby nominally put censorship power into the hands of listeners who were expected to police their local broadcasters, but actually retained most of the power over programming in Washington by determining themselves which content deserved sanction and which deserved reward. The result was what Mark Goodman and Mark Gring called "a system free of direct government interference, but predicated on continual governmental surveillance."⁶ Second, in official pronouncements and, most importantly, licensing decisions, the FRC promulgated a definition of appropriate content that worked to flatten local differences and privilege the programming style of the national networks. This concept of ideal content was couched in the language of localism

⁶ Mark Goodman and Mark Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927: Progressive Ideology, Epistemology, and Praxis," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 3 (2000): 398. Goodman and Gring's article does not specifically discuss the role of localism in this process; furthermore, I believe they err by attributing too much determinative power to the 1927 Act itself and the visions of its key authors and sponsors, and not enough to the multitude of small and large decisions of the FRC.

by arguing that a licensee should be responsive to his local community, but in fact imposed a generic, national standard of programming on broadcasters that sought to erase local distinctiveness. Through these two strategies, regulators used discourses of localism to promote a single standard of national programming, with the power to sanction broadcasters retained firmly in federal hands.

Ia. Controlling Content Through the Trusteeship Model

The delegation of responsibility for content onto the licensee was a model known as local trusteeship. Describing this system, Thomas Streeter wrote, "A license to broadcast ... involved a fiduciary responsibility to serve the public interest more than a right to broadcast or a right to ownership of a channel."⁷ As regulators saw it, charging individual stations with content control provided a means for keeping both the government and market forces in check. Localism further entered into the trusteeship model by making the local audience the primary policing agent for radio content, an idea that appealed to ideas about the "local" as the key site of social control (New England localism, as discussed in the previous chapter). In terms of content control in radio, Commissioner Henry A. Bellows articulated the trustee-community relationship in a speech before the League of Women Voters: "It is for you to establish close relationships with the broadcasters who serve your communities, and to show them that it is to their advantage to use their station for the highest type of public service."⁸ The FRC laid out this position more formally in the Great Lakes decision of 1929, arguing that broadcasters, "for the sake of the popularity and standing of their stations" in their communities, would exercise "self-imposed

⁷ Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 97.

⁸ Henry A. Bellows, "Address of Henry A. Bellows, of the Federal Radio Commission, at the Dinner of the League of Women Voters, Washington, D.C., 29 April 1927." FRC Publications, Box RC2, "RC 1.5:4."

ensorship," thereby freeing the government of that burden.⁹ The theme continued throughout the FRC's tenure.¹⁰

It might be argued that this idea of content control through local surveillance was sentimental or anachronistic, but that interpretation would, I argue, misread how regulators were using the discourses of New England localism to thread a needle between governmental censorship and corporate determination of content. For example, the same speech to the League of Women Voters is worth quoting at length, since it illustrates how Bellows positioned audiences between market forces on the one hand and coercive governmental action on the other, threatening the latter should listeners fail to uphold their role in policing the system:

Every broadcasting station exists for one sole purpose: the creation of public good-will for its owners or for the sponsors of its programs. It will broadcast whatever it believes will best create and maintain that good-will. ... Congress has held that the broadcaster shall not be subject to governmental dictation as to the character of the material he sends out.... In that matter his relations are not with the government, not with the Commission, but with you. ... [I]f you do not make it clear that your understanding of public "interest, convenience and necessity" involves a very broad conception of the obligations of the broadcaster to his listeners, then it may be that Congress will feel that there is need for some amendment to the present Radio Law ... calling for such government regulation of radio programs as would manifestly be deplorable....¹¹

In this sense, localism was less a nostalgic attempt to bring back small town surveillance than a rhetorical strategy using the discourse of localism to situate listeners at a specific point within the

⁹ Federal Radio Commission, "In the matter of the application of Great Lakes Broadcasting Co. No. 4900; Agriculture Broadcasting Co., No. 4902; Wilbur Glenn Voliva, No. 4901." Federal Radio Commission, *Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports, Numbers 1-7, 1927-1933*, 3:32-33.

¹⁰ See for example a speech by Commissioner Saltzman before the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education, 21 May 31: Although the FRC was not allowed to act as censor, Saltzman said, "there is another censor that can do much to regulate objectionable advertising and other obnoxious features of radio programs. That censor is the listening public." Reprinted as "Public Should Be Its Own Censor, Says Saltzman," *Broadcast Advertising* (June 1931): 19.

¹¹ Bellows, "Address of Henry A. Bellows," 8.

policy field: the empowered position of censor that neither the government nor corporations could legitimately, officially occupy. It was thus a politically acceptable story of how to solve the problem of safe content—politically acceptable precisely because it drew on traditional middle-class thinking about grass-roots forms of social control that privileged local elites as the monitors and guarantors of the social order. In other words, the listeners who were organized to police content, provide feedback, and have that feedback taken seriously were themselves usually elites of the local middle class, including women's clubs and the organized business community, which meant that the trusteeship model appeared to empower the class that the FRC most needed to politically appease.¹² At the same time, trusteeship integrated seamlessly with national-class capitalist ideology by drawing on common understandings of how consumer power functioned within a market system.

These features of the local trusteeship model drew on localist tropes to justify the regulatory system, but to fully grasp the strategy's effectiveness, one must remember that, at the end of the day, it was still the federal government that passed judgment and exacted penalties for inappropriate content. Specifically, it was the FRC that could revoke a license and thereby establish the boundaries of appropriate content. In that sense, this use of localism was not exactly a fiction (listeners did play a role in providing the FRC with feedback on licensee performance), but there remained a significant structural imbalance between the power of listeners to bring content-related complaints to the FRC and the power of the Commission to take any or no action in response to those complaints. In fact, listeners were not even granted legal standing to challenge licensing decisions until 1966, effectively eviscerating any meaningful

¹² For a fuller explanation of the role of women's clubs and similarly situated cultural elites in the shaping of radio content during this period, see Jennifer Hyland Wang, "Convenient Fictions: The Construction of the Daytime Broadcast Audience, 1927-1960" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2006).

accountability to audiences that the local trustee model promised.¹³ Content control was nominally farmed out to the broadcaster's service area, but the real power to determine acceptable programming was retained by regulators in Washington.

The trustee model also made content providers "knowable" to the FRC, using localism to keep the dangers of individualism in check in a way that would have made Mary Parker Follett proud. Hugh Aitken has analyzed early radio policy as an effort to resolve the antinomy between the idea of spectrum as a public resource and the desire to exploit it commercially.¹⁴ In that sense, the local trustee functioned as the guardian of that public resource, promising appropriate content in exchange for the right to reasonable profits. "Rogue" broadcasters who appeared to pursue their own selfish individual interests, rather than the interests that the FRC posited for their community, came in for severe regulatory scrutiny; prime examples include William K. Henderson, Dr. Brinkley, KTNT's Norman Baker, and dozens of small-time politicians who used their local radio station as a platform from which to attack their enemies. Given the need to contain such runaway individualism on the public's airwaves, the FRC could at times be quite jealous in guarding the knowability of the local trustee. For example, when a licensee called Knickerbocker Broadcasting tried to lease 100% of its airtime to another company (rather than

¹³ Steven Classen points out that the notion of "standing" prior to the WLBT case in 1966 was limited to economic injury and interference—invariably favoring commercial and industrial interests rather than audiences. Writes Classen,

Although the courts insisted that standing was considered in the light of larger public rather than private interest concerns, members of the listening and viewing audience, 'the public,' were not formally and directly recognized or represented, but only indirectly considered through the various arguments of industry and government. As one legal analyst summarized, 'the courts had apparently given at least tacit approval to the [Federal Communication] Commission's standing construction, for in no instance had standing to contest a licensing order been upheld on any other ground.' ... That is, until 1966, with the release of the WLBT-TV decision.

Steven Douglas Classen, "Standing on Unstable Grounds: A Reexamination of the WLBT-TV Case," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11 (1994): 79.

¹⁴ Hugh G. J. Aitken, "Allocating the Spectrum: The Origins of Radio Regulation," *Technology & Culture* 35:4 (October 1994): 686-716.

selling its station and petitioning for a transfer of the license), the FRC reacted angrily.

Commissioner Harold Lafount wrote a memo expressing concerns about the threat posed by Knickerbocker's agreement to both content control and market control—the two primary concerns that the local trusteeship model was designed to contain:

[It is our obligation] to decide who shall be charged with the responsibility of rendering service. If this policy is adopted, any individual or corporation could control the character of program service to be rendered ... over any or all stations in a city, state, or even in the entire country. It would be possible for a former licensee whose application for renewal license had been denied ... thus to secure rights on the air otherwise denied him.¹⁵

The need to know exactly "who shall be charged with the responsibility of rendering service" in turn led the FRC to a preoccupation with the character of licensees in order to help keep radio speech in check. As Goodman and Gring put it, "If the FRC licensed the right kind of people with the right moral values, then Congress would have nothing to fear."¹⁶ FRC memos and statements on licensing decisions regularly passed judgment on the applicant's character, even if only in passing: "[He's] all right both morally and financially."¹⁷ One extended case involving a Detroit broadcaster explored a range of irresponsible behavior at the station, from the looting of a station-sponsored charity to on-air political discussions "couched in language stronger than that reasonably necessary to adequately present the views of the speaker." The case was finally

¹⁵ Harold Lafount to the Federal Radio Commission (Memo), 29 August 1933. FRC Minutes: Box 23, "8/29/33 #698." Sterling and Kittross describe a similar case involving station KVEP in Portland, OR. The licensee had sold time to a former political candidate, who then used "indecent and obscene" language to attack his enemies. The FRC ruled that the licensee was still responsible for content, and KVEP was deleted. Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*, 3d ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 146.

¹⁶ Goodman and Gring, "The Radio Act of 1927," 407.

¹⁷ "Re Docket #809, Pierce E. Lackey and S. Huston McNutt, and Docket 810, H. H. Schneidman and M. Livingston" (Memo to the FRC), 12 May 1930. FRC Minutes: Box 5, "5/29/30 #221."

resolved in favor of the station since the person responsible for such unethical conduct had, in the meantime, died.¹⁸

In general, the FRC used two metrics for determining the worthiness of a licensee—financial stability and program service—and it is further evidence of regulators' questionable commitment to affirmative localism that finances were by far their primary concern. A study of 180 application decisions, prepared by FRC staff, showed that failure to make "a satisfactory financial showing" was overwhelmingly the most common reason why a given applicant was rejected, cited in forty-two cases. If we add the number of applications rejected for reasons directly related to the applicant's financial status, such as the modernity and sufficiency of the station's technical equipment, the total rises to fifty-eight. Meanwhile, failure to show "a well planned program with sufficient talent available" was cited in just seventeen cases—eight of which were also rejected for financial reasons, which makes sense given that the FRC wanted to know how broadcasters were going to pay their talent. Most tellingly, poor local programming was the sole cause for rejection in just one case.¹⁹ When it came down to it, all the promises of local service in the world would not get you a license if the FRC did not trust your solvency.²⁰

¹⁸ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Michigan Broadcasting Co. (WMBC), Docket 1250." FRC Minutes: Box 16, "3/4/32 #515."

¹⁹ Ben S. Fisher to the Federal Radio Commission, "An Analysis of Examiners' Reports and Commission Action in 180 Cases" (Memo), 8 September 1931. FRC Correspondence: Box 181, "42-1: 4/30/29-6/30/42." This claim requires further explanation. More applications were rejected for technical spectrum-allocation reasons than for the applicant's finances, specifically because of resulting interference, quota restrictions under the Davis Amendment, or failure to show need for the service in a given area, which was another way of saying that listeners in that area could already get what the FRC deemed to be sufficient radio service. These technical grounds were based on where the FRC felt it needed to locate stations rather than the qualifications of the applicants themselves. In that sense, an *application* could be denied on spectrum-allocation grounds, but if a particular *applicant* was rejected, it was overwhelmingly on financial grounds. But even then the situation is more complicated—and more "classist." While the potential for objectionable interference was usually respected by the Commission, the determination of "need" for further radio service was highly arbitrary: the FRC could find "need" in a major city with several other full-time stations, and then turn around and not find "need" in a remote community that barely pulled in a distant clear channel at night. Likewise, when the Commissioners really wanted to grant an application in an over-quota state or zone, the Davis Amendment rarely stopped them; if they didn't want to grant an application, Davis provided a

A contest between two reasonably solvent applicants for the same assignment posed interesting dilemmas in terms of the FRC's stance on localism, and again shows the Commission's rhetorical (rather than affirmative) commitment to local programming. Under the Commission's rules during the Davis Amendment era, an applicant seeking to build a new station (or expand its hours of operation) in an over-quota zone or state was required to identify which already-existing station should thereby be deleted so as to maintain the status quo and not bring the zone or state further over quota. It was a system of "attacks" in which one applicant requested some or all of another station's assignment, and that station then had to defend its performance as a local trustee before the Commission. Technical and financial considerations being equal, the decision came down to programming, with the attacker required to show "a superior service and a necessity for the same by a preponderance of the evidence."²¹ Localism in terms of program service thus became a game that both the FRC and the industry learned how to

convenient and unarguable reason to deny. Therefore, lurking in these grounds for decisions are undoubtedly numerous cases in which "need" or "quota" were given as the prime reason for rejecting a given application, but the actual reason seems to be the perceived social or economic standing of the applicant. Sometimes it is possible to "sniff out" such cases based on the tone of a decision or the way evidence is presented, but rarely can the historian claim incontrovertibly that the given reason is not the "real" reason. For more on this historiographical problem, see Chapter Two, footnote 132 (p. 191). Nonetheless, I maintain that class played a much greater role in spectrum allocation than can be verified by official documentation.

²⁰ It should be added that one station was deleted in August 1928 for "overcommercialization"; see Robert Sears McMahon, *Federal Regulation of the Radio and Television Industry in the United States 1927-1959* (New York: Arno Press, 1979) (original: 1959, Ohio State University), 51-2. As a side note regarding the priority of solvency over local service, a listener once asked the Commission what weight it gave to a station's record of developing local talent in license renewal applications. Although this letter dates from after the period covered by this study, the FCC's response reveals the same hierarchy of criteria that is evident in the Commission's decisions prior to 1934, saying that "the applicant's legal, technical and financial qualifications are determined in the first instance; and thereafter, the nature and character of the service rendered ... receives careful consideration.... May I state also that weight may be given in the above connection to the development of local talent. As to the amount thereof, the Commission applies no exact standard." T. J. Slowie, FCC Secretary, to Miss Thelma A. Overholt, 20 May 1940. FRC Correspondence: Box 490, "194-1." Another indicator of the relative unimportance of program service in Commission licensing decisions is its continuation into the FCC era. According to Charles Seipmann, between 1934 and 1942 there were only two license revocations and thirteen non-renewals, only one of which was due to program service. Charles A. Seipmann, *Radio's Second Chance* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), 223.

²¹ Ben S. Fisher to the Federal Radio Commission, "An Analysis of Examiners' Reports."

play. The attacker and attackee typically both played up their local service, showing just how many hours of airtime were given over to the Kiwanis Club or just how many churches would be permitted to use the station's facilities. The FRC, meanwhile, used the rhetoric of localism to then justify its decisions, whether or not the facts seemed to support the conclusion.

A good example is provided by the case of WSPD, a CBS affiliate in Toledo, Ohio. For several years, WSPD was the only station in Toledo, although residents also had good reception from stations in Cincinnati, Cleveland, and elsewhere. In 1931, an attorney named Frazier Reams applied for a construction permit to build a second station in Toledo, arguing that the city received plenty of chain programs, but "there is a very inadequate outlet for local programs and local talent in Toledo."²² The odds were against Reams from the beginning: financially, although he claimed to have access to \$40,000, the arrangements were sketchy; on the technical side, the frequency he asked for was in use by two other stations within the FRC's standard separation range from Toledo, meaning that his proposed station might cause interference with those existing stations. But of greater interest to this study is how discourses of local content played out in the case. WSPD, eager to keep a competitor out of the Toledo market, began extolling the wonderful local service it provided. It gave the FRC a program analysis for a typical week in which it claimed to devote forty-two hours a week, or around 35% of its schedule, to local programs, but in the hearing, Reams demonstrated that several of these "local programs" were actually transcriptions from elsewhere, and many of the rest were phonograph records. WSPD also promoted its friendliness to local organizations such as the Red Cross, Toledo Council of Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Toledo Safety Council, all of whom

²² "Exceptions to Report of Examiner R. H. Hyde in re application The Community Broadcasting Co., Docket 1336," 5 June 1931. FRC Dockets: Box 291, "1336."

were allowed to air programming "from time to time" (for a fee—many other stations allowed the use of their facilities to nonprofits at no charge). It talked about its talented staff artists and the auditions it held twice a week to find local talent. In short, it presented a picture of local service that was, by the standards of many similarly situated stations at the time, thoroughly average. Reams, for his part, attempted to hammer home the relative weakness of WSPD's local programming and, as a point of contrast, provided a hypothetical program schedule that he would try to implement drawing on more of Toledo's local talent and institutions. But Reams' efforts and arguments did not stop the FRC from praising WSPD's "excellent program service," which in turn helped justify the Commission's decision to deny Reams' application, arguing, "It does not appear from this record that there is a need for the additional service at Toledo as proposed by applicant."²³

The case illustrates how all three parties to the dispute used discourses of localism in pressing their cases. Reams used the poor local service of WSPD to justify adding a second station to the Toledo market, and promised superior local service as a way to advance his own candidacy as a trustee for that station. WSPD, who up until that point had provided comparatively weak local service, suddenly found what one might call "local religion" in order to defend its local monopoly in front of the FRC, even cooking the books to pass transcriptions off as "studio-originated" programs. And the FRC used localism to help justify a decision that was essentially made on other grounds—finances and interference—rather than on program service.

Was this dance of localism therefore just a cynical charade on all sides? Not entirely. By the rhetorical logic of the policy field established by the FRC, localism was about controlling

²³ The records in this case are available at two locations. The quotes from the FRC are taken from "In re application of the Community Broadcasting Company, Docket 1336, and Clayton B. Johnson, Docket 1365." FRC Minutes: Box 16, "2/12/32 #506." The transcript of the hearing, the quote from Reams, and the various supplemental materials are contained in FRC Dockets: Box 291, "1336."

content while providing a check on market forces and government censorship; the actual production of "local" content was of interest only to the extent that such content was indexical of the worthiness of a given trustee. In the WSPD case, since the FRC was permitting the continuation of a local monopoly on radio in the Toledo market, it was required to present assurances that the local trustee system was functioning when it made that decision. And, according to the documentary record in the case, it *was* functioning: apart from the criticisms voiced by Frazier Reams, there was no evidence presented at the hearing that listeners of WSPD were dissatisfied with its programming, nor was there a groundswell of Toledo citizens clamoring for more local-origination programming or airtime for their particular civic organization. Even though the FRC was fully aware that other stations tried harder than WSPD to tailor their program offerings to the needs and interests of their local service areas, the Commissioners could nonetheless praise WSPD's local service because no legitimated party (i.e. the listeners) had challenged that finding. The ascertainment of appropriate affirmative localism, then, was less a goal of FRC licensing procedures than a performative through which the integrity of the system of content control could be asserted.

Ib. Controlling Content Through Program Standards

In discussions of localism, it has often been noted that the FRC favored commercial broadcasters over religious, educational, and political broadcasters, and this has sometimes been used as evidence of the FRC's failure to support its own localist policy. But this interpretation appears less persuasive when we consider another aspect of the national-class project in radio: encouraging urban cosmopolitan norms of programming in order to uplift the local through modern, national-class culture. To see this in action, it is helpful to consider the FRC content

expectations. To the extent that the FRC had a worked-out definition of appropriate content in mind (aside from the avoidance of obscenity, indecency, and profanity), the 1929 Great Lakes decision gives a good approximation of it:

[T]he tastes, needs, and desires of all substantial groups among the listening public should be met, in some fair proportion, by a well-rounded program, in which entertainment, consisting of music of both classical and lighter grades, religion, education and instruction, important public events, discussions of public questions, weather, market reports, and news, and matters of interest to all members of the family find a place.²⁴

This ideal "well-rounded program" was contrasted with the offerings of "propaganda" broadcasters, by which the Commission meant stations serving as a "mouthpiece" for a particular religious, political, social, or economic "school of thought." These propaganda stations supposedly did not have "the standing and popularity with the public necessary to obtain the best results in programs of general interest," and were therefore to be discouraged.

The major cultural assumptions underlying these definitions of appropriate content should be readily apparent and do not need further rehashing here. Obviously the FRC was trying to marginalize a wide range of American thought and experience in radio. What has received less attention is the intersection of the FRC's idea of appropriate content and localism as a policy discourse. The above definition posits a broadcaster serving all substantial groups in his community, and as Anderson and Curtin have argued, it might seem to be predicated on the misconception that a coherent identity can be constructed for a given geographical locale: "The principle of localism presumes that a modern city can be imagined, in Raymond Williams's term,

²⁴ Federal Radio Commission, "In the matter of the application of Great Lakes Broadcasting Co.," 34.

as a 'knowable community,' one with a recognizable identity."²⁵ But looked at from the point of view of a regulatory mandate to control content on hundreds of stations in a diverse nation, not to mention a predisposition to cosmopolitan middle-class programming, a very different picture emerges. The FRC's definition of acceptable content did not, I argue, encourage the identification and promulgation of local identities through radio, but rather sought to negate (or at least contain) those local identities. It provided a template that every community was required to fit, while any *actual* local uniqueness of character risked official suppression.

Many idiosyncratic broadcasters and "disreputable" programming forms fell victim to the FRC's cultural standards, including many that were undeniably speaking to and for a substantial segment of their listening public. A good example is William K. Henderson of Shreveport, Louisiana. As described by Derek Vaillant, Henderson was an enormously popular figure whose specialty was railing against the encroachment of chain stores. As such, he spoke for a large number of citizens in the traditional local middle class who were equally concerned about chain stores and other features of corporate modernization, presenting himself as "the people's pugilist."²⁶ As Vaillant writes, "His fury over centralized economic, political, and cultural power offered a bracing contrast to airwaves festooned with market-driven network fare and bromides for a seemingly unattainable culture of abundance."²⁷ In other words, he was not only a fiery speaker full of rage and occasional profanity, but he stood in explicit and determined opposition to the national class—economically, culturally, and politically. One of his favorite targets was

²⁵ Chris Anderson and Michael Curtin, "Mapping the Ethereal City: Chicago Television, the FCC, and the Politics of Place," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 16, no. 3-4 (1999): 291.

²⁶ Derek Vaillant, "Bare-Knuckled Broadcasting: Enlisting Manly Respectability and Racial Paternalism in the Battle Against Chain Stores, Chain Stations, and the Federal Radio Commission on Louisiana's KWKH, 1924-33," *Radio Journal* 1, no. 3 (2004): 196.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

the FRC itself, whose members he called "parasites" and "sapheads."²⁸ For all these reasons, he was hounded by the FRC, even though the Commission grudgingly acknowledged his popularity:

Many of the utterances broadcast in these programs were of questionable propriety, some must be classed as intemperate; but it also appears that Mr. Henderson in a great many instances broadcast material in the interest of his community and in the interest of the people of his state and neighboring states ... The Commission cannot in any way condone certain of the broadcasts brought to our attention in this case. On the other hand it must be recognized that broadcasts from KWKH have featured an independent outlook on matters of public interest ... and that its service has attracted a considerable public following for the station.²⁹

The FRC finally kicked Henderson off the air in 1933. While Henderson had provided enough provocation, especially through technical violations and use of profanity, the FRC's real objection was to his violation of cultural standards, clearly aligning himself with a brand of Southern masculinity and local populism that the cosmopolitan regulators found it difficult to tolerate. But in the context of this study, the more important point is that he failed to hew to the cultural template that the Commission had provided in the name of localism. Actual local distinctiveness, in other words, was subject to sanction. To drive the point even further home, it is worth noting that, as Vaillant points out, the FRC would have allowed Henderson to keep his license had he agreed to affiliate with CBS.³⁰ In other words, had he adopted national-class cultural standards, regulators would have overlooked even his shady character and failing finances.

²⁸ Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 206.

²⁹ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Loyola University (WWL), Docket 1855 & 1757, et al. (Dockets 1912-1914, 1758)," 15 September 1933, 7-8. FRC Minutes: Box 23, "9/15/33 #702."

³⁰ Vaillant, "Bare-Knuckled Broadcasting," 208.

For another example of using the local community programming standard to enforce non-local cultural limits on radio, consider the example of a typical religious broadcaster. Pillar of Fire is an evangelical Christian church with its roots in Methodism and Episcopalianism, which made it a slightly more fringe identity in the 1930s than today. In 1932, Pillar of Fire already owned two stations (in Zarephath, New Jersey, and Denver, Colorado), and wanted to build a third station in Cincinnati, where it owned a school and nurtured a small community of adherents. On the face of it, nothing should have stood in the way of granting this application: The Church had a solid record as trustees of broadcasting facilities; it had resources upward of \$870,000; the proposed equipment was modern and efficient; the station would cause no objectionable interference; both Ohio and the Second Zone were under quota. Furthermore, the Church promised to offer "a well-rounded program" that nicely approximated the FRC's definition in the Great Lakes decision. It had arranged for the services of four pianists, an eleven-piece brass band, and several singers and violinists, and it also planned to offer children's programs, lectures on music appreciation, and a series of talks on literature, science, politics, geography, religion, and philosophy. And if that weren't enough, it promised to allow other groups to use its facilities as well, including schools of music, choirs, dramatic organizations, and even other churches. Although the day-to-day operation of the station would come from the church's ample funds, Pillar of Fire did plan to defray costs by soliciting donations and selling church publications—a not uncommon practice for religious broadcasters then or now. It was, in short, one of the most airtight applications of the FRC's seven years of existence.³¹

³¹ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Pillar of Fire, Docket 1432." FRC Minutes: Box 16, "4/8/32 #532."

The FRC denied the application, but *not* for the reason one might expect (i.e. discrimination against religious—i.e. "propaganda"—broadcasters). Certainly it is clear from the FRC's decision, dripping with condescension, that they did not want to give Pillar of Fire another station. The opening sentence gives a sense of the snooty tone:

The applicant, an Ohio corporation, is subsidiary to and so closely affiliated with the Pillar of Fire, Incorporated, a New Jersey corporation, as actually to have no separate existence beyond that necessary to hold property in the State of Ohio with the least amount of inconvenience.³²

There was also this interesting sentence: "Should [ad] time be sold, income therefrom would be used in the same manner to all other income of the applicant organization." In other words, give them a station and you support their wacky church. (Similar sentences never appeared in decisions on secular commercial stations, which could presumably use their income in whatever manner they wished without eliciting comment.) But the FRC did not officially deny the application because Pillar of Fire wanted to run a predominantly "propaganda" station; it officially denied the application because the church wanted to run a predominantly general interest station. And this points to another of the unpredictable ways that national-class content standards and discourses of localism interacted. Here's what the FRC wrote in its grounds for decision:

1. Cincinnati and vicinity now receive good broadcasting service from a number of stations located therein as well as some service from stations situated elsewhere and it does not appear that there is a need for additional service in that area.
2. Satisfactory showing is not made that ... the character of the service rendered would be materially different from that now received in the Cincinnati area.³³

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

In other words, to be a viable applicant for a broadcasting facility, Pillar of Fire was required to promise roughly the same type of programming as every other station in accordance with the FRC's stated wishes. But when it proceeded to do that, its application was rejected because its programming would not be different enough from the other stations in its locality. It was a classic Catch-22.³⁴

It is no secret that the FRC did little to encourage religious broadcasting in the U.S., and in the context of ongoing cultural clashes and political struggles between the science-minded national class and the biblical literalism of many evangelicals, not to mention the class and religious divide over Prohibition, sects like Pillar of Fire were not going to get the benefit of the doubt from national-class regulators. But what is of interest here was the use of discourses of localism to wage this cultural battle. Discourses that looked and sounded like the encouragement of distinctive, community-based programming actually imposed a nationwide programming norm on local radio, flattening out local differences and championing the kind of radio fare that the national chains specialized in offering. It has often been noted that geographic-based localism ignores ways that people construct their identities besides (or in addition to) attachment to a local sense of place. But officials were not blind to ways of addressing people other than in terms of local identities; instead, they encouraged "local identities" because the FRC's one-size-fits-all standard of local programming helped contain less controllable and potentially more threatening modes of address. This use of localism imposed a nominal geographic purpose on

³⁴ Nor was this an isolated incident. In the case of WMAY, a religious broadcaster in St. Louis, the FRC wrote, "The programs broadcast by Station WMAY, have not been varied or designed with the purpose of rendering a complete broadcasting service and one which would appeal to substantially all classes of the listening public." The station was deleted. Federal Radio Commission, "In re applications of Kingshighway Presbyterian Church (WMAY), Dockets 1010-1012." FRC Minutes: Box 11, "6/12/31 #393." Such cases are relatively common in the 1930-1934 period.

radio (serving all "substantial"³⁵ groups within a local community, as opposed to other possible purposes for broadcasting) while in fact advancing national programming standards that suppressed particularity and diversity.

Ic. Controlling Content Through "Community"

Another way in which regulators worked to flatten local distinctiveness and erase local idiosyncrasies was in its thinking about the "community of service." Numerous observers have remarked that localism, especially in terms of the "local community," works to suppress difference within a locale.³⁶ Indeed, this is problem for notions of community more generally: by definition, they exclude those who do not belong to the community while subsuming or ignoring difference within the community. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser, Cindy Griffin, Iris Marion Young, Robert Asen, and many others have explored the different ways in which the notion of community (in various manifestations, from social movements to the bourgeois public sphere) has depended on exclusion, repression, enforced conformity to anti-egalitarian norms, and the silencing of social differences in order to achieve its affective or political potential.³⁷

Without rehearsing those debates here, it is fair to say that the FRC was relatively unconcerned with such differences within a community. I have already shown how the FRC

³⁵ The FRC gave no real guidance on when any given group within a community should or must be considered "substantial" enough to merit programmers' attention.

³⁶ See for example Gregory David Newton, "Localism Considered...and Reconsidered" (Ph. D. diss., Indiana University, 2001), 26ff.

³⁷ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," ed. Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992): 109-142; Cindy L. Griffin, "The Essentialist Roots of the Public Sphere: A Feminist Critique," *Western Journal of Communication* 60 (1996): 21-39; Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," ed. Linda J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990): 300-323. Robert Asen, "The Multiple Mr. Dewey: Multiple Publics and Permeable Borders in John Dewey's Theory of the Public Sphere," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2003), 174-188.

promoted a white, middle-class, urban style of programming that only nominally valued the idea of diversity; when it came to actual diversity, even that nominal commitment to serving "all substantial groups" within a service area fell away quickly. For example, when New Jersey station WHOM attempted to secure more hours from the stations with whom it shared a frequency, including Newark's WNJ, the FRC described WNJ's specialized programming for the different communities in its service area: "Much of the station's program time is devoted to matters of interest to foreigners, including Lithuanians, Italians, Germans and Hungarians, and there are broadcast many programs of particular interest to colored people." Nonetheless, the Commission suffered no apparent cognitive dissonance when it deleted WNJ with the argument that "no substantial broadcasting service not otherwise available" would be thereby eliminated.³⁸ Given that this case concerned the New York metropolitan area, it is possible that the Lithuanians, Hungarians, and other ethnic communities of Newark did indeed receive programming especially for them from another nearby station (although the FRC's report does not mention any such service in justifying the decision). But WNJ was not an isolated incident, and this lack of concern with specialized local programming occurred consistently throughout the FRC's tenure. Such cases include:

- a Philadelphia foreign-language station broadcasting programs in Italian, German, and Polish that was denied more power because "it does not appear ... that there exists a need for additional radio service in any of the metropolitan area of Philadelphia";
- a black newspaper in Kansas City, Missouri that was denied a license to build a station for African-Americans "to broadcast the spiritual side of negroes," in part because "Kansas City is already well supplied with stations";

³⁸ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of New Jersey Broadcasting Corp. (WHOM), Docket 1150." FRC Minutes: Box 13, "10/23/31 #449."

- applicants proposing a Japanese-language station in Honolulu who were rejected because, despite 38% of Hawaiians at the time speaking Japanese and the total absence of non-English programming in Hawaii, "It is not shown ... that there exists a need for additional radio broadcasting service in the area."³⁹

Whatever the other merits of applications like the ones above, it is clear that the FRC was not especially interested in the needs and desires of all substantial groups of listeners, but rather in the imposition of relatively rigid programming standards on communities regardless of the divisions within them.

If there is scant evidence that the FRC cared much about diversity within a local community, there is equally little reason to believe that the Commission was too concerned with differences between communities either. For example, the FRC approved the removal of a station from Moorhead, Minnesota to Duluth, reasoning that Moorhead was adequately served by a station in Fargo, North Dakota (just across the Red River). In other words, for the FRC's purposes, Fargo and Moorhead were essentially the same place, even though they are in different states. Of course, Moorhead's citizens saw the situation very differently and protested vehemently: Fargo's station reported on Fargo's and South Dakota's social and political life, not Moorhead's and Minnesota's. Furthermore, the two towns had distinct economic and social characters (as is often the case with "twin cities," as anyone familiar with San Francisco-Oakland, Minneapolis-St. Paul, or Tampa Bay-St. Petersburg can attest). By ignoring such

³⁹ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of WRAX Broadcasting Co., Docket 1190." FRC Minutes: Box 13, "10/23/31 #449." "Re Docket #699, Kansas City American, Inc." (Memo). FRC Minutes: Box 4, "2/14/30 #173." Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Palmer K. Leberman & Lois C. Leberman, Docket 1220." FRC Minutes, Box 14, "11/13/31 #462."

differences between localities, the FRC demonstrated little sensitivity to local identities and distinctions.⁴⁰

Similarly, the FRC treated cities and their suburbs as one locale, even though urban centers often have very different needs and concerns than their suburban satellites, and local suburban advertisers often could not afford to advertise on the city stations. For example, an applicant in Jeannette, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh, hoped to offer an alternative to the Pittsburgh stations that were "not altogether suitable advertising outlets for many of the merchants in the Jeannette area who are interested in and might patronize a local station."⁴¹ The FRC denied the application, arguing that Jeannette was already well served by the Pittsburgh stations. The Commission made the same point even more forcefully in the case of an applicant from Greensburg, Pennsylvania, about twenty-six miles from Pittsburgh:

There is no ... station licensed to operate in Greensburg, but this community and its neighboring communities appear to be well within the service range of broadcasting stations located in Pittsburgh. ... The evidence shows in this connection that Greensburg and the other communities nearby are all definitely a part of what is generally known as the Pittsburgh area.⁴²

While it is understandable that not every town and suburb could get its own radio station—especially in light of the FRC allocating just six frequencies to local stations⁴³—the refusal of the

⁴⁰ George Porter to the Federal Radio Commission, "In re: 4-P-B-3085 (KGFK) and Protest Thereto" (Memo). 27 Feb. 1934. FRC Minutes: Box 25, "3/2/34 #747."

⁴¹ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of H. Verne Spencer, Docket 1787." FRC Minutes: Box 20, "12/22/32 #633."

⁴² Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Mavrck Scott et al., Docket 2142." FRC Minutes: Box 24, "11/17/33 #719." The Commission was viewing the reorganization of local space from the standpoint of the national class: Greensburgh looked like Pittsburgh, Fargo looked like Moorhead, etc. From the standpoint of the traditional local middle class, however, the elision of these distinctions represented a real and specific economic threat. This perspective will be explored in Chapter Four.

⁴³ In the early 1930s, less than half the U.S. (by area) received "primary" (i.e. groundwave) radio signals. Put another way, some 21 million people had no "local" stations of any classification whatsoever. Alexander Todd

FRC to even acknowledge these local differences seems to undermine any claim that regulators held any great brief for facilitating the expression of unique local identities.

Instead, such decisions tended to stitch outlying communities into the identity and culture of the modern urban center through broadcasting, both in terms of infrastructure and content. In other words, in the FRC's hands, media policy participated in the radio's challenge to traditional geographic notions of place and forced a reorganization of conceptions of space. For example, in denying licenses to localities that were too small to provide advertising revenue and talent to a degree that was sustainable and "desirable to the listening public," regulators were not merely making licensing decisions, but actually helping to define, formalize, and rationalize new conceptions of local place according to their own cosmopolitan values and national vision. In this schema, only towns of a certain size were compatible with modernity as it was shaping up through radio, with local radio (or its absence) acting as a mediator between the character of a locality and its ability to sustain the project of modernity in its economic, social, and technical aspects. Towns that before were small now became "too small"; towns that, prior to the advent of broadcasting, might have been simply "near Pittsburgh" now became "a part of ... the Pittsburgh area." The FRC was effecting a spatial and social reorganization of those localities to come within the orbit of larger areas that could sustain a commercial radio station, with "national" programming standards and the erasure of local differences and identities serving the expansion of modern, urban, middle-class culture. Although, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Four, this process of social and spatial reorganization was often contested by local citizens, including by the traditional local middle class using discourses of localism to encounter

modernization on their own terms, the power of federal national-class regulators to grant or withhold such a key economic and social institution as radio was a formidable tool in the national-class project of stitching the local into their modern American vision.

When a generic, national standard of radio is defined as responding to local community needs, yet the community's expression of those needs is routinely ignored, and when a policy of local service is defined as central to the public interest, yet that policy is used to suppress local distinctiveness, there is more going on than an anachronistic longing for small town life. The FRC did not use localism to encourage local difference or to give expression to local identities. Instead, it used localism to find politically acceptable solutions to the need to control radio content, solutions that navigated between direct government control of programming through ownership or censorship on the one hand, and corporate control of content through market forces or outright monopoly on the other. In so doing, it constructed a local trustee model that drew on the rhetoric of traditional middle class ideas about the local as a site of social control, discursively privileging local elites as the guarantors of safe content through their surveillance of a licensee's character and performance, while in fact ultimately retaining control of content in Washington. There, through their definitions and decisions, the FRC promulgated a style of radio content that, despite using the language of local identity, worked to erase local differences in favor of the ideologically and culturally acceptable content that national chains were best able to provide. Thus did localism as content control help impose a narrow—and national—standard of programming for U.S. radio.

Part II: Modernization Through Economic Management

In the previous chapter, I outlined a range of competing pressures on regulators in terms of the economic basis of the radio system. I have already described, in the previous section, the FRC's response to one of these economic pressures: the impulse to allow financial standing to function as a reflection of moral character, with the result that the FRC established a rough correlation between the economic status of licensees or applicants and their eligibility for local trusteeship. In this section, I will discuss how localism helped regulators navigate two further economic tensions: the pressure to ensure the industry's economic viability and the need to regulate competition. Both were intricately bound up with local-national divisions, and both were complicated by the economic crisis of the early 1930s.

The key text for understanding how regulators integrated radio into the corporate market economy during the FRC era is Robert McChesney's *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*. McChesney's primary concern is in explaining the emergence of the advertising-based system of radio by 1934, and the ways in which alternatives to that system (such as nonprofit educational and religious broadcasting) were marginalized by the forces of commercialism. Thomas Streeter has approached a similar theme from a different angle in *Selling the Air*, arguing that a shared corporate-liberal mindset among regulators and much of the industry abetted the processes of privatization and commercialization that McChesney describes. Finally, Michele Hilmes points out in *Radio Voices* the role that infrastructure played in the ultimate character of American radio, suggesting "that the decisive factor leading to the defeat of educational or public control of radio occurred not in 1934, after the great Communications Act debates, but in the years from 1922 to 1926, as wired interconnection of stations gradually

undermined radio's local base and made advertising support nearly inevitable."⁴⁴ All of these scholars describe the processes by which private, commercial, network broadcasting came to dominate U.S. radio.

My concern here is to build on that scholarship by exploring the role that discourses and structures of localism played in the emergence of commercial national programming. I argue that issues of localism were not ignored by regulators as one might expect from the "capture" thesis, nor was localism merely ineffectual at slowing down commercialism as a deregulatory perspective might assert. Instead, regulators used localism to facilitate the growth of commercial national radio. This aspect of early radio is key to understanding how localism helped regulators advance their goal of integrating the local into the modern, first by allowing Hoover to enable the growth of national networks on a commercial basis, then through the FRC's efforts to rationalize the system that weakened the economic basis of local stations and tied them more closely to commercial models, and finally through the FRC's management of the economic crisis of the 1930s, which bound the fates of local stations to those of local commercial markets.

IIa. Local-National Tensions in Industry Economics

As Herbert Hoover's Commerce Department pursued national broadcasting throughout the 1920s, local stations offered one indispensable technical advantage: they provided the best radio reception to a given audience, especially during the daytime.⁴⁵ In general, radio sets of the

⁴⁴ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22.

⁴⁵ Signals traveled greater distances at night due to changes in the atmosphere; this effect was called nighttime propagation. This quirk of physics meant that listeners were almost entirely dependent on their local stations until sunset, but could pick up stations hundreds or even thousands of miles away after dark—just in time for primetime for most of the year. Before 1927, many cities instituted "silent nights" on which local stations would cease operations so that radio fans could better pull in distant signals. In the FRC era, the same effect was created not

1920s were significantly less sensitive than they would soon become, making listeners especially vulnerable to interference. Clean, stable signals were hard to come by, and listeners received much more consistent reception from their local stations than from most distant ones. This gave local transmission—if not local programming—a pre-eminence in policy considerations that far outweighed these stations' political and economic influence or their perceived social value.⁴⁶ I referred to this in the introduction as a tension between localism as an infrastructural value and localism as a social value. Hoover enthusiastically supported national radio as the greatest social value for broadcasting and thus viewed local stations first and foremost instrumentally: linked to a centralized program source, they were the best way to guarantee adequate reception of national programming regardless of locality—a technical means to a social end. If locally originated programs were mentioned in this context at all, it was almost always as an afterthought, an addendum to the truly important category of national programming: "[L]ocal stations must be able to deliver every important national event with regularity. The local station must be able to bring to its listeners the greatest music and entertainment of the nation To this it must add its matters of local interest."⁴⁷

through local cooperation but through federal regulation: most local stations were licensed "daytime only" or with significantly reduced power at night (a typical assignment was for 250 watts daytime, 100 watts nighttime).

⁴⁶ Commerce Solicitor S. B. Davis also held this view: "I know the importance of these smaller stations to the communities they serve. I know that there are millions of crystal sets and small tube sets whose owners are practically compelled to-day to rely upon the stations at their doors and are getting good service from them. These are the people I have in mind and the ones I primarily want to serve, for the owner of the multi-tube set, reaching out for an indefinite number of miles, is pretty well able to look out for himself. I want to see the little fellow get something more than he has now." Qtd. in R. S. McBride, "How the Government Is Regulating Radio Broadcasting," *Radio Broadcast* 7, no. 1 (May 1925): 30.

⁴⁷ Herbert Hoover, "Secretary Hoover Addresses Third National Radio Conference." Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Advertising, 1924-1927." It is worth pointing out that Hoover exhibited no need or desire to spell out what those matters of local interest might be. He certainly did not wax eloquent about the voice of the community or insist on radio's responsibility to broadcast local affairs. In other words, it is difficult to convey through a few short, reader-friendly quotes the degree to which Hoover's appreciation of local radio was limited to instrumentalism. Readers who are interested in further exploration of Hoover's attitudes should see Glenn Johnson's dissertation,

Local stations were also politically valuable in helping balance the economic tensions discussed earlier in this chapter. In the Commerce era, under anti-monopoly pressure to maintain competitiveness in American radio, regulators championed the hundreds of local stations throughout the country, contrasting them to the few national stations owned by or allied with RCA and other industry monoliths. The plethora of local stations thus served as guarantor of competition in the industry, with a notion of "local service" helping to justify economic and technological inequalities in the system. This was not a cynical use of localism as mere rhetoric: there is every reason to believe that Hoover, not entirely foreseeing the extent of commercial chain broadcasting, could reasonably expect a multiplicity of stations to keep both monopoly and excessive commercialism in check. In that sense, the structure of local licensees acted as reassurance for both Commerce and the public that the competitive basis of the industry was secure, leaving Hoover free to continue his efforts toward "national" radio through interconnection.

At the beginning of the FRC era, this local-national construction proved reasonably effective in promoting national radio while retaining a substantial number of independent local stations: as long as most local stations remained economically viable in their respective markets, the FRC could treat "local" as a service category, not an economic category. Given the FRC's overriding interest in the financial condition of licensees, it is fair to assume that the Commissioners expected most of the stations that made it through General Order 40 to have a reasonable shot at long-term economic self-sufficiency, whether through advertising or through the support of their institutional sponsors and primary businesses. Through a host of decisions

which discusses this issue in depth and reprints most of Hoover's public statements on radio in an appendix: Glenn Allen Johnson, "Secretary of Commerce Herbert C. Hoover: The First Regulator of American Broadcasting, 1921-1928" (Ph. D. diss., University of Iowa, 1970).

based on this assessment of the overall health of the industry, the FRC worked to make the system more "efficient" by rationalizing it according to their national-class values. For example, they deleted insolvent stations and gave those facilities to stronger ones; imposed time-sharing on part-time stations in order to maximize the use of the airwaves; mandated minimum broadcast hours for full-time stations, again to increase the efficiency of the system; and established technical and reporting requirements that sought to raise standards of professionalism and modernization. The result could indeed be described as a more "efficient" system, forcing local stations to become more "modern," but at the cost of gradually favoring broadcasters with a solid financial basis and a professional staff, both of which encouraged commercial models over non-profit and artisanal models of radio production.

That approach might still have been potentially stable, leaving plenty of room in the system for mom-and-pop and non-commercial radio, although as demonstrated in the previous section, the FRC's content control efforts restricted the space available for alternative styles and forms of radio programming. But it is fair to assume that the Commissioners did not see the Great Depression coming. They knew that some attrition of stations would doubtless occur, which would prove that the market was working and that their regulation in support of greater efficiency and competition was weeding out poorly run or unpopular stations. But with the dire economic conditions of the early 1930s, artisanal, goodwill, and non-commercial broadcasting became much harder to sustain. Furthermore, regulators' insistence on modern efficiency and professionalism through demanding technical requirements further squeezed small stations by both reducing revenue and increasing expenses. The FRC's reification of the national/local distinction now ran up against the imperative to guarantee the industry's solvency while trying to

maintain that "full representation of local stations" that anti-monopoly rhetoric required—an incredibly difficult balancing act.

Larger commercial broadcasters generally were not a problem, but the FRC had put smaller, independent broadcasters into a very difficult situation, many of whom quickly found themselves hard pressed to stay afloat. The financial disadvantages of time-sharing became life-threatening as artisanal stations that could previously sustain a few hours a week of radio for their own publicity (e.g. for their primary business) or with just a couple of sponsors saw their primary business going under and sponsorships drying up. Marginal markets that once might have been large enough to support several stations through advertising began having trouble supporting one. Some stations applied for power increases, hoping to attract a lucrative chain affiliation, only to be thwarted by the restrictions of the Davis Amendment that required an entire state and zone to remain under quota. Poorer stations in smaller markets found it difficult to comply with the terms of their licenses, and religious and other nonprofit broadcasters began trying to sell advertising to make ends meet. Many stations went under, transferred their licenses to wealthier owners or station groups, or abandoned independent programming for the relative economic security of network fare and transcriptions.

Thus, the FRC faced a bind after 1930: They needed a healthy contingent of independent local stations to guarantee competition and contain the chains, especially with much of Congress perpetually angered by the relentless growth of network broadcasting, but the Depression and the FRC's own policies had helped make smaller local stations significantly less competitive in a tight market, especially those low-wattage, categorically "local" stations with which the chains refused to affiliate. The FRC resolved this bind by using discourses of localism to better "manage" the broadcasting economy, which in this case meant binding stations ever tighter into a

commercial-corporate model by regulating competition in different markets, preserving local monopolies in smaller markets, and facilitating chain affiliation under the guise of local service as a means of keeping local stations afloat. The result was even greater penetration of the national—through networks and transcriptions—into local programming. In other words, although this was the period in which the chains consolidated their hold on the radio industry, a fact for which weak regulation is often blamed, the ascendancy of networks was due to numerous complex factors including an effort to shore up the industry as a whole, and not, I argue, due to regulatory capture or corruption.

Iib. Modernization and Professionalization

The FRC responded to the economic downturn of the early thirties in two ways that were superficially contradictory but, I would argue, part of an overall project of economic stabilization for the industry. First, they weeded out the stations that were in the worst financial shape by denying licenses to undercapitalized applicants, deleting weaker time-share partners, and refusing to budge on technical and operational rules that poorer and "fixed-income" stations (like nonprofits) were hard pressed to meet. The effect of these efforts was greatly magnified by the Davis Amendment, which, as implemented by the Commission, encouraged stronger stations to attack smaller, weaker stations in order to improve their spectrum assignments.⁴⁸ Second, the

⁴⁸ Among the many ways that the Davis Amendment hurt the prospects for local stations in the U.S., one of the most important is that it introduced yet another level of scarcity into the system. As described earlier in this chapter, a station in an over-quota zone or state that wanted to increase its transmitter power or hours of operation was required to identify the station whose power or hours would be correspondingly curtailed. Since the FRC's primary metric in resolving these disputes was program service, applicants logically enough tried to select stations whose program service was substandard in the eyes of the Commission: programming just a few hours a day; violating technical rules such as frequency stabilization or the announcement of call letters; over-relying on phonograph records (especially during evening hours); over-relying on snake oil ads, fortune tellers, or other "socially undesirable" programming, etc. Unsurprisingly, such program service often correlated with low revenue, making undercapitalized stations in smaller markets especially vulnerable to attack. [Cont.]

FRC tried to shore up the economic viability of the remaining stations, protecting local monopolies in the smallest markets, denying licenses in markets that they thought could not support a station, and helping stations position themselves for network affiliation. In all such cases, the Commission once again found discourses of localism helpful in justifying and explaining their actions.

One of the less visible ways that the FRC sought to guarantee the economic health of the industry was to deny licenses to applicants who did not appear to have a solid enough financial backing. They did so ostensibly on behalf of the local community that would not benefit from the granting of a license to an applicant without the financial wherewithal to provide satisfactory service. But often they were also protecting applicants from further economic devastation during tough economic times: enough stations were struggling to remain open as it was, and many early broadcasters lost their shirts even without the FRC's "help." Poring through the FRC's decisions, one comes across numerous cases that, reading between the lines of bureaucratese, appear to involve rank amateurs: under-prepared would-be broadcasters who had managed to scrape together \$1000 and hoped to make a go of it in radio, or undercapitalized applicants such as the Ohio man who had only the promise of an unsecured loan from "his wife's people."⁴⁹ It is hard not to feel that, in rejecting many of these Depression-era applications on financial grounds, the

[Cont.] The direct relevance of this system to a discussion of industry economics is that such attacks brought weaker stations into the Commission's sights in a way that normal license-renewal procedures did not. As long as no one was asking for a given station's facilities, and as long as listeners were not moved to complain too vociferously about their local broadcaster, a poor station could hobble along for years unmolested by the FRC, providing a few hours of lame programming a day, or not, or whatever. It could sneak by as one of dozens of stations on a long list of license renewals that the FRC rubber-stamped on a regular basis, thereby retaining its license and hoping for better days. But once that station's share of quota was requested by a stronger station, it both allowed and forced the Commission to take action. In accordance with a project of improving programming and shoring up the industry's finances, then, these weaker stations became most visible at the time that they were most vulnerable, and many of them got the ax.

⁴⁹ Federal Radio Commission, "Examiner's Report No. 387: In re application of John F. Weimer (WJW), Docket 1574." FRC Dockets: Box 342, "1574."

FRC was perhaps doing a favor to applicants who were simply way in over their heads. At the same time, such decisions advanced the modernization and professionalization of radio in two ways. First, in many cases they invalidated local economic practices and time-honored patterns of credit and enterprise. For example, it could very well be that the Ohio man's "wife's people" had the money, and that such an arrangement was a locally acceptable financing strategy, circumventing banks, professional lenders, collateral, contracts, and other features of modern finance in favor of perfectly viable traditional, interpersonal financial practices. But the lasting effect was to keep stations in the hands of broadcasters with substantial financial backing from a "modern" lending institution, a primary business (e.g. stations owned by flour mills or car dealers), or a national chain. This is not to deny the FRC's prominent role in perpetuating and deepening the economic hardship of small stations, a theme I will deal with below.

Regarding the FRC's willingness to weed out weaker stations, two rulings stand out. The first was General Order 105, passed in February, 1931, which specified, among other things, that a "full-time" station must be on the air for at least twelve hours a day, including three hours in the evening between six p.m. and midnight. A flurry of clarifications and limitations followed, but the upshot was that struggling stations that could not afford the operating and programming costs of running a station for twelve hours daily now risked the loss or curtailment of their licenses. The inflexibility of the Commission in this matter is illustrated by the case of KFJM, Grand Forks, North Dakota: The station was on the air thirteen hours a day, but only for two hours during the evening (six to eight p.m.), not the required three. The FRC informed the owner in no uncertain terms that the consequence of this violation was enforced time-sharing or

reduction to part-time status, no exceptions.⁵⁰ Indeed, several stations were reduced to part-time only, a move that usually accelerated the downward economic spiral that prevented them from staying on the air twelve hours a day in the first place. The second key ruling was General Order 116 in June, 1931, which mandated that stations maintain their assigned frequencies within fifty cycles (down from five hundred cycles as specified in General Order 7), an effort to reduce audible interference between stations. This ruling will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Four, but in this context, the important point is that G. O. 116 made all stations more listenable, but it required already strapped stations to purchase expensive frequency monitors at a time when they could least afford it.⁵¹

⁵⁰ James Baldwin to D. La Masurier, 31 March 1931. FRC Correspondence: Box 6, "7-105/General Order 105."

⁵¹ The FRC's attitude and decisions presumed a commercial basis for the industry in the absence of alternative financing; it was a question of finding a way to pay for yourself or going under. This means that many of their rulings were especially hard on nonprofit stations. Purdue University's station reminded the FRC during the debates over G.O.116 that "Educational Institutions ... cannot exist in competition with Commercial interests," while the University of South Dakota station proposed a separate 100-cycle standard for nonprofits as "much more fair to those stations that have no commercial income and must develop their own frequency control equipment." Likewise for G. O. 105, the "twelve-hour rule," the Commission apparently did not consider the special situation of educational broadcasters, who could not necessarily staff a station for twelve hours a day, especially during summer.

There is evidence that some of the Commissioners were not unmindful of the non-commercial status of most educational and religious stations. For example, Ira Robinson, the Commissioner most sympathetic to nonprofit stations, tried to exempt educational and religious broadcasters from General Order 105, but his motion failed, three to two. But as Robert McChesney has demonstrated, non-commercial broadcasters were a politically divided constituency, and enough educational and other nonprofit stations supported the FRC's moves to enable the Commission to treat all "local" stations uniformly. For example, station KOB at the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts supported G. O. 116 precisely because it would help local radio "by eliminating much of the highly audible heterodyning now heard on the regional and local channels ... [and] increase the number of satisfactory programs available for each listener, a highly desirable result in these days of duplicated chain broadcasts on the higher powered stations."

For the Purdue quote, see J. W. Stafford to the Federal Radio Commission, 21 March 1931; for South Dakota, see B. B. Brackett to the Federal Radio Commission, 23 March 1931, both in FRC Correspondence: Box 3, "7-7." For an example of an educational broadcaster struggling with G.O. 105, see James Baldwin to Harold G. Ingham, 9 March 1931. FRC Correspondence: Box 6, "7-105/General Order 105." Robinson's motion is at Federal Radio Commission, "Minutes of the Federal Radio Commission: Miscellaneous," 23 April 1931. FRC Minutes: Box 10, "4/23/31 #364." The New Mexico quote can be found in Evan Carroon to the Federal Radio Commission, 31 March 1931. FRC Correspondence: Box 3, "7-7." McChesney's study is Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, & Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

These two regulations, together with other rules and decisions, reflect not simply a willingness to bend to large broadcasters who wanted less interference for their own signals, but an effort to put the industry on firmer economic footing through modernization and professionalization—by forcing the local to come up to modern national standards. In other words, the Depression had changed the FRC's calculus of the pressures between monopoly and solvency, and by 1931 they were much more willing than in 1927-1928 to trade a full representation of stations as a hedge against chain domination for the economic viability of the industry as a whole. Whereas in 1927, regulators were content to "relegate those stations which seem to be of little or no value to frequencies on which they can make little trouble," by 1930, Commissioners proposed that the FRC take a long, hard look at those same stations "with a view to the gradual elimination of the unfit and unworthy."⁵² Scholars like McChesney are right to be critical of the ways in which the FRC, rather than creating regulatory supports for local stations (including nonprofits), drove many of them off the air, often with a very bureaucratic indifference to the challenges small stations faced and the livelihoods and investments that hung in the balance. After 1930, appellants to FRC decisions could not even assess court costs to the FRC, thereby limiting appeals to those with deep pockets and increasing the Commission's

⁵² "...make little trouble": Federal Radio Commission, "Plan for Frequency Reallocation," 29 April 1927. FRC Film Minutes: Box 1, Reel 1.1. "...with a view...": Motion by Chairman Saltzman in "Minutes of the Federal Radio Commission," 15 December 1930. FRC Minutes: Box 8, "12/15/30 #307." This proposal came as a response to the pressures of the Davis Amendment, which the FRC had repeatedly and, by all appearances, arbitrarily violated as a matter of course during the previous two years. Saltzman's was one of several such motions, and while it failed to carry, 3-2, it does reflect a callous attitude toward local stations that can be traced through many of the Commission's decisions during this period. For more on the role of the Davis Amendment in the elimination of weaker stations, see McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, 18-37. Lest one think too badly of General Saltzman for his Social Darwinian views, he alone among the five Commissioners voted to repeal Paragraph 2 of General Order 95, which stipulated that insolvency was by itself sufficient grounds for license revocation. Federal Radio Commission, "Miscellaneous," 18 December 1930. FRC Minutes: Box 8, "12/18/30 #309."

imperious status.⁵³ Bordering on callousness and occasionally peppered with the contemptuous language of Social Darwinism, the FRC's attitude often boiled down to a simple principle: If some local stations couldn't hack it, that was the cost of progress.

Even while lamenting this harsh treatment of small station owners, one should not lose sight of the effect of national-class discourses of efficiency on policymakers' decisions. As Thomas Streeter has pointed out, early regulators believed that enlightened policy could reconcile the needs of local and national stations within a well-run system—and there's no doubt that Commissioners in the early 1930s saw broadcasting not as a collection of local stations but as an interdependent national system that required rationalization to function smoothly. The complicated licensing decisions demanded by the dictates of the Davis Amendment further encouraged Commissioners to see themselves as regulating a national system. For example, a small station with nothing but a handful of phonograph records and a wobbly signal was not merely causing interference and providing a poor program service to its local community; it was using hours and watts that some other, more promising station could use to survive in a market perhaps two states away. By diluting the financial prospects for everyone during a depression, weak stations threatened the efficiency of the entire system, while the spectrum freed up by eliminating such stations could be used by other broadcasters to improve their own competitive position. Therefore, one can criticize the FRC's commitment to commercial radio as an organizing principle and its unquestioning acceptance of categories like "local" and "national," but it is unfair to presume that the FRC was simply carrying RCA's water when they passed rules like General Orders 105 and 116. In regulating for modernization and professionalization,

⁵³ Kay Charles Jameson, *The Influence of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia on Federal Policy in Broadcast Regulation 1929-1971* (New York: Arno Press, 1979) (original: 1972, University of Southern California), 53.

allowing weaker stations to perish, they were attempting to bring about the enlightened policy that would effect a reconciliation between privately owned stations and content control, between the check on monopoly provided by a multiplicity of stations and the economic health of the industry overall. One need not be an apologist for the FRC to argue that, within the economic, legal, and ideological constraints within which they were working, they were trying on the whole to help, not hurt, the predicament of small stations: modernizing them, increasing their professionalism, putting them on a sound financial footing, and thereby enabling them to weather the worst U.S. economic crisis of the century. That this had the corollary effect of tying stations further into the commercial model as a means of survival is, I argue, no evidence for the weakness, corruption, or capture of the FRC.

Iic. Regulating Competition

The interpretation that the FRC was trying to improve the health of entire system to the benefit of large and small stations alike is further supported by examining the various ways that the FRC regulated competition on behalf of promising smaller stations, often using discourses of localism to explain and justify their decisions. A typical case occurred in 1932 in Iowa. KSO, a 500-watt station owned by the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, wanted to move from the small town of Clarinda (population 25,000) to Des Moines. The station had lost around \$30,000 in Clarinda and had received permission from the FRC to temporarily suspend operations in an effort to minimize further losses. KSO hoped that the move to Des Moines would both expand the pool of advertisers and allow it to affiliate with a chain. Des Moines had one station already, an NBC Red affiliate on a clear channel.

The FRC permitted the move, carefully employing discourses of local service to justify the decision. First, it soft-pedaled the loss of KSO to the local community of Clarinda by listing the other stations received there, making a special note of the station at St. Joseph, MO, "which renders a service largely agricultural in nature which is of general interest to the population in the Clarinda territory" — in other words, the local needs of Clarindans would still be met, just not by a local station. Second, the FRC emphasized the licensee's solvency and discussed KSO's losses in the Clarinda market, which it blamed on too much local competition and too little local talent: "It appears that [KSO's deficit] is due largely to Clarinda's small population and because of the existence of the two regional stations in Page County, leaving but scant economic support for KSO. Program resources are also very meager at Clarinda, although the applicant has employed such local talent that is available." Any weakness in KSO's program service, therefore, was due to the market and not the character or competence of the licensee. Third, the FRC justified the increase of competition that the move would introduce to the Des Moines market. They emphasized the city's size and economic base, as well as the lack of good local radio service there since the one station, WHO, aired mostly chain programs, and most of the "local" programs it did air originated in Davenport, not Des Moines. Fourth, the FRC described how KSO would fill that gap in locally originated programming: "Applicant's purpose is to establish and operate a station which is primarily identified with the city of Des Moines and its institutions and business interests, rendering a local service." Next, KSO's character as a local trustee was vouched for by a long list of prominent citizens, and the available talent in Des Moines was described in some detail, illustrating the viability of a local program service. The report acknowledged that KSO also plans to affiliate with a chain, but only "to the extent consistent with giving the local service which it proposes." Finally, the FRC established the

viability of a second station in the Des Moines market, determining that the competition would not "jeopardize the quality of the service now rendered by [WHO]," adding that "it appears that there is a need for the type of local community service proposed by the applicant." Application approved.⁵⁴

I have described the report on KSO's application in some detail because it nicely illustrates the ways in which the FRC worked to shore up the economics of the system by navigating the two uses of localism described so far: localism as content control and localism as economic control. Knowing that it is depriving Clarinda of its local station, the FRC is at pains to justify the move on both economic and content grounds: Clarinda has neither the talent nor the resources to sustain KSO, but its local radio needs will be met nonetheless, since it receives several stations including one whose programs approximate Clarinda's rural local identity (in so many words, "close enough"). The FRC then reverses the equation for Des Moines: KSO will fulfill a local need with its local programming (despite its plans to affiliate with a chain), and the market will bear another station in terms of resources and talent. By carefully constructing a case against one locality and for another on both local economic and local content grounds, the FRC enabled a struggling broadcasting operation to become financially viable. Their success may perhaps best be measured by KSO's future: after moving to Des Moines, KSO affiliated with NBC Blue and remained on the air under the same call letters until 1989.

Occasionally, economic grounds for a decision could be disguised as content grounds. For example, at various times and in different cases in the early thirties, the FRC found that Klamath Falls, Oregon; Lagrange, Georgia; Chester Township, New York; Kosciusko,

⁵⁴ Federal Radio Commission. "In re application of Iowa Broadcasting Co., Docket 1849." FRC Minutes: Box 19, "9/30/32 #607." The detail about KSO suspension of operations prior to the move came from George F. Davison, Jr. "A History of KRNT and KSO." DesMoinesBroadcasting.com. <<http://www.desmoinesbroadcasting.com/krnt/krnt-kso-history.html>> (12 June 2005).

Mississippi; and Antonito, New Mexico (population 850) had sufficient local talent to support a radio station, but that Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., and even San Francisco did not.⁵⁵ Obviously, these cases were decided largely on other factors, but localist rhetoric was sufficiently central to the legitimation of FRC actions that the Commission evidently felt obliged to make their findings fit their decisions regardless of plausibility.

Such fine-tuning of local markets was common in the 1930-1934 period. As described above, the FRC did not shy away from turning down applicants who did not seem to have the resources to succeed financially, and the Commission also openly protected local broadcast monopolies rather than allow a second station into the market that might make both operations unprofitable. For instance, an application to build a station in Carterville, Missouri, to share time with a station in Joplin, was denied by the FRC on the grounds that "the Joplin-Carterville area is [not] capable of commercially supporting two local broadcasting stations."⁵⁶ If a station was doing especially poorly and lacked a workable plan for recovery, the FRC would take the opportunity to delete it in order to benefit another station that might have a better chance at survival. A good example is KGDA, a fairly hopeless station in Mitchell, South Dakota that wanted to move to a slightly larger market in order to improve its prospects. The FRC decided

⁵⁵ Klamath Falls: Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of KFJI Broadcasters, Inc., Docket 1264." FRC Minutes: Box 14, "12/4/31 #473"; La Grange: Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Allen Wright Marshall, Sn. et al., Docket 1715 and Musicove, Inc., Docket 1731. FRC Minutes: Box 20, "1/20/33 #641"; Chester Township: Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Peter Goelet (WGNY), Docket 1600, and Peter J. Prinz (WMRJ), Docket 1444." FRC Minutes: Box 19, "9/30/32 #607"; Kosciusko: Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of J. Niles Boyd et al., WHEF, Docket 1737." FRC Minutes: Box 21, "2/3/33 #644"; Cincinnati: Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Pillar of Fire, Docket 1432." FRC Minutes: Box 16, "4/8/32 #532"; Washington, D.C.: Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of WJSV, Inc., and Old Dominion Broadcasting co., Docket 1656. FRC Minutes: Box 17, "6/10/32 #562"; San Francisco: Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Hale Bros. Stores, Inc. and the Chronicle Publishing Co., National Broadcasting Co. Inc. (KPO), Dockets 1614-1615." FRC Minutes: Box 17, "6/10/32 #562."

⁵⁶ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Ozark Radio Corporation of Carterville, Docket 1050." FRC Minutes: Box 13, "10/23/31 #449."

that the station was so undercapitalized that it would not do much better at the new location.

Instead, the Commission deleted KGDA and gave its allocation to a station in Yankton, South Dakota, which was thereby able to increase its signal to reach more listeners (and presumably increase ad rates).⁵⁷ One interpretation of such decisions is that the FRC had it in for small local stations and was systematically killing them off to benefit larger broadcasters and the chains. My interpretation is that the FRC was attempting to shore up the system nationally, eliminating economically untenable stations like KGDA in order to improve the industry's overall health.⁵⁸

Along these same line, the FRC helped put struggling stations in line for network affiliation if possible. A good example is a case in Kentucky in 1933. WLAP, a Louisville local station, wanted an increase in power and a shift to a regional frequency so that it could affiliate with NBC. WFIW,⁵⁹ an unaffiliated regional station in rural Hopkinsville, Kentucky (population 10,746), wanted to move to Louisville to improve its economic prospects and also join NBC. The case boiled down to: Who gets the Louisville regional assignment (and thus the NBC affiliation)? Both applicants had adequate financial backing and acceptable technical equipment, so the case hinged above all on content. WLAP seemed to offer Louisville residents a decent local service and hoped that it would win the assignment based on past performance. Also, WFIW had accepted "questionable" advertising, and over the course of a four-day hearing, WLAP hammered home just how bad WFIW's sponsors were. WLAP introduced testimony

⁵⁷ Federal Radio Commission, "In re applications of The House of Gurney, Inc. (WNAX), Docket 1578, and Mitchell Broadcasting Corp. (KGDA), Dockets 1613 and 1642." FRC Minutes: Box 21, "2/10/33 #646." The Yankton station, WNAX, is most noteworthy for having given Lawrence Welk his start.

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that it was not until 1940, in *FCC v. Sanders Brothers Radio Station*, that the Supreme Court ruled that the FCC could not consider a licensee's potential for economic success or failure and had no say over a broadcasters' business practices. According to John Armstrong, the decision contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of stations following World War II. John Stevenson Armstrong, "Localism, Community, and Commercial Television, 1948-1960: A Value Analysis" (Ph. D. diss., University of Utah, 2002), 54.

⁵⁹ Owned by a milling concern, WFIW stood for "Whitest Flour in the World."

disputing the effectiveness of Willard's antacid pills and attacking the credibility of the Velveteena hair tonic company, both advertisers on WFIW.⁶⁰ WLAP hoped to show that, by airing fraudulent advertising claims, WFIW had violated the trusteeship relationship and thus did not deserve a better assignment. But unfortunately for WLAP, the strategy backfired. WFIW blamed the small, advertiser-poor market of Hopkinsville for its reliance on questionable sponsors, demonstrating the difficulty of attracting national and local accounts as well as the challenge of finding local talent. At the same time, they also brought in a minister from Louisville who testified to the need for another station in that city.⁶¹ In other words, the market rather than the character of the licensee was to blame for the fraudulent ads: *Let us move to Louisville, WFIW was suggesting, where our local service is requested by those doing God's work, and you will be cleansing the air of the snake-oil salesmen!* The FRC agreed, saying that "it appears extremely difficult to obtain either the advertising business or the necessary talent" in Hopkinsville and approving WFIW's application.⁶²

Several aspects of this case indicate the role of localism in shoring up the economics of the radio industry. First, WLAP seemed to have forgotten the first rule of FRC decision-making: finances trumped content. By playing up the ads that WFIW aired, it reminded the FRC of that station's money-losing operation in Hopkinsville. The difficulty of providing appropriate content

⁶⁰ Velveteena was a hair tonic whose ads promised a formula tailored to one's particular hair condition. Listeners would send in a hair sample for Velveteena to analyze, and then Velveteena would ostensibly mix up a tonic just for that person. To show evidence of Velveteena's fraud in this process, Paul Segal, a well-known broadcast attorney representing WLAP, sent in dog hair for analysis and received two bottles of tonic back, no questions asked. Those sample bottles are now stored with the hearing transcript in the case files at the National Archives.

⁶¹ For details from the hearings, see FRC Dockets: Box 375, "1725." For the FRC's report and decision, see Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of American Broadcasting Corp. of Kentucky, Docket 1725, et al." FRC Minutes: Box 22, "6/16/33 #680"

⁶² It appears that WFIW, for reasons I have not yet discovered, never made the move to Louisville, remaining in Hopkinsville until 1933, when it went off the air. WLAP eventually moved to Lexington, Ky., and is still in business as a Fox News affiliate as of this writing.

in an unlucrative market thus inadvertently encouraged the Commission to remove WFIW to a larger city that could sustain "quality" programming, just as it had in the KSO case. Second, the FRC determined that Louisville, a city of over 300,000, could support two regional chain stations and a local independent—certainly more so than Hopkinsville could support one independent regional—exemplifying how regulators factored in market size and competition in making their decisions. Third, the FRC repeatedly used discourses of localism to justify those decisions: It contended that WFIW had demonstrated need for another station in Louisville, and effectively shifted responsibility for the station's poor local service in Hopkinsville onto factors beyond its control. Furthermore, moving WFIW to Louisville "would not leave the residents of the Hopkinsville area without broadcast service," since they could still receive WSM out of Nashville. Fourth, in this and similar cases, the FRC effectively defined *chain* programs as good *local* service, a premise based on listener demand. "There is a need in the Louisville area for a broadcast service such as proposed by each of the applicants," the FRC wrote, referring to NBC affiliation. "[T]he evidence discloses that there is substantial demand for another national or chain service. It appears that the public took considerable interest in a chain service produced by the National Broadcasting Company that was formerly available in this area but which cannot now be received in a satisfactory manner."⁶³ In other words, the FRC was arguing that the best way for a local broadcaster to serve his local community was by providing national programs, a position that is difficult to explain if one starts from the premise that the FRC was interested in encouraging affirmative efforts to foster geographically-based local identities and local public spheres.

⁶³ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of American Broadcasting Corp. of Kentucky, Docket 1725, et al." FRC Minutes: Box 22, "6/16/33 #680."

In short, the FRC spoke the language of local service but was more interested in the financial stability of the industry as a whole than in a romantic vision of localism. This interest intensified during the desperate economy of the 1930s, to the point that the FRC was constantly regulating local competition, permitting local monopolies in smaller cities, and fostering solvency through sustainable local markets and chain affiliation. The point is, of course, that all this localism directly assisted the entrenchment of commercial national radio—not paradoxically, but deliberately. The FRC accomplished this by eliminating weak independent stations, denying licenses to undercapitalized applicants, positioning stronger stations to join the networks, defining chain programs and transcriptions as good local service, and encouraging modernization and professionalization for the industry as a whole. In negotiating the tension between economic viability and the power of the large commercial radio interests, the FRC used discourses of localism to draw and re-draw its lines ever more in favor of financial stability even in the face of political pressure to curb the growing power of NBC and CBS.⁶⁴ This pressure did not disappear through the persuasiveness of the FRC's localist rhetoric. Still, when pressed, the FRC continued to use the multiplicity of independent local stations to support its claim that it was keeping the chains in check. As Commissioner Harold Lafount wrote to one critic:

[T]here are approximately 600 licensed stations in operation today of which 85 are affiliated with the National Broadcasting Company and 82 with the Columbia Broadcasting System. This does not mean that 167 stations are entirely "chain stations" out of the 600 licensed. It means that of the 600 stations licensed 85 broadcast part of their time some of the programs of one chain and 82 part of their time the programs of another chain. The great majority of the stations in the United States, therefore, are so-called "independent stations."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ For the record, the FRC also encouraged the growth of smaller, regional chains, such as the Yankee Network in New England and the Don Lee Broadcasting twelve-station chain in California.

⁶⁵ Harold A. Lafount to George F. Havell, 29 January 1934. FRC Correspondence: Box 38, "File 15-3A Legislation: Radio, Acts, Radio Act of 1927 and Amendments thereto."

Lafount's claims understate the dominance of chain broadcasting within the U.S. radio system, since chains—especially thanks to the high-powered clear channels—controlled the prime spectrum assignments, most of the allocated wattage throughout the country, and a disproportionate share of the advertising revenue that was generated through broadcasting. Congress was not persuaded and continued to express its concern about a radio monopoly, for example by introducing resolutions to reallocate the chain-dominated clear channels and give three such assignments to the federal government (one each to the departments of Labor, Agriculture, and Interior).⁶⁶ The FRC vehemently resisted such plans:

If any channels are assigned to Government Departments ... such assignments will correspondingly reduce the channels for broadcasting by commercial, educational, religious and other similar private enterprises. This will necessarily result in the elimination of many stations or a reduction in the time of operation of many.⁶⁷

Such threats can be taken two ways. First, if taken at face value, they indicate that the FRC would rather eliminate "many" small stations from the airwaves to clear new channels for the government than delete three large stations on existing clear channels. This interpretation would seem to offer evidence of the FRC's willingness to service large broadcasters at any cost. But taken in conjunction with quotes like Lafount's above, I argue that they do not demonstrate the FRC's "capture" by the radio trust so much as the discursive power of localism, including the rhetoric of the need for a "full representation of local stations." By threatening to reduce the number of small broadcasters in meeting Congress' demands, including the kinds of stations that the resolutions' sponsors least wanted to disturb, the FRC was essentially claiming that it had

⁶⁶ S. J. Res. 220, 15 December 1930. FRC Correspondence: Box 38, "15-2."

⁶⁷ Charles Mck. Saltzman to the Secretary of Commerce, 23 January 1931. FRC Correspondence: Box 38, "15-2."

already struck the right balance between large and small broadcasters in the industry and that it had the radio monopoly under control.

Whether the FRC ever struck the "right" balance is and will always remain a question of what values one would wish to see expressed in and through media. But in the process of navigating competing economic pressures within what they saw as a national system, there can be no question that regulators presided over the entrenchment of chain broadcasting in the U.S. Discourses of localism proved valuable in explaining and justifying the policy and licensing decisions that, one by one, assisted those developments, with the result that the FRC's use of localism, in the economic sphere as in the sphere of content, facilitated the growth and eventual dominance, not of local independent radio, but of national network radio.

Perhaps the FRC itself made my argument better than I could. Commissioner Harold Lafount, in summarizing the FRC's accomplishments in 1933, boasted of the very nationalizing project I have been discussing:

National unity has been promoted, musical culture and appreciation widely extended, messages of men and women of outstanding achievements and mentality are now heard by millions through the networks, geographical provincialism is being banished rapidly, thus preventing the disintegration of our vast population into classes. Common sources of entertainment, common economic interests, common ideals ... constitute bonds for making our people homogeneous.⁶⁸

It could hardly be stated more clearly. The FRC was not interested in preserving local idiosyncrasies and regional identities. Rather, it was interested in using its own narrow definition of "culture" to promote national unity, banish provincialism, and make "our people" homogeneous—on the national-class's cultural and economic terms. Localist discourses and

⁶⁸ Harold A. Lafount, "Radio Control in the U.S." (Speech prepared for and published by the National Committee on Education by Radio), 29 September 1933. NBC: Box 17, Folder 35.

structures proved useful in this project, but the bedrock concept of encouraging local identities and local public spheres really had very little to do with it.

Conclusion

Previous scholarship suggests that early radio regulators attempted to impose a social fantasy of the small-town community, and that they really wanted a localist radio system but because of the unworkability of localism presided over the creation of a national one instead. As I hope to have convincingly demonstrated, regulators were not operating in a mythic haze of nostalgic localism, nor were they "captured" by the industry in any meaningful sense. Contrary to the dominant thrust of scholarship on localism, the federal decision-makers who were most responsible for shaping radio policy in the 1920s and early 1930s were not laboring under social fantasies about the societal value of local radio, and they held no particular fondness for the many small independent radio stations they oversaw. Instead, they used local stations out of a regulatory need to balance competing economic, technological, political, and ideological pressures, all the while advancing the proliferation of ideologically appropriate, culturally modern broadcasting. They saw themselves as modernizers, eradicating the worst aspects of pre-modern culture, and suppressing local identities and practices in the name of efficiency, modernization, and professionalization. Tying diverse local communities both structurally and culturally into the modern, consumerist, corporate order, they used radio not to benefit localities, but localism to benefit a national-class vision of a modern America.

During the late 1930s, the FCC did indeed begin to turn to affirmative localism and began attempting to foster local identities and local public spheres through radio, something that the FRC never did. They revisited the issue of spectrum allocation with an eye toward reducing the

number of clear channels, and they began emphasizing local origination in their programming standards. There are various reasons for this "turn to localism" after 1936, most notably the national-class's increasing dissatisfaction with corporate mass culture as discussed in an earlier chapter. This included the return to power of traditional reform groups such as women's clubs; a reevaluation of Progressive-era social policy with its tinges of New England localism; the continued consolidation of network power in the radio industry, the further erosion of the nonprofit sector after 1934, and the growing domination of national radio by Hollywood—changes that both increased the pressure on regulators to contain corporate radio and exacerbated structural conflicts between networks and local stations;⁶⁹ the rise of a new generation of regulators less invested in Hooverian associationalism and more invested in the New Deal's structural remedies to industry inequalities; and the depth of the persistent economic crisis that threw into question the modern, corporate, national-class social vision that drove the FRC in its policies.

But whatever the reasons for this late-1930s turn to localism, I hope to have shown that it was not a "return to localism." Although localist discourses figured prominently in the FRC's explanations and justifications for its policies and decisions, affirmative localism as it would come to be promoted by the Commission was never a priority of regulators prior to 1934. Instead, the FRC pursued and achieved an economically stable, ideologically safe, modern corporate broadcasting system for the nation. And as regulators who later tried to reform that system discovered, the FRC did their work all too well.

⁶⁹ James C. Foust, *Big Voices of the Air: The Battle Over Clear Channel Radio* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2000), 6.

Chapter Four

National Radio and Local Resistance: The Networks and Localism

In 1924, a Sears vice-president was entertaining friends in his Chicago home and, wishing to show off Sears' broadcasting venture, WLS, turned on his radio set for his guests. The executive was known as a music aficionado and fully anticipated light classical music to emerge from the set, the genre that Sears believed was most appropriate for their image. Instead, he happened upon the premiere broadcast of *Barn Dance*, a country music show that WLS was hoping would attract the rural clientele that had made Sears' mail-order operation so successful. The executive was mortified; according to historian James Evans, "When his ears were assaulted by Turkey in the Straw rendered by a devil-may-care country fiddle, the National Barn Dance nearly died right then and there." The vice-president demanded an explanation from an underling as to why this "so-called music" was going out over WLS, only to be presented with the evidence of hundreds of supportive telegrams from listeners demonstrating the show's instant popularity. One letter read, "Mother and I pulled up the carpet and danced for the first time in years." *Barn Dance* was spared and became one of the first great successes of the broadcast era.¹

The anecdote illustrates several of the economic and cultural forces at work in shaping the rise of radio under the control of national-class interests. As discussed at length in Chapter One, the "national class" was primarily a set of discourses that privileged the cultural and economic power of an emerging group of translocal professionals in the new corporate economy of the twentieth century. For many of these professionals, especially those with urban, cosmopolitan tastes and attitudes, localism and "local" culture were effectively defined out of the

¹ James F. Evans, *Prairie Farmer and WLS: The Burrige D. Butler Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 215.

"modern" American nation; old-timey music like "Turkey in the Straw," for example, did not qualify. I have attempted to show, then, that an important national-class goal in media was to bring modernity to the local, or put another way, to stitch the local into the modern. But what did this mean in practice, and with what implications for the shape of the U.S. media system?

In terms of official policy, the desire to stitch the local into a national-class vision of modernity meant, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, using discourses and structures of localism to navigate a range of competing political pressures in the process of professionalizing, modernizing, and—to the degree possible—standardizing radio throughout the country. In the present chapter, I examine this modernization project from the perspective of national broadcasters themselves to see how national-class interests in the industry sought to negotiate the tensions between the national and the local, as well as between the local and the modern. How did national broadcasters think about and manage the local? Did they, like the regulators of the FRC, use structures and discourses of localism to further national radio? How did they overcome resistance to their nationalizing project—both cultural resistance on the part of audiences, and political resistance, since the traditional local middle class, often suspicious of network power, dominated political institutions during much of this era?

It is tempting (and commonplace) to think of national and local radio as relatively discrete cultural and economic systems, but the reality was more complicated than that, and evidence suggests that the networks often found it even more difficult than regulators to navigate the tensions of nationalism and localism. NBC and CBS were primarily in the business of extending "national" radio throughout the country (and with it the ethic and practices of national consumption and mass culture on which it depended), but continually found themselves challenged internally and externally by the local: local economies, local cultures, and local

politics. Furthermore, as the experience of the Sears executive shows, national-class content expectations often conflicted with the mass tastes and desires that were the key to maximizing profit. The result was that national broadcasters simultaneously participated in *and* sought to suppress structures and discourses of localism—a dialectic that resulted not in separate things called "national" and "local" radio, but rather a decade-long effort to "get the local under control," that is, to structurally and culturally integrate the local into a profitable, efficient, and corporatized national system.²

As in the case of official federal policy, the networks' task of getting the local under control consisted of several distinct sub-projects. At its most fundamental level, it meant optimizing contracts with affiliates in order to reconfigure the economic and political incentives that favored local over national programming. It also meant confronting administrative challenges to running the efficient and centralized national operation that national-class ideology demanded, a task complicated by the fact that the networks themselves—through their O&Os—were also in the business of local radio. Beyond these managerial concerns, however, there was the larger problem of defending and extending the idea and reality of commercial national radio itself, which meant both containing objections and suppressing alternatives to this system. For this larger problem, discourses of both positive and negative localism again proved useful.

Economically and politically,² the networks and their allies invoked localist rhetoric to help

² An important and unfortunate limitation of this study is that I am unable to examine the Mutual network or the various regional networks in any detail. However, the work of Alexander Russo suggests that the Yankee Network and other regional chains were subject to many of the same structural pressures that the national chains faced and were equally confronted with the challenge of navigating competing discourses regarding their mission and identity. Alexander Todd Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth: Audiences, Aesthetics, Economics, and Technologies of American Broadcasting, 1926-1951" (Ph. D. diss., Brown University, 2004). Additionally, Michael Socolow discusses the rise of Mutual as a response to the weaknesses and blind spots of NBC and CBS, privileging a decentralized strategy and "tapping into a vein of resentment that the decline of local radio and expansion of C.B.S. and N.B.C. in the mid-1930s produced." Michael Socolow, "To Network a Nation: N.B.C., C.B.S., and the Development of National Network Radio in the United States, 1925-1950" (Ph. D. diss., Georgetown University, 2001), 106.

marginalize local stations, disempower the traditional middle class, and commercialize local space along national-corporate lines. Culturally, the networks used an aesthetic of positive localism to overcome cultural resistance to national-class radio. Although one aspect of stitching the local into the modern was cultural uplift—changing the tastes and habits of thought of the locals through a combination of exposure to cosmopolitan culture and suppression of traditional, rural, or local culture—this goal proved more difficult and contentious than might have been expected. In an example of hegemonic negotiation, the networks ultimately turned to a kind of "translocal localism" that constructed an idealized local through programming that spoke to the cultural values of Main Street while preserving the economic underpinnings of national corporate radio and consumer culture. This was not the only strategy they pursued—they also increasingly piggy-backed on Hollywood-based mass culture, which itself found growing acceptance within the traditional local middle class during this period—but this translocal localist aesthetic proved remarkably effective at drawing audiences ever closer to national radio.

Part I: The Struggle to Make "National" Radio National

National radio, as Michael Socolow has pointed out, was not born national but emerged first as a rhetorical strategy to advance the interests of a handful of urban stations in the Northeast and their corporate owners. In Chapter Two I discussed the rise of this terminology of local and national stations and its ultimate enshrinement in official policy in 1928: throughout the 1920s, the so-called local station was a convenient structuring other for the Sarnoffs and Crosleys of the industry, the object of their scorn, insult, and repression in political maneuvers to achieve more favorable regulation. These efforts paid off at various points in the regulatory process: when larger, wealthier broadcasters were able to escape the crowded broadcast band

and become Class B stations; when GE, Powel Crosley, and others successfully resisted serious local regulation in the mid-1920s; and when the FRC issued General Order 40, allowing large, powerful broadcasters to officially become "national" broadcasters and consigning smaller, poorer broadcasters to the official category of "local" stations, segregated off to the far end of the dial where tuning often required surgical precision.

But the contest between "local" and "national" radio was still far from settled and in fact became more complicated—for both broadcasters and the public—once chains like NBC began to expand throughout the country. Specifically, the network structure introduced a new wrinkle into the meaning of "local" radio, as dozens of officially "regional" and "national" stations now became "local affiliates" of national systems. The negative localism that had proven so effective in clearing the channels for RCA and others now carried new risk: "Local" as a policy designation describing a station category collided with "local" as a corporate unit identifying a box on the networks' organizational charts. Far from enjoying a national perch apart from and above the local the way the FRC did, the networks were required to constantly negotiate internal and external dilemmas of scale in ways that prevented them from adopting an easy national-local dichotomy. To address these dilemmas, the networks regularly drew on discourses of both positive and negative localism: positive localism to fend off charges of monopoly by playing up the networks' beneficial effects on local radio through their local affiliates, and negative localism to deflect criticism of excessive advertising and lowbrow content onto non-affiliated, categorically "local" stations. Furthermore, this discursive deployment of good and bad localism occurred both between the network and its critics and within the networks themselves.

Given the over-representation of national network programming and the growth of national radio in the scholarly literature, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the not-insubstantial

localness of the chains. Two recent dissertations, by Michael Socolow and Alexander Russo, have begun to correct this: Socolow demonstrates the slow and painful process through which the networks were built, arguing that it took them more than a decade to live up to the rhetoric of "national" radio, while Russo problematizes the national-local distinction, for example by examining the growth of the transcription market that made national networks more local and local stations more national. In this section, I will build on the work of Socolow and Russo by exploring some of the ways in which political and economic dimensions of localism helped shape network policy and operation.

Ia. Using Localism to Defend Chain Broadcasting

As Robert McChesney has shown, large commercial broadcasters faced sustained and serious challenges to their hegemony well into the 1930s, with investigations (or threatened investigations) of chain broadcasting and spectrum allocation looming perpetually over their heads. In particular, advocates of educational and nonprofit radio mounted continued attacks on the commercial structures that large broadcasters insisted on calling "the American system."³ Some of these attacks also came from members of the FRC, even long before the proceedings of the late 1930s that would lead to the Chain Broadcasting Rules. In a speech contrasting the American and British radio systems, for example, Commissioner James Hanley took the networks to task in 1933 for "too much duplication of chain programs, too much offensive sales talks, too few educational programs, ... and too much trafficking in radio facilities; also a tendency towards a monopoly on the part of certain groups." Hanley's speech was not exactly an anti-network rant: He also criticized "too many programs tending to develop religious agitation,"

³ Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, & Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25.

an apparent reference to figures like Father Coughlin, who was enjoying tremendous success on local and independent stations after having been shunned by the chains. But the Commissioner's criticism of the networks was nonetheless stinging. In the end Hanley endorsed the so-called American system despite its faults, but he did attempt to put the networks on notice: "Personally, I am in favor of more local stations and I am very sympathetic towards the plans of the educators for additional radio facilities."⁴ Importantly, the grief for the networks was coming not only from regulators and interest groups, but also from the traditional local middle class. NBC's own internal fact-finding pointed to trouble; one executive, following a trip through the South in 1932 to meet with local business leaders, alerted his colleagues to "[i]ncreased protests that local Stations are 'going network' to exclusion of local interests. This is a real problem."⁵

In the face of such criticism and ongoing threats, the chains and their allies frequently invoked the rhetoric of positive localism, playing up the beneficial effects that, they claimed, network radio made possible in local communities through their local affiliates, and shifting the blame for undesirable programming and other ills of radio away from the networks onto unaffiliated local stations. In this rhetorical strategy, non-affiliated local stations were guilty of negative localism (inefficiency, amateurism, cultural degeneracy, etc.), while network-affiliated stations fostered positive localism (neighborliness, local public spheres, civic pride). As Matthew Murray summarized the first part of this strategy,

By establishing network programming as high quality and in good taste, [the chains] were able to taint critics and small-scale operators with an ambiance of disreputability and irresponsibility. Non-corporate radio broadcasters were discursively linked to the period's figures of social, political and cultural

⁴ James H. Hanley, "Radio in the United States and England." Undated (1933?): 6-7. NBC: Box 19, Folder 35.

⁵ F. A. Arnold to John Royal, 18 March 1932. NBC: Box 6, Folder 28.

'Otherness' that symbolized disorder, inversion and unAmericanness in prevailing ideologies.⁶

Independent locals provided an easy target for accusations of irresponsibility and the betrayal of radio's glorious promise. Often desperately under-funded, especially once the Depression hit, many small stations accepted any advertisements that came their way regardless of their apparent social value: quack medicines, fraudulent stock tips, bogus hair tonics, get-rich quick schemes, etc. "Local stations seem indifferent as to the character or merit of the matter going over the air," complained *Variety* in 1933, referring to locals in Los Angeles. "Medical talks are so frequent that in themselves they would drive all listeners away."⁷ On the East Coast, WAAT, Jersey City, continued to accept the sponsorship of Modern Medical Associates, a quack medicine outfit, even after one listener died under MMA's care.⁸ In a common analogy of the time, local radio stations were the traveling snake-oil salesmen, and local audiences were the rubes who made easy marks; as *Radioland* put it in 1934, "[It is] the 'moron' in the towns way out where the grass is so tall that the sun has to back in, who are the real purchasing power for the Modern Medicine Man."⁹ Similarly, *Variety* reported on the fraudulent stock tips that certain stations were airing, adding with typical national-class condescension: "The condition is even more acute in the hinterland where the chumps are the thickest."¹⁰ These local stations also often flogged their sponsors' products relentlessly, eschewing the genteel style of briefly mentioning the sponsor's

⁶ Matthew Murray, "Broadcast Content Regulation and Cultural Limits, 1920-1962" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1997), 36.

⁷ "Pacific's Blah Programs," *Variety* 20 June 1933: 29.

⁸ Unsigned (Paul Segal?) to Herbert L. Pettey, 3 May 1934. FRC Minutes: Box 26, "5/4/34."

⁹ Nellie Revell, "Radio--The Modern Medicine Man," *Radioland* 3, no. 3 (July 1934): 58.

¹⁰ "Taking Chumps By Radio," *Variety* 21 November 1928: 1.

name and product in favor of repetitive, hard-sell advertising spiels that could go on for several minutes. The networks leaped on this perception of excessive advertising on local stations to boast about the relative quality of the networks, with one NBC pamphlet telling potential advertisers, "The small local broadcasting stations that allow advertisers indiscriminately to use the air for straight out-and-out advertising talks at all times of the day, have very small audiences, because radio listeners in their communities instinctively turn the dial to the more entertaining programs of national network stations."¹¹

Meanwhile, on the programming side, it was not difficult to find examples of objectionable content on local stations, sometimes with the objection based simply on taste prejudices against working-class or rural culture, but sometimes traceable back to the often precarious economics of independent stations in small markets. KGDA in Mitchell, South Dakota (population 11,000), for instance, was in such dire straights that much of its programming consisted, not even of phonograph records, but of "paper composition records furnished free of charge by the manufacturer" that it played several times a day; the station hoped to improve its fortunes by relocating to a more promising locale: Aberdeen, South Dakota (population 16,500).¹² Even in larger markets, programming on the locals consistently raised the eyebrows and hackles of cultural guardians, as when a Cleveland listener complained that his local stations "put on artists from cheap vaudeville shows, whose acts and lines of patter are often offensive and sometimes obscene."¹³ In one emblematic example, WGL, a local station in

¹¹ Thomas F. Logan, "Broadcasting and the Advertising Agency," n.d., 8. E. P. H. James: Box 20, Folder 1.

¹² Federal Radio Commission, "In re applications of The House of Gurney, Inc. (WMAX), Docket 1578, and Mitchell Broadcasting Corp. (KGDA), Dockets 1613 and 1642," 10 February 1933, 6. FRC Minutes: Box 21, "2/10/33 #646."

¹³ John Wallace, "The Listeners Speak for Themselves," *Radio Broadcast* 8, no. 6 (April 1926), 669-671.

New York City that *Radio Broadcast* claimed was "notorious for consistently wretched quality of transmission and mediocrity of programs," proposed to air the "mutterings and shriekings of the inmates of an insane asylum."¹⁴ Muttering and shrieking could also describe many of the amateur musical performances that resource-strapped program managers sent out over the airwaves; despite the rare station like WCAL in Northfield, Minnesota, which could draw on the abundant musical gifts of St. Olaf College students, a common complaint was "the home talent foisted on the unsuspecting listener by small stations."¹⁵ Finally, the transmissions themselves from local stations were also accused of muttering and shrieking, since high wavelength assignments and older or poorly maintained equipment made it difficult to maintain precise frequencies; such technical deficiency made it easy to paint locals as unprofessional and inefficient. Among national-class publications, such examples were less likely to evoke sympathy for the struggling local small businessman than to merely further solidify the reputation of the chains for "quality." As *Radio Broadcast* informed its readers, network-affiliated stations are "superior in program value to those which must rely for their programs on the Squeedunk church choir and the piano-playing professor at a roadside speakeasy."¹⁶

The networks were, unsurprisingly, central in propagating the anti-local theme of network quality. In his famous 1928 "Modern Stentor" speech at Princeton, for example, NBC's Merlin H. Aylesworth identified poor local programming as the prime mover of "national" radio, saying that small stations "had exhausted their program resources. They were hard pressed for good programs whereby to maintain the interest of their audience," making it imperative for

¹⁴ "The Low-Power Stations Plead Their Case," *Radio Broadcast* 13, no. 6 (October 1928): 338.

¹⁵ "The Trend in Broadcasting: Talkies Paving Way for the Numerous Recorded Programs," *Broadcast Advertising* October 1929: 10-11.

¹⁶ "What is the True Broadcasting Situation?" *Radio Broadcast* 12, no. 5 (March 1928): 346.

NBC to fill the gap with "a higher grade of entertainment."¹⁷ In other words, America needed the networks to ride in and rescue radio from those hard-pressed and amateurish local stations that were destroying broadcasting. This trope continued throughout the 1930s; an even more explicit (and more defensive) contrast with local stations was prepared for David Sarnoff to use before the Commission in 1935, testimony designed to help him ward off attacks on chain broadcasting:

We would not seriously contend that all of the programs which we broadcast are of the highest quality, nor uplifting in character. ... [But] the real difficulty in American broadcasting is not with the great networks but with the hundreds of small stations which must fill their time with commercial plugs and spot announcements in order to meet expenses. Nevertheless, the American tradition of "going after the big fellow" inevitably heaps the sins of the small independent stations upon the heads of the networks.¹⁸

In addition to a sympathetic press, the networks could (despite occasional criticism like Commissioner Hanley's) count on powerful political allies to circulate these anti-local sentiments on their behalf. Federal Radio Commissioner Harold A. Lafount, for example, was a reliable booster of high-powered, network, commercial broadcasting. In a 1933 speech to the network-friendly National Advisory Council on Radio in Education,¹⁹ he defended chain broadcasting and tried to shift critics' attention to the "over 500 stations broadcasting local programs, whose

¹⁷ Merlin Hall Aylesworth, "The Modern Stentor: Radio Broadcasting in the United States," Speech before the Engineering Faculty and Students of Princeton University, 1928. E. P. H. James: Box 9, Folder 8 ("NBC Advertising Promotion Speech Reprints, 1928-1937").

¹⁸ Unsigned (Henry K. Norton?) to David Sarnoff, 17 August 1934. NBC: Box 26, Folder 27. This memo consisted of briefing notes to Sarnoff, coaching him on what to say during upcoming FCC hearings. I have not been able to determine whether Sarnoff actually used these (or similar) words before the Commission, but the memo does indicate the network's thinking about the issue and their readiness to use a strategy of blaming locals for the ills of radio.

¹⁹ Although proponents of educational broadcasting, NACRE was a strong ally of the network system and worked with the chains to improve educational radio. In contrast, the National Committee on Education by Radio (NCER) was significantly more hostile to chain broadcasting. For more on these groups, their agendas and strategies, and role in the debate over radio policy, see McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, & Democracy*.

unsold or sustaining programs I seek to improve." He blasted these locals for their "short-sighted, selfish station managers who are failing to measure up to reasonable standards of public service." Rather than expending energy pestering the networks, he argued, media reformers should target those broadcasters who "have not only failed to build up strong programs from local talent but sometimes have actually offended the public by their cheap, tawdry programs and blatant ballyhoo over the air."²⁰

When not using discourses of negative localism to define themselves against the "sins" of non-affiliated local stations, the networks used discourses of positive localism to play up their benevolent influence on the radio system as a whole. They often articulated their product to an imagined past of neighborliness and the values of Jeffersonian agrarianism, as when RCA President J. G. Harboard argued that the telephonic party line, keeping neighbors in touch with each other with news and gossip, "must have been a legitimate ancestor of the broadcasting of our modern day."²¹ As noted in earlier chapters, large broadcasters and policymakers alike also frequently invoked the existence of hundreds of non-affiliated stations to downplay fears of network domination. A plethora of local stations thus gave them some measure of political cover against charges that the chains were monopolizing radio, as when David Sarnoff wrote in *The Nation*:

With over five hundred stations, large and small, broadcasting daily programs of music, entertainment, and speech to a radio audience of probably 10,000,000 people in the United States, it is strange that the cry of monopoly should

²⁰ Harold A. Lafount, "Extract of Remarks Made By Commissioner Harold A. Lafount of the Federal Radio Commission at the Annual Assembly of the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education in New York City, May 19, 1933," 2. NBC: Box 17, Folder 34.

²¹ J. G. Harboard, "Radio and the Farmer," Speech delivered to the Advertising Club of New York, 16 September 1925, 3. FRC Correspondence: Box 139, "1732."

reverberate through the press in any discussion of the broadcasting problem. For there are no gateways in the air to bar the human voice.²²

The networks took this embrace of localism one step further, arguing that chain broadcasting not only did not threaten local programming, but actually promoted affirmative localism thanks to a symbiotic relationship between network and station. As NBC's Sales Promotion Manager E. P. H. James described this relationship in 1933,

While giving [affiliates] a well-rounded schedule of network programs, we encouraged them to preserve their local identities by continuing to broadcast local programs which had become established features in their respective territories. Instead of filling in their free time entirely with network programs, these stations continued to broadcast programs featuring local artists, local civic dignitaries and local orchestras. As the quality of these local programs improved, we went further and selected the best of them to be fed to the network and rebroadcast in other cities, thus fostering local pride.²³

NBC's house engineer Alfred N. Goldsmith repeated this theme, insisting that good local programming could only be augmented, not driven out, by the national networks: "Stations which aspire particularly to serve their neighborhood will not willingly lose their identity. The neighborhood station will desire to continue at certain hours, to give its audience the highest class of national programs."²⁴ Instead of hurting the cause of positive localism, he argued, networks help it by strengthening local stations during their non-network hours. Drawing an analogy to press agencies—as local papers are dependent on the wire services, so too are local broadcasters dependent on the networks—Goldsmith claimed, "One may even fairly point out

²² David Sarnoff, "The Freedom of the Air: Uncensored and Uncontrolled," *The Nation* 119, no. 3081 (23 July 1924): 90.

²³ E. P. H. James, "Rough Notes on Presentation to American Marketing Society," 19 October 1933, 2. NBC: Box 5, Folder 6 ("NBC--Ad Promotion--Speeches and Articles 1932-33-34").

²⁴ Alfred N. Goldsmith, "Before the Federal Radio Commission: Conference Held at Washington, D.C. (30 March 1927), 167. Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio: Conference, 3/30/27."

that probably the greatest single force acting to perpetuate the local broadcasting station is network operation.²⁵

In addition to using positive localism to assuage fears of monopoly, the networks used the discourse to ward off concerns about diversity and educational broadcasting that threatened to lead to significant structural changes to the radio system, especially before 1934. For example, Michael Socolow points out that discourses of positive localism helped the chains fend off the specter of synchronization, which would have enabled all of a chain's programs to be broadcast on the same frequency. This potentially would have freed up the airwaves for considerably more programming diversity, and while there were many technical problems to overcome, synchronization began to appear increasingly feasible in the late 1920s and early 1930s. But synchronization would have severely disrupted the chains' business model by, among other things, increasing the number of potential competitors for ad dollars and enabling more national chains to enter the market at relatively low cost.²⁶ In their campaign to quash synchronization, the networks could not comfortably admit to the business reasons behind their resistance to the technology, and turned instead primarily to discourses of localism. As Merlin Aylesworth put it, devoting synchronized stations to national programming would entirely eliminate local programming on those stations, a fate too horrible for the nation to contemplate: "[As] the stations on the present networks are all individually owned and serve important local

²⁵ Alfred N. Goldsmith, "Analysis of Network Broadcasting," Speech delivered to the Mid-Winter Meeting of the Radio Division of the National Electrical Manufacturers Association, Chicago, 29 November 1927, 7. Hoover Papers: Box 491, "Radio Correspondence, Press Releases, Misc. 1927 May-December." This speech also appeared in slightly different form as Alfred N. Goldsmith, "The Advantages of Broadcast Networks," *Radio News* February 1928: 871ff.

²⁶ For a full discussion of synchronization and the chains' objections to it, see Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 53-67.

interests, as well as national programs, they cannot and should not be operated in synchronism."²⁷

In a similar rhetorical move, the networks played up their beneficial effect on local radio to ward off educational broadcasting. For example, in testimony intended to dissuade regulators from implementing set-aside provisions for non-commercial educational broadcasters in 1934, Judith Waller, Educational Director of NBC's Central Division in Chicago, listed at length the various local community service performed by WMAQ and other NBC stations around the country, claiming:

[T]here is not time to go into more detail in regard to the educational and community service rendered by WMAQ, but there has scarcely been a civic, welfare or educational organization that has not had regular or occasional broadcast over the station. ... It is this service that the local member stations of the National Broadcasting Company are endeavoring to render through their various affiliations.²⁸

In part through this strategy of publicizing such positive localism on the part of the network, advocates of national radio were able to resist significant structural reform of national commercial broadcasting well into the 1930s. The FRC gave up on trying to impose synchronization, and educational broadcasters lost their bid for channel set-asides. Although many factors contributed to these policy decisions, the networks' careful use of positive and negative localism was one important strategy in achieving these objectives.

²⁷ Qtd. in Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 61.

²⁸ Judith Waller, untitled statement on the relationship of the local station to the network affiliate, n.d. (1934), 12, 8. NBC: Box 26, Folder 39.

Ib. National-Local Tensions Within the Networks

While the large chain broadcasters used discourses of negative localism to blame unaffiliated local stations for "bad" radio and positive localism to claim to be the savior of local radio through their network affiliates, this rhetorical posture was less adequate in helping the networks conduct internal business. In fact, the network radio business was full of competing national and local interests that employees throughout the system were required to negotiate daily in the course of their jobs. The truth of the local-national relationship was that the interests of the affiliates—including the networks' O&Os—were in constant tension with the needs of the chains. A reflexive anti-localism was not helpful in navigating these tensions, nor was an overly zealous commitment to affirmative localism despite the money to be made from local programming on the O&Os and the external political advantage to be gained from supporting positive localism. Instead, a more flexible and situationally specific attitude toward the national-local relationship was called for: cede too much power to the local, and the national network business would suffer; privilege the national too much, and the O&O profits would go down, local affiliated stations would rebel, and the political clouds would possibly darken. In that sense, as the chains strove to establish a lucrative and truly national system, one of the greatest imperatives was, essentially, getting the local under control within network operations.

One of the most important of these national-local tensions that the networks had to negotiate, especially once the question of synchronization was off the table, was the question of how fast to expand the network and through which affiliates. Although the major networks today have affiliates or O&Os in nearly every large- and medium-sized market, this strategy was undesirable in the 1920s and 1930s for both technical and economic reasons. As Socolow explains in his work on the growth of national networking, networks achieved interconnection by

leasing dedicated telephone lines from AT&T to send their programs to affiliates, rather than using synchronization or short-wave retransmission to cover the country. The phone-wire system had the advantages of reliability and quality, but it was extremely expensive; as both Socolow and Michele Hilmes have pointed out, it had the added advantage of reducing competition, since the enormous expenses for line charges inhibited the growth of additional networks.²⁹ This expense was also the key drawback to interconnection: hooking up a remote affiliate could easily add tens of thousands of dollars to the networks' bills, especially prior to an FCC-mandated rate reduction on phone lines in 1936. If that remote station was not one that national advertisers were especially interested in, it could be difficult to make the addition of new affiliates cost-effective. For that reason, the networks would not even consider affiliating with FRC-designated "local" stations, since the low power and nosebleed wavelengths of these stations made them unattractive to sponsors, who of course wanted the strongest possible signal and the widest possible reach for their money.³⁰ This financial structure also discouraged the growth of national radio in the West, where wire-miles could be long and market sizes small.³¹ Although the South was somewhat more geographically compact, the relatively small size of urban centers there and the low level of radio ownership, as well as cultural differences that I

²⁹ Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 3-4; Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 29. NBC and CBS did face competition from various regional networks, most notably the Yankee network in New England and the Don Lee network on the West Coast, and less lucrative regional networks continued to arise throughout the country during the 1930s. Nonetheless, only one national network, Mutual, ever emerged as a serious challenger to the hegemony of NBC and CBS prior to the creation of ABC.

³⁰ See for example "Re Docket #739, Carl S. Wheeler." FRC Minutes: Box 5, "6/9/30 #225"; see also Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth," 32.

³¹ As an example, the 1924 Democratic and National conventions were carried on radio, but not heard west of the Missouri due to the prohibitively expensive line charges. "Coast-to-Coast Radio System Uses Miles of Telephone Wire," *New York Times* (27 July 1924): XX15. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (3 March 2006).

will return to below, also discouraged the networks from adding a proportionate number of affiliates to the network in that region.³²

The truth was, however, that the networks hardly needed a local presence in every market. One key reason for this was the emphasis on primetime, a result of both economic and technological factors. As Jennifer Hyland Wang has shown, the networks were extremely slow to sell a significant amount of commercial airtime during the day, a result of advertiser mistrust of the new medium as well as broadcasters' own sense of what radio should be and how it should develop. This made network programming much more profitable during the evening hours: until the early 1930s, national sponsors were less reluctant to associate themselves with "prestige" programs aimed at a male and family audience in the evenings than they were with daytime shows aimed at housewives.³³ Listener habits, too, encouraged the chains to emphasize primetime; as one Shreveport broadcaster noted, "Listeners tune in the local stations during the day and early evening hours and tune to the higher powered stations over the country during the later hours for chain programs."³⁴ This economic condition coincided with a natural one: As it happens, the physics of skywave propagation allow radio signals that are absorbed by the atmosphere during the day to bounce off the atmosphere and return to earth at night, hundreds or even thousands of miles away. Although skywave signals are less reliable and more prone to static than groundwaves, this meant that just a few stations could cover most of the country with

³² Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 9.

³³ Jennifer Hyland Wang, "Convenient Fictions: The Construction of the Daytime Broadcast Audience, 1927-1960" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2006). Wang's study is a dissertation-length discussion of the growth of daytime network programming, with a special emphasis on the role of gender. See also Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), especially the chapter on "Under Cover of Daytime."

³⁴ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Robert M. Dean, Dockets 1406 and 1288, and G. A. Houseman, Docket 1422." FRC Minutes: Box 16, "4/1/32 #520."

some degree of consistency after sunset—a good thing for listeners since, as previously noted, more than half of the country had no groundwave radio coverage whatsoever in the 1930s.³⁵

Thanks to this confluence of factors, the time during which the networks were most interested in gaining broad coverage (and when listenership was at its peak) was also the time that any given station could reach the farthest, most of the year. Add to that the fact that the network shows were usually available on clear channels, i.e. on easier-to-tune and interference-free frequencies, and the result was that most listeners in the densely populated East and Midwest could reliably pick up NBC and CBS even if there was no affiliate in the nearest big town (see Figure 1). This considerably reduced pressure on the networks to establish a local presence in all but the top markets in the country well into the 1930s.³⁶

For those markets that the networks did enter through affiliation, economics were often not the only consideration at stake, and the "national" networks frequently found themselves forced to negotiate "local" political relationships. Since institutional political power was largely in the hands of representatives of the traditional local middle class until 1934, broadcasters were

³⁵ See also Sydney W. Head, Christopher H. Sterling, and Lemuel B. Schofield, *Broadcasting in America: A Survey of Electronic Media*, 7th ed, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 122. The continued absence of groundwave signals in much of the U.S.—well into the 1940s—would have important effects in the growth of American media following World War II, especially in the way that the FCC tackled problems of license allocation for television. See John Stevenson Armstrong, "Localism, Community, and Commercial Television, 1948-1960: A Value Analysis" (Ph. D. diss., University of Utah, 2002).

³⁶ The networks were, of course, focused on providing "mass coverage in the population and trading centers of the country," enabling them to sell both daytime and highly reliable evening service in the most lucrative markets. This coverage, as Alexander Russo points out, enabled the networks to position themselves as "national" institutions, even if their "rhetoric of universal service outstripped [their] actual practices." Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth," 26.

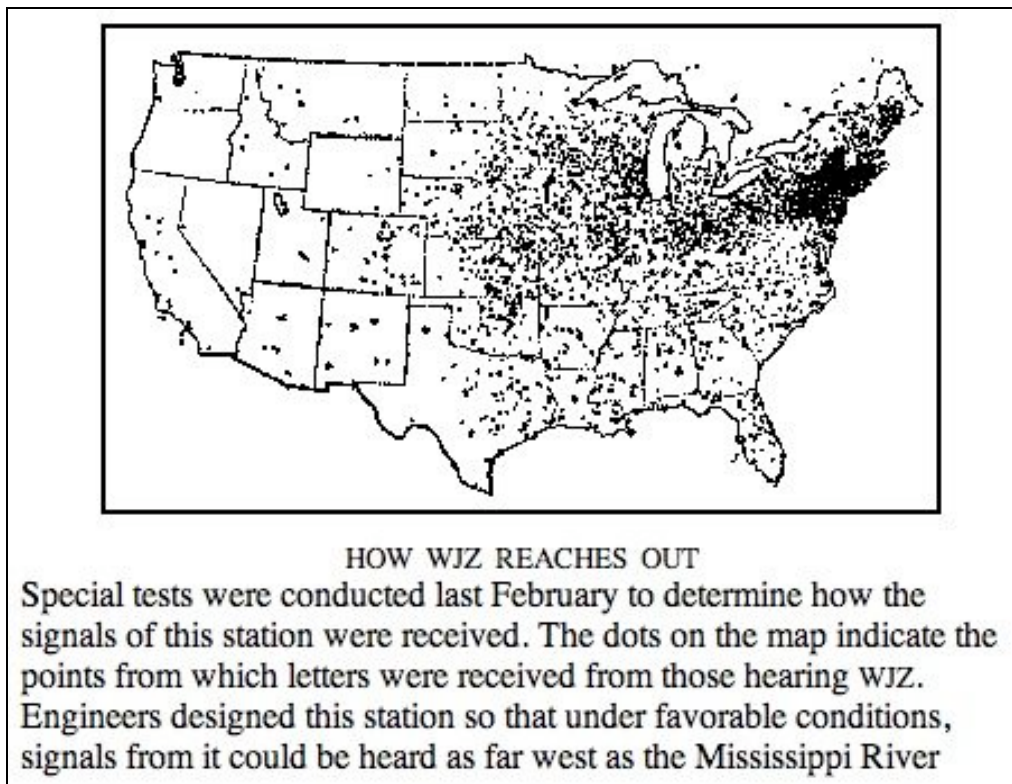


Figure 1: The potential reach of a single powerful station in the lucrative evening hours mitigated against networks affiliating with local stations in every market. Source: Austin C. Lescarboura, "How Much It Costs to Broadcast," *Radio Broadcast* Sep. 1926: 371. Reprinted at earlyradiohistory.us.

particularly wary of ignoring local Congressmen and the wishes of their constituents.³⁷ So, for example, NBC added the unpromising markets of Fargo and Bismarck to the network in 1931 only under pressure from North Dakota's congressional delegation, backed by the Governor, several State Supreme Court justices, the state legislature, and a petition drive that netted fifty thousand signatures.³⁸ An even more personal instance of local political pressure driving

³⁷ NBC even had a policy of allowing members of Congress to use the airwaves "at anytime they choose upon any subject they select," a policy that risked internal friction and external grief when a Congressman such as Huey P. Long requested time. F. M. Russell to R. C. Patterson, 13 February 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 52.

³⁸ "Two North Dakota Broadcasters Join the National Radio Network," *New York Times* (8 March 1931): 134. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (5 January 2005). To put the public

network decisions occurred in 1933, when NBC considered terminating its affiliations with stations in Butte and Billings, Montana. These stations were difficult to sell to sponsors, and keeping them on the network was a money-losing proposition for the company to the tune of between \$46,000 and \$60,000 a year. Furthermore, the Butte station's owner, Edward Craney, was a long-standing thorn in the network's side, constantly arguing with NBC over clearances, fees, and other aspects of the network-affiliate relationship. "If the political angle can be satisfactorily handled," read a memo from NBC's manager of station relations, "I am prepared to recommend the discontinuance of service to Butte and Billings effective May 1st, 1933." Another executive echoed the delicacy of the political situation: "There may be great political value in the maintenance of this service and in no event should it be discontinued until Mr. Aylesworth and possibly Mr. Russell have been consulted."³⁹ But as it turned out, the political angle proved critical: Craney was a personal friend of powerful Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler, who even without that private connection was unlikely to welcome the complete removal of his state from the NBC lineup. Sure enough, Wheeler gently but firmly put the screws to NBC, writing to Merlin Aylesworth: "[T]he situation in Montana is critical. The radio programs which they have received, have been a godsend to them in this time of depression. ... I hope that you will see your way clear to help out in this situation."⁴⁰ In the context of ongoing federal scrutiny of and pressure on broadcasters, Aylesworth appears to have had little choice but to try to work out a solution. NBC ended up offering Butte a slightly better deal on

demand for network radio in North Dakota in perspective, the petition drive gathered signatures from almost 7.5% of the state's population (the equivalent of, say, two and a half million signatures in California today), in a largely rural state whose largest *county* at the time had fewer than 50,000 people.

³⁹ Don E. Gilman to Richard C. Patterson, Jr., 15 March 1933, 1. NBC: Box 99, Folder 24 ("KGIR 1933-1942").

⁴⁰ Burton K. Wheeler to M. H. Aylesworth, 23 March 1933, 2. NBC: Box 99, Folder 24 ("KGIR 1933-1942").

compensation, but at the same time threatened to switch its affiliation to a station in Great Falls if Craney refused to accept its offer—effectively keeping the Butte station in line while giving Wheeler enough political cover to remove Craney's protection.⁴¹ Although NBC continued to lose money on both stations, Montana listeners kept their network service and NBC stayed on Wheeler's good side in Washington.⁴²

When it came to their affiliates, the networks also had to contend with the fact that there was often more money to be earned—by both individual affiliated stations and the networks through their O&Os—by exploiting local cultural differences, local economies, and local relationships than there was in producing and broadcasting national network programs. Both Socolow and Russo have detailed the frequent clashes between networks and local stations, most notably the problem of obtaining clearances for network shows. Briefly, the key source of conflict was that affiliates could usually sell their time to local or even national sponsors for more money than the networks could afford to pay them for clearing (i.e. carrying) a given program. This made it difficult for the networks to secure local airtime on affiliated stations for prospective national sponsors. Especially in the earlier days of NBC and CBS, before they tightened their contracts with affiliates to gain more control over each station's programming decisions, it was a constant struggle getting affiliates to actually air the program for which the sponsor had paid. As the schedules began to fill up in the 1930s and affiliates had more opportunities to sell time to local sponsors, it also became more difficult for the networks to find a time slot that was open on enough stations within a reasonable time frame to interest national advertisers.

⁴¹ Donald Withycomb to E. B. Craney, 25 April 1933. NBC: Box 99, Folder 24 ("KGIR 1933-1942").

⁴² Donald Withycomb to Richard C. Patterson, Jr., 26 April 1933. NBC: Box 99, Folder 24 ("KGIR 1933-1942").

In the other direction, sponsors often did not want to pay for the entire network, avoiding purchasing smaller markets when they could and instead preferring to buy time on "split networks," that is, on only some of the network's affiliated stations. National advertisers (and, often, local affiliates) appreciated split networking, but the practice drove network executives crazy. Although such sales were often the best that NBC and CBS could do under the depressed conditions of the early 1930s, split networking was inefficient for the chains, forcing them to operate and manage various sub-networks rather than one streamlined national network; on any given evening, three different NBC Red affiliates in three different cities could be airing three different programs at the same time.⁴³ As Russo points out, this "did not fit with the NBC [and] CBS image of unified national service."⁴⁴ Socolow adds that such economic and contractual issues slowed the growth of the networks to the point that it is misleading to talk about truly national radio until well into the 1930s.⁴⁵ Split networking, in addition to adding friction to sponsor-network negotiations, also introduced another source of conflict with affiliates. For localities that were routinely left out of sponsors' marketing plans, the practice meant that those affiliates could not offer (and get paid for) certain network shows that their audiences might be interested in. For the markets that were of greater interest to advertisers, split networking was a boon and encouraged programming more closely tailored to their area, but from the networks' point of view this gave the affiliate too much leverage over the network as a whole.⁴⁶

⁴³ Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 92.

⁴⁴ Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth," 28.

⁴⁵ Socolow, "To Network a Nation," especially Chapter Two.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

Split networking was not the only conflict between the local and national in network operation; other trouble spots included dual affiliations, the handling of spot advertisements, and issues of rebroadcasting consent. Dual affiliations occurred when a station obtained programming from multiple competing sources; Russo cites the example of one station that was affiliated with three different networks as late as 1937.⁴⁷ Spot announcements were another regular source of tension as local stations tried to sell quick announcements to local sponsors before and after popular network shows or network sustaining programming, potentially confusing audiences about who was paying for the show and thereby irritating both the network and its national sponsors. As detailed at length by Russo, the struggle over spot announcements is a fascinating chapter of radio history, developing its own terminology of "hitchhikers," "cowcatchers," and the like, and coming to resemble a virtual arms race as networks tried different strategies to prevent local spot announcements while stations continued to find ways around the networks' roadblocks.⁴⁸ Finally, the issue of rebroadcasting consent concerned the unauthorized re-airing of network programs on non-affiliated stations, often with the commercial announcements cut out and the program re-sold to a local sponsor—an obvious violation of network interests that was nonetheless not always easy to prevent.⁴⁹

As such issues illustrate, networks and their local affiliates were constantly at odds, with structures of local radio requiring the chains to modify or subordinate their national ambitions. Even the networks' owned-and-operated stations were perpetually tempted to privilege local

⁴⁷ Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth," 20.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter Three.

⁴⁹ F. M. Russell to R. C. Patterson, 22 May 1935. NBC: Box 91, Folder 41.

interests, especially local commercial business, over national network shows. Socolow called the network-affiliate relationship "symbiotic,"⁵⁰ but that term might imply a more harmonious situation than was actually the case; as Russo put it, "Neither mutually beneficial cooperation nor one-sided dominance, the relationship between stations and networks was often one of conflict. Stations recognized that their interests and that of the networks did not always coincide."⁵¹

Socolow notes that these tensions were somewhat suppressed in the period before 1934, since the ravaged economy made cooperation financially advisable, but the larger point is that these were foundational, structural conflicts between national and local structures. While discourses of positive localism could provide external political cover for network expansion, they may have even exacerbated internal struggles between the chains and their affiliates by empowering the local at the expense of national radio and creating expectations of continued "network-quality" local programming. Indeed, in light of all the pro-localist rhetoric emerging from network mouthpieces, it is worth pointing out that, whenever the chains were able to exercise their will over their affiliates, local programming stood little chance if there was a national commercial program to be sold. The networks would play up, for political gain, the "innumerable such instances ... where the local station exercises its proper right to operate in the public interest by giving priority to local events where, from the local point of view, they transcend in importance" network shows.⁵² But in everyday decision-making, the networks did

⁵⁰ Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 91.

⁵¹ Russo, "Roots of Radio's Rebirth," 22.

⁵² "The National Broadcasting Company's Programs and Policies," 8 December 1936, 9. NBC: Box 92, Folder 43 (Continuity Acceptance).

everything they could to discourage local pre-emption. A sense of actual network attitudes and practices, at least as they stood in the mid-1930s, can be gleaned from a 1935 NBC memo detailing its affiliate relationships. In the case of WIBA in Madison, WI, for example, the memo noted that the station was "100% cooperative" with the network, but that did not win WIBA the right to optimize service to its local market: "This station has requested permission to carry local basketball games which fall in network optional time, but we have of course, refused their request." WTMJ in Milwaukee made a similar request and was similarly denied—"of course."⁵³ For all the rhetoric of how the networks were respectful of affirmative localism and encouraged stations to create and foster local identities, critics were not imagining things when they noted the gradual disappearance of local shows or the relentless encroachment of national programming at the apparent expense of local origination as the 1930s progressed.

It is easy to see how independently owned stations would have little loyalty to the network with which they were affiliated, but even within the network and its O&Os, keeping the local under control required constant negotiation, detailed attention, and vigilance. For example, local rivalries could be fierce, and when a local O&O got scooped or outperformed by a competitor, internal memos often flew at the national level as well. On the one hand, then, stations were urged to perform effectively against the local competition in their market, requiring a greater degree of independence from the network when it came to programming decisions. On the other hand, there was the perpetual question of exactly how "local" a network station should be, and at what cost to national control by the network, defined in terms of a national purpose and a national image. In balancing the competing demands of the national networks and their local properties, the chains continually found themselves forced to attend to local issues and iron

⁵³ R. M. Brophy to R. C. Patterson, Jr., 30 November 1935, 10. NBC: Box 99, Folder 27 ("KGW 1933-1941").

out unwanted local problems, a source of constant irritation that led executives to assert the relative efficiency and orderliness of the "national." As NBC's Vice President for Programming, John Royal, groused, "[T]here are so many local political angles, that the National Broadcasting Company should not be put in the position of having to take sides in local problems."⁵⁴ In other words, the reflex was to bypass the local wherever possible in favor of national operation. In Boston, for example, the NBC O&O got caught between rival local factions of the American Legion, leading Royal to insist on only working with the Legion's national office rather than local branches from then on.⁵⁵ On the topic of airing police reports, a popular local feature in many markets, Royal warned against providing this type of programming altogether: "The police angle is one that lends itself to a lot of embarrassment and difficulties if we participate in it."⁵⁶ When it came to perhaps the touchiest subject of all, religion, NBC quickly learned not to work with local churches or individual religious figures, producing all of their religious broadcasts as sustaining programs at the national level (and only with Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish organizations); following a bit of unpleasantness with a certain radio priest, CBS soon did the same.⁵⁷ The networks were also keenly aware of stepping on the toes of local newspapers, a concern that significantly slowed the growth of national network news operations.

Often the networks' distaste for these local spat revealed tinges of the national-class discourses of anti-localism. One of the reasons that an NBC executive gave in the late 1920s for

⁵⁴ J. F. Royal to F. M. Russell, 21 February 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 52.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ J. F. Royal to Niles Trammell, 4 January 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 37.

⁵⁷ J. F. Royal to F. M. Russell, 21 February 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 52; Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002): 126. Note that many of the network's O&Os continued to produce sustaining religious program at the local level for their own audiences, but these were generally not picked up by the network for national distribution.

avoiding network news was a distaste for pandering to local imbecility the way that the local papers, in his opinion, were required to do; as he put it, "Newspapers may, and most of them of necessity do, satisfy the morbid cravings of American moronia; radio networks cannot afford to admit that moronia exists."⁵⁸ John Royal in particular seemed to have a strong aversion to what he perceived as an undignified localism, as when he decided that broadcasting announcements of lost dogs and missing automobiles over the O&Os was taking local service too far: "I'll be damned if we are going to be a lost and found department."⁵⁹ He also occasionally expressed a distinctly national-class bias against the bush-league local affiliates he was forced to deal with. For instance, when a Portland, Maine station flubbed a program that was going out over the network, Royal was quick to frame the incident in terms of incompetent local amateurs who were in over their heads: "Personally, I think we should not permit this local handling of important network programs.... What really happened is that they had so much stage fright because they were doing a program for the network, that the announcer forgot to push eight or nine buttons."⁶⁰ But as in my discussion of the national-class attitudes among Federal Radio Commissioners, what mattered more than individual class biases was positionality: network employees were trained to think "nationally" because they were in the "national" radio business, and if this approach occasionally fit uneasily with the multifarious local elements of network structure, that was simply part of what it meant to be a "national" company.

⁵⁸ G. W. Johnstone, "News Broadcasts," n.d. (1928?). NBC: Box 90, Folder 1. In this context, it is worth remembering an article mentioned in Chapter One that said the main obstacle to a "modern" newspaper was an excess of localism. "The Modern Newspaper," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, (5 December 1897): 32. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849-1985)*, ProQuest (10 March 2006).

⁵⁹ J. F. Royal to F. M. Russell, 21 February 1934. Box 90, Folder 52.

⁶⁰ J. F. Royal to Niles Trammell, 9 September 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 40.

The perceived greater importance of the "national" and of doing "national" work, as reflected in Royal's frequent anti-localist pronouncements, also affected network policy; indeed, a recurring theme in network internal correspondence is the attempt to police an imagined national-local divide. For example, when Director of Sales Roy Witmer raised a question about the possibility of purely West Coast accounts for NBC, Chicago Vice-President Niles Trammell chided him for thinking too locally, urging Witmer to look at network policy "not through the eyes of A Century of Progress nor aboard a canoe in the Mississippi River but from the national viewpoint." Pointing out that NBC doesn't allow "purely Cleveland, purely Boston, purely Pittsburgh" accounts, Trammell argued that the West Coast should get no more special treatment than "any other community in which we are located and organized to handle local and sectional business."⁶¹ At other times, Trammell himself came in for similar chiding from John Royal. When Trammell complained in 1934 about losing significant sympathy among listeners in Chicago by running national commercial programs rather than local baseball on NBC's O&O there, Royal reminded him to put the network first, adding, "Whether or not we lose good-will locally is beside the point."⁶² There was also the quotidian challenge of managing a far-flung and difficult business enterprise, where simply attempting to iron out a standard rule on spot announcements among the O&Os could produce significant back-and-forth among multiple executives, plus more headaches in trying to enforce it.⁶³ A typical indicator of this unruliness came from Judith Waller, who argued, "Until we can put our own house in order, in regard to our own owned and operated stations, we cannot very well ask for cooperation from affiliated

⁶¹ Niles Trammell to R.C. Witmer, 11 October 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 42.

⁶² J. F. Royal to Niles Trammell, 26 March 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 37.

⁶³ Niles Trammell to J. F. Royal, 16 August 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 40.

stations."⁶⁴ At one point in 1935 the difficulty of creating and maintaining consistent national policies appeared so troublesome that Bertha Brainard, following a consultant's advice, recommended the establishment of a national supervisory board to formulate policy across the network and avoid local deviations and innovations altogether.⁶⁵

Although the imperative to "think nationally" often won the day, this was not always the case. The tension between the national and the local could not merely be wished or administrated away, nor could it always be resolved by bypassing the local in order to concentrate decisions and activities at the national level, nor could it always be effectively contained by more attention to the local. Again, the tension was structural: The real labor occurred in negotiating the economic and political dimensions of being in both the "local" and "national" broadcasting business. Sometimes this was on the level of a minor local irritant. In Denver, for example, the long-time station manager of KOA, Freeman Talbot, was so despised by the owner of the *Denver Post* that the network found it was hurting the station's publicity in that market. In an effort to secure better cooperation with the paper, NBC finally replaced him, only to find their new man rejected by the rest of the local business community, still loyal to Talbot.⁶⁶ But at other times, the conflict revealed fundamental divergences in the company's mission and priorities. A good example of this occurred in 1935 when several NBC executives attempted to establish a special network of O&Os within the larger national network during "station time" slots (i.e. time periods that stations were allowed to program themselves). The idea would have been to sell station time on these NBC-owned stations as a package to national

⁶⁴ Judith Waller to John F. Royal, 3 November 1936, 2. NBC: Box 92, Folder 6.

⁶⁵ Bertha Brainard to Alfred H. Morton, 30 April 1935. NBC: Box 42, Folder 21.

⁶⁶ Niles Trammell to R.C. Patterson, Jr., 16 March 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 37; Gene O'Fallon to F. M. Russell, 10 December 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 54.

sponsors instead of each station scrambling for individual spot accounts on their own.

Washington, D.C. Vice President Frank M. Russell objected to the plan on the grounds of localism, arguing that filling station time with national programs would reduce the amount of time available "to be devoted to local, civic and commercial interests."⁶⁷ The tension between nationalism and localism, therefore, became *the* key sticking point in this internal struggle, and backers of the plan tried to assure Russell that local service would not be harmed by an O&O sub-network. As one executive pointed out, most of this business was sold to national sponsors on a spot-advertising basis anyway, meaning that the plan "would not interfere with important local accounts or public service broadcasts."⁶⁸ Added another supporter:

[I]n my estimation, this type of business has nothing more to do with local interests than has our network business. If, therefore, certain of the present national spot programs could be eliminated and replaced by the special network service that we are considering, I can see no objection from the standpoint of serving the local interests.⁶⁹

Russell shot the plan down with little fanfare or explanation (saying only, "It strikes me that the subject has now reached the Academic Stage"⁷⁰), and it is unclear whether he was primarily concerned with supporting strong local service or, as NBC's main representative in Washington and an important liaison with regulators and policymakers, he was more worried about the political repercussions of *not* being seen supporting strong local service. Either way, the episode illustrated the difficulty of balancing local and national interests, both internally and externally, in running the national business. In these and many other cases, the network could not easily

⁶⁷ Mark Woods to Frank Russell, 6 December 1935. NBC: Box 91, Folder 42. Note that the quotation is Woods summarizing Russell's position, not Russell speaking for himself.

⁶⁸ Edgar Kobak to Frank Russell, 6 December 1935. NBC: Box 91, Folder 42.

⁶⁹ Mark Woods to Frank Russell, 6 December 1935. NBC: Box 91, Folder 42.

⁷⁰ F. M. Russell to M. J. Woods, 20 December 1935. NBC: Box 91, Folder 42.

construct itself as "national" in opposition to the "local" without jeopardizing the structure of local O&Os and the enormous profits (and political cover) that this structure provided, nor could it always act "locally" without threatening "national" business interests. In that sense, even for the national networks it was never nationalism versus localism, but always national *and* localism *and* how do we get this contraption to run smoothly?

Importantly, the networks made great strides toward getting the local under control after 1935. As described by Socolow, they tightened their contracts with affiliates, requiring stations to clear all network programs on four-weeks notice. They also changed their rate structure for sponsors in order to discourage the purchase of split networks, and the increase in radio advertising after 1935 made such provisions easier to enforce.⁷¹ On an economic and administrative level, then, improving business conditions enabled the networks to integrate the local into a more cohesive and efficient national structure.

Part II: The Struggle to Make "Local" Culture National

If economic and administrative issues confounded easy distinctions between national and local, the local was even more difficult to control culturally, and ultimately demanded different strategies from national radio. Specifically, the effort to keep all sections of the country happy with the radio fare emerging primarily from New York and Chicago introduced another tension in both national-local relations and national-class ideology about the local. The networks were continually running into local and regional opposition to urban radio culture, from musical style to specific lyrics to the subject of jokes to general attitudes toward race, sexuality, and modernity in all its forms. In many ways, this was an unforeseen reversal of the national class's dominant

⁷¹ Socolow, "To Network a Nation," 94-112.

discourse of cultural uplift and the project of bringing "modern" American culture to local places. This enculturation process was, as described at length in Chapter One, absolutely central to national-class visions of radio throughout the 1920s. In 1922, for example, *Radio Broadcast* had assured readers that Kansans enjoyed receiving programs from New York even more than New Yorkers did: "Already one hears grumbling in the Eastern cities about the character of the programmes of certain of the big stations, so exacting and critical is the public mind in a big, conventional city. But our Western listeners are less critical of the programmes from the East."⁷² This was confirmed by a 1926 study reported in the *New York Times* concluding, based on a broad survey of rural listeners, that "farm folk, on the whole, are not prone to be fussy about the kind of entertainment they can get over the air; 18 per cent of the men and 16 per cent of their wives refuse to state a preference, because they like it all so well."⁷³ And if those simple, indiscriminating provincials failed to take to "good national radio programs" right away, they would learn to like them soon enough. *Wireless Age*, a publication backed by RCA, exhibited this optimism in praising KDKA for giving listeners "the best class of music, even if this did not meet with immediate popular demand."⁷⁴ Similarly, *Radio Broadcast* promised that high culture would ultimately win out:

After having heard announced, "The orchestra will now play, 'Dirty Face,'" about one hundred thousand times, they may welcome hearing that the Victor Talking Machine Company orchestra will play the "Ballet Music from 'Faust.'" Especially

⁷² Thomas M. Galey, "How Radio Came to Independence Kansas," *Radio Broadcast* 1, no. 3 (July 1922): 235.

⁷³ "Radio's Value on the Farm Revealed by 1200 Scouts," *New York Times* (11 April 1926) sec. 9. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2001)*, ProQuest (7 January 2004).

⁷⁴ Qtd. in Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 9.

will they welcome the announcement after they hear this music a sufficient number of times to become familiar with it.⁷⁵

Early in the broadcasting era, especially in the mid- and late-1920s, corporate stations at the top of the radio hierarchy tended to privilege European art music, including opera and classical, as well as the big-band style that Erik Barnouw called "potted palm music."⁷⁶ Conversely, they avoided "old-timey" or "hillbilly" music, which was assumed to be appreciated only by the locals out in the boonies. Furthermore, as discussed by Clifford Doerksen, it was not merely the content itself but also the presentation and cultural framing that bespoke cosmopolitan tastes and values. Announcers, for example, were urged to convey "dignity" above all else.⁷⁷ This meant speaking in hushed tones, emphasizing clear diction, avoiding an identifiable regional accent, and exuding a calm demeanor; *Radio Broadcast* declared the best announcer "one who is only slightly more human than an automaton."⁷⁸ Although Doerksen argues that the actual shows on corporate stations were often less dignified and less highbrow than broadcasters' claims and self-image would indicate, there were nonetheless clear distinctions between radio programmed according to national-class standards and radio programmed for the traditional local middle class, rural folk, and the urban working class in this early period.⁷⁹

But in the mid-1920s, as broadcasting and set ownership became more widespread, opposition to this model began to bubble up into national-class consciousness, and resistance to

⁷⁵ "Good National Radio Programs Prove 'What the Public Wants,'" *Radio Broadcast* 7, no. 1 (May 1925): 63.

⁷⁶ Qtd. in Doerksen, *American Babel*, 10.

⁷⁷ Doerksen, *American Babel*, 25.

⁷⁸ "What Sort of Fellow Should the Announcer Be?" *Radio Broadcast* 8, no. 3 (January 1926): 318.

⁷⁹ Doerksen, *American Babel*, 9-10.

the imposition of national-class culture quickly took hold in certain major publications.

Radio Age, for example, complained about this one-way cultural transfer from the cities to the provinces in 1925. While agreeing with the national class that radio could "[eliminate] sectional lines and [bring] North, South, East and West into closer relationship," the magazine nonetheless contended that "any arrangement which makes any one, or even several eastern cities, the chief source of radio entertainment is neither the best arrangement nor in the long run will it be found the most popular one."⁸⁰ A writer to *Radio Broadcast* in 1926 echoed this concern, saying he "can't see why these chain hook-ups always work one way, that is out of New York."⁸¹ Like the executive at Sears discussed at the beginning of this chapter, even the staunchest supporters of cosmopolitan radio had to recognize that non-cosmopolitan audiences were stubbornly, mysteriously clinging to their cultural tastes and preferences. The less sympathetic among boosters of national-class radio explained this as, essentially, a character flaw. A merciless piece from *Variety* describing the hillbilly even treated it as a genetic defect:

[The hillbilly is] a mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the chautauqua and the phonograph. ... [He is] of 'poor white trash' genera. The great majority, probably 95 per cent, can neither read nor write English. Theirs is a community all unto themselves. Illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons, the sing-song, nasal-twanging vocalizing of a Vernon Dalhart or a Carson Robison ... intrigues their interest.⁸²

According to this account, hillbillies cannot be culturally uplifted because they are simply powerless to resist hillbilly records. This music "hits these simple souls right under the belt," so much so that "in Knoxville is a local edict that no hill-billy song can be played ... within earshot

⁸⁰ "Radio Editorials," *Radio Age* 4, no. 4 (April 1925), 4.

⁸¹ John Wallace, "The Listeners Speak for Themselves," *Radio Broadcast* 8, no. 6 (April 1926): 670.

⁸² "'Hill-Billy' Music," *Variety* 85, no. 11 (29 December 1926): 1.

of the market-place. It has been found that as soon as a hill-billy hit is turned loose, the market merchants lose their prospects. It attracts the natives to the source of the music like flypaper." Of course, if you want to get rid of a hillbilly, just put on a "regular popular song record ... and they disperse with alacrity."⁸³

Although *Variety's* account was, one hopes, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, what was sincere was the national class's exasperation at the relative ineffectiveness of the cultural-uplift project to integrate the local into the moderns' vision of a cosmopolitan America. A slightly more polite attempt to explain this resistance to enculturation appeared in a 1927 *Radio Broadcast* article on KMA, KFNF, and other "direct advertising" stations that specialized in selling seeds to farmers and other purposes that were well outside the national-class vision of what radio should be. These "farmer" stations were not "local" in either categorization or range, but were higher-powered stations often doing millions of dollars of business with fans all over the country; nonetheless, the magazine twisted itself into a discursive pretzel to first marginalize these distasteful stations as merely "local," then acknowledge their undeniable popularity, and then finally simply discount that popularity by implicitly denying the importance of their audiences:

There is no question but that there is a field for the local broadcasting station in the service of the small local merchant. ... Evidently, in spite of the harsh dislike which we have of the direct advertising stations, we must confess that they have an audience and, as such, deserve consideration, but only in proportion to the importance of that audience.⁸⁴

Such continuing phenomena as "farmer" radio stations and the popularity of "rogue broadcasters" (in Clifford Doerksen's term) like Dr. Brinkley on KFKB and W. K. Henderson on KWKH not only revealed deep pockets of resistance to cosmopolitan culture; they cast the

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁴ "Is Direct Advertising a Service?" *Radio Broadcast* 12, no. 1 (November 1927): 16.

viability of national radio itself into doubt.⁸⁵ The chains' focus on a narrow slice of American tastes suddenly looked like "a disadvantage which has become more and more apparent to listeners of late," as *Radio News* put it in early 1928.⁸⁶ Such growing resistance to network radio grew more politically volatile after the FRC, in its first year, failed to contain the networks to the satisfaction of a more locally minded Congress. In the debates leading up to the 1928 reauthorization of the 1927 Act, numerous senators averred that, back in their home states, "the complaint is against chain broadcasting, emanating principally from New York. The people there do not want that broadcasting. They prefer the independent stations."⁸⁷ Among the effects of this perceived discontent was the Davis Amendment, requiring the Commission to take a more precise and proactive approach to evening out regional disparities in broadcast station operation. The Amendment's sponsor, Sen. Ewin Davis of Tennessee, explicitly articulated this requirement to local resistance to northeastern urban culture:

We want broadcast licenses fairly distributed in such a manner that those who desire to do so may listen to New York and chain stations when they want to, but may, when they so desire, listen to programs broadcast by stations elsewhere throughout the country, including their own zones, states, and cities.⁸⁸

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Davis Amendment ultimately did little to stymie the chains and, as implemented by the FRC, ended up hurting the cause of localism in multiple ways. But

⁸⁵ For more on farmer radio, see Smethers, J. Steven, and Lee B. Jolliffe. "Singing and Selling Seeds." *Journalism History* 26:2 (Summer 2000): 61+. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. 31 July 2005; Steve Craig, "'The Farmer's Friend': Radio Comes to Rural America, 1920-1927," *Journal of Radio Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 330-346.

⁸⁶ Charles Magee Adams, "What About the Future of Chain Broadcasting?" *Radio News* February 1928: 869-871.

⁸⁷ Sen. Sam G. Bratton, *Congressional Record*, 70th Congress, 1st Session, 22 March 1928, 5163-4.

⁸⁸ *Congressional Record*, 70th Congress, 1st Session, 2 March 1928, 3985.

whatever its failings in practice, it represented a strong rebuke to the idea that national-class culture was appropriate for and appreciated by the entire nation.⁸⁹

Predictably, this reaction was not merely external, coming from critics outside the networks, but also internal as affiliate stations (particularly in the South) complained about the network fare they were given to put on the air. In another instance of national-local tensions, for example, the NBC affiliate in Asheville, NC, wrote several letters to the network in 1935 complaining about the "putrid" sustaining programs originating from WRC in Washington and "distributed to the suffering listeners of the southeastern group stations." The station reserved special scorn for the show *Doctor of the Blues*, whose musical choices and host were both found wanting, perhaps a reflection of persistent hostility toward "race music," particularly in the South. Asheville's management was especially irate because this show aired on Sunday evenings, so not only were the musical choices questionable for that slot, but the station was dependent on network sustaining programs: stations throughout the South were loathe to put on commercial programs on Sundays due to local religious sensitivities about conducting commerce on the Sabbath.⁹⁰

IIa. Localizing the National and Nationalizing the Local

For self-proclaimed "national" radio, the continued perception of resistance to urbanized network culture and the apparent failure of such programming to overcome the perpetuation of regional and local cultural differences, as had been predicted in the early days of radio, presented

⁸⁹ For more on the Davis Amendment, see Jennifer M. Proffitt and Michael Brown, "Regulating the Radio Monopoly: Ewin Davis and his Legislative Debates, 1923-1928," *Journal of Radio Studies* 11, no. 1 (2004), 100-115; Fritz Messere, "The Davis Amendment and the Federal Radio Act of 1927: Evaluating External Pressures in Policymaking," Unpublished paper delivered at the Broadcast Education Association Annual Convention, 19 April 2001, Las Vegas, Nev.

⁹⁰ Don S. Elias to Frank Mason, 8 April 1935. NBC: Box 91, Folder 40.

a significant challenge. Despite national-class prejudices, the networks saw themselves forced to respond to—rather than continue to attempt to "improve"—varying cultural standards across the country. For instance, they would change song lyrics to avoid offending local sensitivities, or just ban a song entirely, such as "Sing Something Simple," which was blacklisted due to the line "Thank God it's simple" for fear of outraging religious conservatives in the South.⁹¹ At least one song, "Little Red Riding Hood," had to be pulled from record stores after the networks stopped programming it in response to southern complaints.⁹² Such self-policing made no one happy. Treading gingerly on local sensitivities was not quite enough to give conservative critics a sense of control over their culture, while fans of network fare disliked having the limits of their culture dictated by the most illiberal voices in the country. As *Variety* explained in 1930, because of the chains, cosmopolitans everywhere only got to hear content that was appropriate in the view of the country's most backward "local islands":

Radio humor cannot be suggestive, and one of the airdom's most fearful areas is what is known as the 'Bible Belt.' That's somewhere around Kansas, where one can't even smoke on the street. Radio is strong in such spots and what humor it uses has got to fit in there, as well as elsewhere. It is hinted [that] radio figures a wee bit differently on morality around metropolitan centers like New York and Chicago. Compared to the wide area covered by air, these spots have to stick to the viewpoint of the local islands because of network hookup.⁹³

Suddenly, instead of modernizing the local, it appeared that network radio was threatening to impose "pre-modern" standards on the national—not what the national class had in mind. Such tensions were, of course, nothing new: regional (in particular Southern) prejudices and sensitivities regarding such issues as race and religion were one of the primary sources of

⁹¹ "One Crank Can Induce NBC to Bar Pop Song Lyric Okay Elsewhere," *Variety* 1 April 1931: 1, 62.

⁹² "'Raw' Song Ordered Off Air By Southern Radio Stations," *Variety* 85, no. 12 (5 Jan. 1927): 1, 27.

⁹³ "Radio Can't Get Too Hot," *Variety* 29 October 1930: 1.

national-class animosity toward the "villatic" mind in the first place.⁹⁴ But although film and vaudeville had frequently run into similar issues, navigating local censorship boards and other controls on content, several features of radio exacerbated the problem: as discussed in Chapter Two, radio was generally live and unreviewable, it trafficked in controversial areas of music and verbal humor in ways that film was just beginning to do, and it entered more-or-less unbidden into the home, blurring long-standing definitions of public and private as well as evading traditional controls on the character of material that crossed the familial threshold.

Perhaps most problematically for the specific case of network fare, audiences and local authorities were—in a way that was profoundly new—mostly shut out of the process of determining their culture when it came to national radio. In other words, in addition to generalized anxiety about content, network radio undermined or circumvented the ability of the traditional local middle class to impose cultural standards for their locality—a significant challenge to their cultural power. The mail could be scanned and censored locally, bawdy stage shows shut down by local police, and offensive film scenes snipped out of the print at the local movie theater, but network radio was significantly more impervious to local control. Worse still, responsibility for content on network radio was nominally clear—it was up to the local licensee—but in practice that responsibility was repeatedly deferred away from local control. In the case of a typical commercial network program, for example, sponsors actually produced the show, the networks actually fed that programming to the local stations, and the FRC—who ultimately passed judgment on whether any given content was punishable—had almost no legal authority over networks or sponsors. This created a kind of "responsibility gap" at the local level whereby the individual network affiliate, accountable to local listeners (which in practice usually

⁹⁴ "On Hating the Provinces," *The Nation* 111, no. 2889 (17 November 1920): 550.

meant the local elites), ostensibly carried full responsibility for content, but in practice had little say over network programming. The result was, as in the case of Hollywood film, a widespread sense of a foreign cultural invasion from the decadent and immoral cities and a real loss of cultural authority for the traditional local middle class.

It is important to note that the perception of resistance to "modern" urban culture may have been more potent than the reality, and even the language of resistance masks ambivalences and situational responses. For instance, resistance to jazz did not necessarily mean resistance to *Amos 'n' Andy*, and concern about bawdy humor did not necessarily mean concern about Rudy Vallee. Furthermore, Americans who felt largely excluded by national-class discourses of sophisticated cosmopolitanism were not, by dint of their exclusion, themselves immune to projections and stereotypes about urban culture that operated to construct a class identity rather than describe real distinctions. In particular, urban-rural and modern-local dichotomies masked generational, racial, class, and gender divides that make it difficult to measure the kinds of identifications and ideological shifts that were taking place when listeners tuned certain programs in or out. For example, it is hard to single out just one axis of difference in the following complaint, sent to *Radio Broadcast* in 1927, which managed to invoke distinctions of class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and region, all in just three short lines: "[J]ust what do you mean by high class programmes? Some cigarette smoking female dago or Russian warbling in upper C till they drive all the dogs in the neighborhood crazy? If that is your idea of a high class programme ... just keep them in the cultured and protected east, will you?"⁹⁵ Furthermore, different scholars emphasize different audience reactions at different times, further complicating a clear understanding of what kinds of network fare predominated and how that fare was

⁹⁵ Qtd. in "Radio Freedom of Speech Impossible," *Radio Broadcast* 11, no. 3 (July 1927): 138-9.

received by differently socially positioned listeners at different locales and at different cultural moments. For example, Michael Socolow argues that objections to chain broadcasting diminished after 1930 due to the chains' shift in emphasis from music to drama and comedy,⁹⁶ while Elena Razlogova finds, equally convincingly, that listener discontent with the networks was growing after 1935. But even if it is difficult to say how variously positioned listeners responded to network fare at various times, what is certain is that critics of network programming in the late 1920s and early 1930s were loud, numerous, and influential enough to require national broadcasters to pay attention.

Iib. Aesthetic Localism, Translocal Localism

Faced with such vocal hostility, the networks pursued several strategies to localize the national, that is, to make national programming palatable to what they perceived as "local" opinion. For example, as Alexander Russo describes at length, they went into the transcription business, allowing individual local stations to carry network and other programming that the stations considered suitable for their particular audiences, with spot announcements and local contextual material providing a local inflection for nationally distributed shows. A perhaps more significant shift was toward the production of what Hal Barron identifies as a transregional local identity. By this he means (put into the terms of this study) the supra-local circulation of discourses that use an aesthetic of positive localism to posit shared "local" values of simplicity,

⁹⁶ Michael Socolow, "The Single-Wavelength Debate: Synchronous Broadcasting and the Commercial Radio Networks in the United States, 1926-1932," *Technology and Culture*, forthcoming.

neighborliness, independence, and face-to-face communication while advancing national economic and cultural structures.⁹⁷

This kind of "translocal localism" was in fact nothing new by the time of the network radio era. Among its most visible incarnations, rural and small-town newspapers had long used syndicated material to construct a generic "local" identity for themselves, running nationally-distributed cartoons and columns proclaiming the virtues of "your local community" or "your hometown" (see for example Figure 2, p. 291). In a particularly ironic iteration of this phenomenon, small-town presses around the country ran mass-produced ads for civic boosterism, prepared by syndicates, that urged readers to "buy local." But although the discourse was well established by the mid-1920s, large broadcasters were slow to draw on its power, in part for the several reasons I have been examining in this study: the articulation of radio to a national vision of modernity; the urban, cosmopolitan desires and prejudices of those who ran and regulated national radio; the equation of socially responsible programming with national-class norms of propriety, decorum, and taste; etc. Over time, however, national programming increasingly drew on an aesthetic of localism to overcome resistance to urban culture, even as it continued to advance national economic and institutional structures.

"Local" broadcasters had been telling the national broadcasters for years how to reach the mass audience, urging them to adopt the folksy, friendly banter of a Henry Field on KMA or the exuberant hucksterism of a Nils Thor Granlund (better known as "NTG") on WHN. "People don't care about gentle, modest talk," argued William K. Henderson, the notorious populist radio personality who ran Shreveport's KWKH, "They want it strong."⁹⁸ As for the cultural selections

⁹⁷ Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 225.

⁹⁸ "KWKH Has Real Personality," *Radio Digest* 23, no. 6 (October 1928): 60.



Figure 2: Syndicated cartoons and other features constructed a generic, translocal "local" identity for hundreds of localities around the country. Source: *Cuba City News-Herald* (Cuba City, WI), 8 Feb. 1924, 8.

themselves, "farmer radio" pioneer Henry Field described his station's style to the assembled corporate broadcasters at the Third Radio Conference in 1924, "We have used the home type of music and program at our station, ... and we find that there's a very big demand, which a great many do not suspect, for simple, wholesome, old-fashioned, home type of music." Implicitly rebuking national-class programming, he urged his colleagues to try a little more of his brand of positive localism in their broadcasts: "Now, I am admittedly a small town man, live on a farm, and expect to die there, and my tastes might be expected to run that way. But I find that a

surprisingly large number of listeners of all classes feel very tired of cabaret music, and would like to have a little more of the old home-town stuff."⁹⁹

Although national-class publications like *The Nation* continued to mock figures like Field for "talking familiarly to the folks,"¹⁰⁰ the large broadcasters in the early 1930s increasingly began taking Field's advice, abandoning potted-palm programming for more "home-town stuff," and to great success. In large part this shift was the result of economic considerations: sponsors may have desired to associate their products with prestige and class, but they also wanted to reach the largest possible pool of potential consumers. Thus audiences formerly known as "Ladies and Gentleman" were increasingly addressed as "Friends," as in "Friends, the products of General Petroleum are just as dependable as the good, honest, home folks whom you have just heard in *Memory Lane*."¹⁰¹ Advertising trade journals and the networks' own promotional literature from the late 1920s and early 1930s are full of admonishments to sponsors to avoid going too highbrow in their programs. One anonymous broadcaster boasted to *Broadcast Advertising* in 1932, "We have eliminated the 'high-hat-ism' which radio once knew," while another a few years later in *Variety* advised his colleagues to "[develop] original program ideas through broadcasts having 'Main Street' appeal."¹⁰² Similarly, by 1935 an NBC pamphlet urged sponsors to follow the advice of a former BBC director of talks:

⁹⁹ Henry Field in the "Report of Proceedings of Sub-Committee No. 3," Third Radio Conference, 6 October 1924, 3-4. Hoover Papers: Box 496, Folder "Radio: Conferences--National Third (Proceedings)."

¹⁰⁰ Harry Hansen, "Some Meditations on the Radio," *The Nation* 120, no. 3116 (3 March 1925): 324-325.

¹⁰¹ *Memory Lane* (Brochure), October 1931, qtd. in Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 103.

¹⁰² "How Can We Improve Radio? A Station-Agency Symposium," *Broadcast Advertising* April 1932: 22; "My Conception of Radio Showmanship Is --" *Variety* 26 August 1936: 46.

[T]he key to successful broadcasting is personality, -- and personality as seen not from the point of view of the sophisticated listener but from the point of view of the average man and woman, who is suspicious of any trace of superiority and of anything that sounds highbrow and of any attempt at uplift or education.¹⁰³

This folksier tone became integrated into the programming as well, and a host of programs featuring small-town crossroads and general stores reached the network schedules in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Michele Hilmes discusses this phenomenon at work in shows like *Memory Lane*, *The Real Folks of Thompkins Corners*, *Smackout*, and *Lum and Abner*. These and other programs featured small-town, unpretentious folks, often doing not much more than simply acting neighborly. In some ways, they were less stories than doses of pure positive localism through the ether; as the creators of *Memory Lane* admitted, "[T]here is not enough plot to call it [a comedy]. ... Each week the audience gets glimpses of the home life of the Goshen Center folks, their simple pleasures, their squabbles, quickly made up, the 'box socials' of the Ladies Aid, the annual church fair ..."¹⁰⁴ Through shows like these, as well as the old-timey musical programs of the *Barn Dance* and *Grand Ole Opry* genre, radio in Hal Barron's words "institutionalized localistic values of homeliness and neighborliness in ways that transcended the particular community, and it helped to define a more general culture that celebrated localism without being directly tied to the culture of any one locality."¹⁰⁵ The small-town idyll these shows constructed was also free of the markers of social difference that made modern life so contentious: The "real folks" of Thompkins Corners and other denizens of the translocal local were white, presumably Protestant, and safely middle class. On radio's generic Main Street, if

¹⁰³ Hilda Matheson, qtd. in "Broadcasting--To All Homes," Vol. 1. New York: National Broadcasting Company, 1935. E. P. H. James: Box 8, Folder 5 ("NBC-Research-1935").

¹⁰⁴ H. C. Connette, qtd. in Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 103.

¹⁰⁵ Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 225.

not on actual Main Streets around the country, the status and privilege of the traditional white Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle class was never threatened by class, ethnic, or religious others.

While such shows became one of just many different genres, not all of them reacting against urban culture,¹⁰⁶ they remain a significant part of the story of localism, in part because of the tensions they reveal in the attempt to integrate the local and the modern. In particular, the genial, friendly storekeeper dispensing down-home wisdom was but a small step away from the backward local yokel who is incompetent at negotiating modern life, and as Hilmes points out, the "general store" programs that celebrated the positive localism of small-town life easily morphed into the "rube" comedies that used negative localism to mock the provincialism of the pre-modern hick. As in so many areas of national programming, keeping the local under control was easier said than done, even in the production of the local for translocal consumption.

A good example of careful national-class management of translocal localism was the program *The Real Folks of Thompkins Corners*, and a 1931 NBC promotional pamphlet for the show—entitled "Human Appeal in Broadcast Advertising"—reveals many of the tensions at work in this aesthetic shift (Figure 3, p. 295). Addressed to potential national sponsors, the pamphlet's first page was designed to mimic an Elizabethan playbill, complete with sixteenth-century grammar and orthography. The Shakespearian framing device both situated *Thompkins Corners* in fictional space and legitimated the show's localist tropes by embedding them within signifiers of quality and high art that spoke to national-class taste. It also functioned as a

¹⁰⁶ Of special note here is a figure like Fred Allen, who was able to bridge cosmopolitanism and translocal localism. For example, the opening of *Town Hall Tonight* (1935-1940), as described by Jason Loviglio, invited listeners to join a parade kicking off each program, "a radio ritual that cleverly joins quaint notions of small-town civic pride with the decidedly urbane humor of Allen and his Mighty Allen Art Players." Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxv.

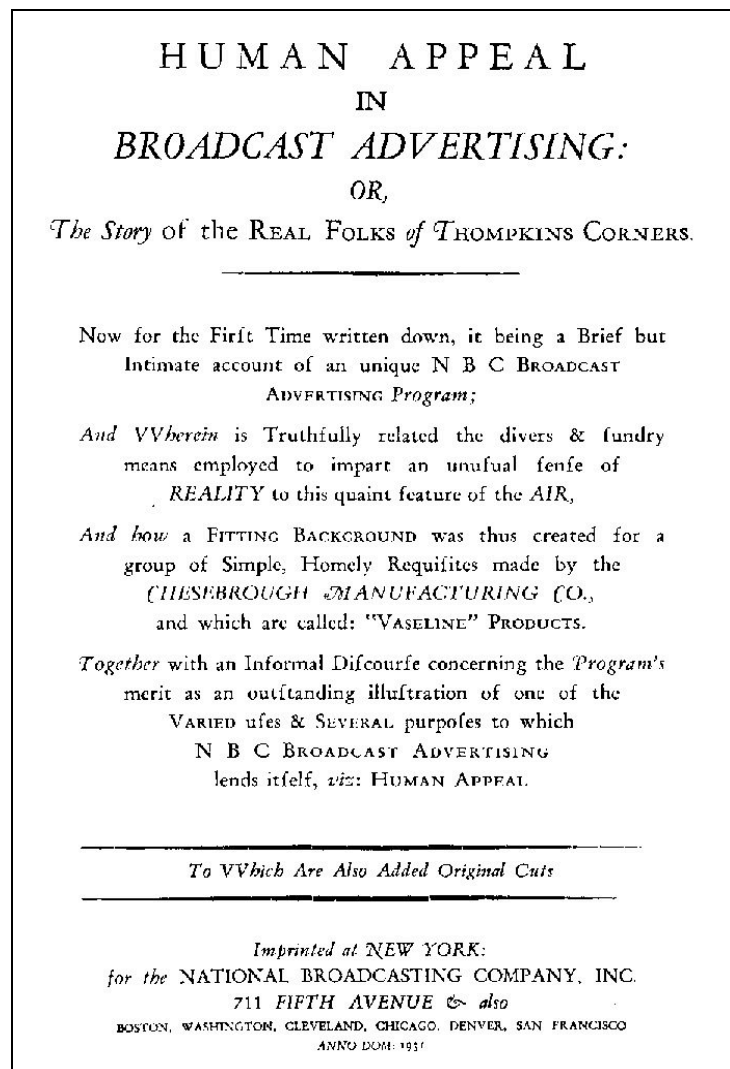


Figure 3: NBC uses conventions of high art to distance itself from the localist discourses of *Real Folks of Thompkins Corners*.

reassuring wink for its presumed urbane audience of advertising men that the localist discourses to follow were constructed for their benefit, ensuring that they were in on the joke.

The next section of the pamphlet was written in the voice of the residents of Thompkins Corners themselves and acted as ventriloquist for their local perspective:

Thompkins Corners! There's a name for you! Something definitely possessive, with a naive pride in it. ... Maybe some city folks who have had a smattering of "book learnin'" would call it a "hick" town, with a bit of disdainfully significant emphasis on the "hick" part. ... There's often a lot of good, honest shrewdness and

frankness of purpose to be found in a place like Thompkins Corners. They have plenty of time up here to think things over. And sometimes, you can gather bits of pretty sound advice and mighty practical philosophy from their talk.¹⁰⁷

This passage was obviously written by a network PR person, but in the voice of a local resident of Thompkins Corners describing how he thinks his town would be viewed by "city folks" such as, say, national ad men. He acknowledges their class prejudices, but then asserts the value of local culture despite its pre-modernity. The result is a play of shifting perspectives: the cosmopolitan author imagines a local resident, who himself is imagining how cosmopolitans imagine the local. In other words, this network construction of localism was not the local speaking for itself, but the national speaking for the local, or at least as it imagined the local *would* speak if given the opportunity. Through such strategies, NBC controlled the voice of the local at a safe, national-class remove from actual localness.

This passage continued for several pages, detailing the simplicity, lack of pretension, and neighborliness of the town's modernity-challenged inhabitants (e.g. "New-fangled ideas don't catch on quickly in Thompkins corners, unless they're pretty good"¹⁰⁸). Then, following introductions to the shows' characters (Mayor Matt Thompkins, wife Martha, Judge Whipple, Fred Tibbett the barber, etc.) and a map of the town illustrating its quiet, quaint appeal, this synthetic local voice ceded the narrative back to the national-class voice of NBC: "Now, we'll go back to the National Broadcasting Company's place, and let the folks back there tell you the rest of the story in their own way."¹⁰⁹ This national-class voice—NBC's voice—then described

¹⁰⁷ "Human Appeal in Broadcast Advertising" (promotional pamphlet), New York: National Broadcasting Company, 1931, 3. E. P. H. James: Box 3, Folder 6.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

how "these quaint homely people" were all part of a marketing plan by Chesebrough, maker of Vaseline, and claimed that the show draws "an almost universal response from all classes in sophisticated cities and rural villages alike. ... It recreates the naive simplicity of a life whose fundamentals are very near to many of us, and whose bucolic charm is brought into our own lives with an almost graphic delineation."¹¹⁰

This construction of positive localism, already subtly positioned as "other" vis-à-vis the ad man/reader (whose life is presumed to need bucolic charm delivered by radio), is further packaged for national-class consumption by tropes of contemporary psychological theory and the latest techniques of opinion management. In other words, this fictional translocal localism is represented as itself a product of modern, scientific rationality, with plots, settings, and dialogue specially engineered to stimulate a specific emotional response in the listener:

How do these plain, simple folk present a striking demonstration of the new "radio psychology," and in so doing, further illustrate another one of the flexible possibilities of NBC Broadcast Advertising? ... [P]sychologists assure us that no sensory stimulus reaches the brain quicker nor with swifter registry, than sound. ... Through new refinements in continuity and dialogue, and the clever inference of effects associated with the specific locale or situation projected by a program, an NBC Broadcast presentation can create, entirely with sound, a graphic realism and a complementary emotional setting.... We might pardonably term this illusion a demonstration of the new "psychology" of radio.¹¹¹

In this scenario, the listener is conceptualized as a passive, pre-modern, and pre-rational creature just waiting for the advertiser to manipulate his emotions and desires by "transmitting to his

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 23.

mind a visual sense of reality and delineation," in this case consisting of a simulacrum of the local in the guise of the fully simulated "real folks" of Thompkins Corners.¹¹²

Through such clear markers of class difference and class superiority, national sponsors were invited to incorporate translocal positive localism into their programming without becoming *of* it themselves. The rhetorical strategies in NBC's promotional material enabled national-class figures in the industry to abandon their own standards of taste and propriety in favor of localist programs with mass appeal, without risking their own class status in the process (although, as I will discuss below, at some ultimate cost to their cultural authority). As Hal Barron points out, this national construction of a generic positive localism, largely unanchored from any actual community, devoid of any local specificity, and devoid of threatening markers of non-WASP otherness, helped draw rural and small-town Americans closer to a national popular culture. Put in the terms that I have used thus far in this study, it helped stitch the local into the national by acknowledging, rather than attempting to overcome, resistance to cosmopolitan culture.

The networks largely marginalized national-class ambitions to uplift and modernize the local through culture, but continued to modernize the local economically and socially by introducing national structures to localities around the country through increasingly palatable national radio. For example, it put localities everywhere on a national schedule (farmers tuned in to the *National Farm and Home Hour* daily at noon, for instance). But more importantly, as Barron writes, "the radio was also a vehicle for selling national brand-name products, another

¹¹² Ibid., 23.

defining feature of the emerging consumer culture."¹¹³ Argues historian Nathan Miller about the years following World War I:

The postwar years ushered in an age of consumerism with a broader base of participation than had ever existed before in America or anywhere else. Throughout the previous centuries, the problem had been to produce enough of the goods that men wanted; now, it was to make men—and increasingly women—want and buy the great cornucopia of things that were suddenly available as a result of mass production and the growing efficiency of industry. Massive advertising campaigns were launched to encourage consumers to buy, to use, and buy again.¹¹⁴

As Roland Marchand has pointed out, advertising-driven radio encouraged new practices of consumption as the key to modernization itself.¹¹⁵ Or as an advertising insider put it in 1928 in the trade journal *Printer's Ink*, "Consumers Must Be Taught How to Spend."¹¹⁶

Network radio, in part through the construction of translocal localism that helped overcome local resistance to national radio, assisted in this project. Thomas Streeter has pointed out that broadcasting began as a challenge to the corporate order: anarchic, geographically dispersed, and run by and for amateurs. If, however, its structure could be rationalized and its diversity controlled, "the possibility of a radio set in every home presented new opportunities for integrating everyday life with the corporate order."¹¹⁷ In part, this integration simply meant

¹¹³ Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 225.

¹¹⁴ Nathan Miller, *New World Coming* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 150-151.

¹¹⁵ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). See also John D. Stevens, "Small Town Editors and the 'Modernized' Agrarian Myth," *Mass Media Between the Wars*, eds. Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984): 21-38; Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America 1875-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

¹¹⁶ A. H. Landwehr, "Consumers Must Be Taught How to Spend," *Printers' Ink Monthly* 16, no. 5 (May 1928): 29-30, 91.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 86.

modernization through the sales of actual products. For example, Hal Barron has shown the ways that radio advanced a vision of modernization in rural America that included electricity, indoor plumbing, and various appliances like refrigerators and radio itself. Barron writes, "Rural northerners during the 1920s ... confronted and negotiated the new consumer culture in their homes."¹¹⁸ This negotiation was often a gendered process: farm women stood to gain more from the labor-saving devices of the twentieth century, and "in the gendered calculus of the farm family's economy, that meant that these improvements were worth less, and usually not enough."¹¹⁹ But integrating everyday life with the corporate order also meant inculcating new purchasing habits and new attitudes toward mass culture, encouraging Americans to see themselves as "consumers." In particular, there was strong ideological resistance to consumerism among rural Americans; as one writer expressed the attitude, "If people couldn't get along without luxuries like bathrooms they'd better quit farming and move to the Waldorf-Astoria."¹²⁰

A national consumer culture built on national brands did not immediately or radically reorganize local life or its values; as Barron notes, "country people chose products and brands in ways that were consistent with their own priorities instead of rejecting those values for supposedly more modern or glamorous ones."¹²¹ Furthermore, the consumerist-corporate system of which radio was a part predated broadcasting and had in fact been slowly undermining the structural underpinnings of local life through chain stores, the automobile, mail order, etc. for

¹¹⁸ Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 210.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

several decades. And even that process was unpredictable; as Lizabeth Cohen has demonstrated in her study of Chicago's working classes, "modern" structures and discourses were subject to local adaptation, modification, and incorporation.¹²² Nonetheless, national radio's translocal localism and the national economic structures that it advanced did participate in the gradual weakening of both local cultures and local economies, often hand-in-hand.

NBC executive Don Gilman even boasted about the effects that national advertising had on dictating the practices and decisions of local retailing: "The retail distributor in the neighborhood of the listener may be directly associated with the [national] product advertised. The retailer who is not carrying the product is made to realize that he may not share in the benefits of the broadcast."¹²³ In that sense, while *The Real Folks of Thompkins Corners* was erasing local distinctiveness through its brand of generic localism, putting listeners on a national schedule, providing them with national cultural frames of reference, and pulling ever more people away from local entertainment, it was also nationalizing their local economy. For example, Chesebrough's wider marketing campaign and merchandising tie-ins worked through chain drug stores to place 14,000 displays in NBC's coverage area, connecting popular culture to national retailing in ways that marginalized local brands, local retailers, or both.¹²⁴ In other words, the representations of the general store on national radio contributed unmistakably to the demise of the general store in real life—the aesthetic of localism undermining the economic structures of localism. The effect on local culture could be equally devastating; as Barron

¹²² Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s," eds. Ronald Edsforth and Larry Bennett, *Popular Culture and Political Change in Modern America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 81-101.

¹²³ Don E. Gilman, "Radio Broadcasting an Aid to Distribution," Speech delivered to the Pacific Coast Advertising Clubs Association, Oakland, n.d. (June 1929?). E. P. H. James: Box 20, Folder 2 (Insert in Sales Promotion Report of 1929 and Plans for 1930).

¹²⁴ "Human Appeal," 15.

argues, "[J]ust as the automobile led to the demise of such venerable country institutions as the general store, so too did radio curtail older forms of ... entertainment and socializing."¹²⁵ As one strategy to overcome local opposition to national-class culture, then, translocal localism provided the cultural counterpart to the economic project of stitching the local into the modern.

Conclusion

National radio in the 1920s and 1930s was marked by the imperative to "get the local under control" if it was to succeed financially and culturally. Both internally and externally, in its relationship with affiliates, politicians, regulators, sponsors, and audiences, large national broadcasters had to find ways to manage the local if they were to achieve their national ambitions. In doing so, a reflexive anti-localism was unhelpful, as was a too strict adherence to cosmopolitan norms of taste and culture. Instead, they sought to balance positive and negative localism, using tropes from each as appropriate to deflect criticism and defend the networks' business model. Sensitive to political and cultural pressure, they found themselves forced to situationally abandon their own predisposition to efficient national administration and cosmopolitan culture. Subordinating and marginalizing the local wherever possible, they also turned to localist aesthetics to reach mass audiences who were resistant to national-class tastes, all while advancing national corporate economic structures. The result was not merely their relative success in bringing "modern" radio to the local, but also in reconfiguring social and economic power within localities: disempowering the traditional local middle class by undermining their economic basis and cultural authority, and weakening local public cultures by drawing Americans ever tighter into nationally produced mass entertainment.

¹²⁵ Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 221.

At the same time, these processes also undermined the cultural authority of the *national* class by marginalizing cosmopolitan standards and hopes for radio in pursuit of the mass audience. The project of class differentiation pursued by the national class throughout the 1920s had failed to uplift the local, and by the mid-1930s it was clear that they had lost control of national radio as well. A national-class figure like novelist Booth Tarkington may have been ready to stand and fight, declaring of the networks in 1935, "The only remedy is to prove to them that the public's taste is better than they imagine, or if it isn't, to do everything to make it so."¹²⁶ But between federal regulation that empowered the national networks and the networks' own turn to mass culture, cosmopolitan elites were losing the ability to control the corporate culture they had once championed. This development, with its concomitant concerns about homogenization, standardization, and, yes, *localization* in the sense of a growing threat to national class values and tastes, contributed significantly to the national-class turn to localism of the mid- to late-1930s discussed in Chapter One.

National broadcasters did not and could not have imposed such changes on their own—audiences and consumers had to assent on some level to these social shifts—but they nonetheless incrementally built on local adaptations and incorporations of national corporate culture and economic models to stitch the local into the modern. Despite the power and popularity of national radio, however, this form of broadcasting progressed parallel to the growth of local radio in the early 1930s, which offered another site for the expression of local cultures and local resistance to the national-class project. That story will be the subject of Chapter Five.

¹²⁶ Qtd. in Perriton Maxwell, "The Coming Radio War," *Radioland* (June 1935): 44.

Chapter Five

The Traditional Local Middle Class and Local Radio, Or: How the Local Became an -Ism

In the previous chapter, I discussed the use of localism by national radio interests, in particular the networks, who used national-class tropes of both positive and negative localism to advance their political and financial interests, and used the network-affiliate structure to advance programming and economic structures that sought to tie localities ever more tightly into the "modern" corporate-consumer economy. In this chapter, I look at this process from the viewpoint of the local itself, examining local responses to radio that attempted to encounter the encroachment of the modern on the locals' own terms, using the gaps and weakness of national-class radio to the local's advantage. Specifically, I will explore two broad areas. First, I will examine the use of localism and local radio by audiences and citizens, including the construction of listener desire for local or national radio, as well as the intersection of local radio and civic boosterism as radio helped reorganize social and economic space. Second, I will examine the use of localism by local radio stations, including the exploitation of the politics of localism in regulatory matters and the construction of local identities for stations (including local public spheres) as a response to a range of economic and cultural incentives.

In both of these areas, I will attempt to demonstrate how, in resisting efforts to nationalize radio and marginalize the local, the local became an "-ism," that is, the local transitioned from a site of relative empowerment for the traditional local middle class to an ideological tactic used to resist the increasing economic and cultural *disempowerment* of the local in modern American life. This tactic, accordingly, had both economic and cultural dimensions, and it opened up a space in the early 1930s that enabled affirmative localism—the

fostering of local identities and local participatory public spheres—to thrive on radio stations around the country. While this window of affirmative localism largely closed again when economic conditions changed in the late 1930s, the ideological aspect—the -ism—remained, and became increasingly available for the elites of the national class to adopt when their own doubts and concerns about the new corporate economy and national radio began to emerge.

Part I: Audiences, Citizens, and Local Radio

Ia. Localism, Nationalism, and Listener Desire

It is always tricky to talk about media reception: listeners are unpredictable, changeable, and multiple, making any categorical assertion about audiences a risky endeavor. Thus, few consistent and reliable patterns about listeners and localism emerge. One of those patterns that did seem to hold in the early days of broadcasting concerns the diffusion of radio in the 1920s which, while relatively rapid everywhere, demonstrates important class differences. For example, while the national class embraced broadcasting relatively enthusiastically in the early 1920s, the traditional local class was somewhat slower to discover and embrace this new cultural technology. *Radio Broadcast* may have run articles like “How Radio Came to Independence Kansas,” detailing the speedy spread of broadcasting and the eagerness with which the locals in the sticks pulled in Pittsburgh and New York, but evidence suggests that the process was much slower and more fraught than that. Diffusion was hampered by the technical difficulty of radio reception in these early years, and in the absence of a strong local signal (which was the case for most of the country) there could be very little to listen to, even given nighttime propagation. Economics also played a role: the postwar farm crisis suppressed the spread of radio not just among rural folk but also in the countless small towns that depended on an agricultural

hinterland for their prosperity. That said, there are countless stories of communal listening practices that suggest that statistical measures such as radio sales and the number of broadcast stations are poor indicators of radio's actual penetration into non-urban areas. In the small town of Cuba City, Wisconsin for example, a resident with a radio set called his neighbors on a party line so that anyone who wanted to could listen to radio over the telephone.¹ In Wagener, South Carolina, social listening was so popular that the town began turning off the streetlights at 11:15 p.m. rather than 11:00 so that citizens could walk home after KDKA signed off.² In a precursor to community-antenna television, the town of Pittsfield, Illinois was wired for radio in 1927: the signal was sent by phone lines from a central receiver to loudspeakers in each house. There was no volume control, and everyone had to listen to the same program, but residents apparently found it better than no radio at all.³

As for what people were actually listening to, several authors have emphasized listeners' seemingly innate desire for "national" radio. Susan Smulyan made perhaps the most forceful case for this perspective, arguing that a "consensus on national radio service" among both corporate broadcasters and audiences drove the creation of the commercial system.⁴ Americans imagined and desired national radio even before the technology to bring it about existed, she argues, primed as they were by previous advances in transport and communication that seemed to move steadily toward the *telos* of national service: the railroads, telegraph, telephone, automobile, etc. Smulyan contends that, while a primarily local radio system could have

¹ "Radio Rurals Listen In By Phone," *Variety* 77, no. 9 (14 January 1925): 1, 46.

² Ray Barfield, *Listening to Radio, 1920-1950* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 4.

³ "Wired Radio In Small Town Successful," *Variety* 86, no. 13 (13 April 1927): 1.

⁴ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 12.

developed, listeners "demanded" national radio; on this point she quotes Susan Douglas's observation that "middle-class Americans were hungering for a sense of what people in different cities or states were like, what they thought and how they lived."⁵ Of course, in the case of Wagener, South Carolina, mentioned above, and countless similar towns, KDKA and other "national" stations were the only broadcasters that could be reliably picked up for several years. Still, there was certainly no shortage of public expressions of that hunger for non-local culture, and Smulyan cites many popular sources showing the fascination with distance and with radio as a national phenomenon (although her evidence for this claim comes primarily from *Radio Broadcast*, a journal that was a consistent cheerleader for the idea of national radio). The "silent nights" that were organized in many towns were a direct policy effect of this fascination, literally silencing local stations one or more evenings each week to enable listeners-in to pick up non-local signals. Smulyan adds that when interference or disadvantageous atmospheric conditions made distance listening difficult or impossible, listeners would tune in their local stations, only to find them hopelessly amateurish and disappointing, falling short of the high expectations created by the name talent and slick production values of the large urban stations. In addition to the entertainment value and sense of wonder that distant stations could provide, there were practical reasons for desiring non-local radio as well; farmers, for example, wanted weather and market reports from outside their area, while the many migrants from the country to the cities often wanted to hear the music from the places they left behind.⁶ Many people enjoyed distant stations for a variety of reasons, and there is no doubt that large broadcasters were able to respond to that genuine enthusiasm as well as channel it to political ends, as discussed in the previous chapter.

⁵ Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 206.

⁶ Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 20.

Several other authors, in contrast to the desires that Smulyan concentrates on, have focused on the appeal that local radio held for many listeners. Clifford Doerksen, for example, discusses the popularity of the local offerings of broadcasters like WHN, New York, which specialized in a brand of radio that differed dramatically in tone and content from what was available on WJZ and other chain stations.⁷ Likewise, Derek Vaillant has explored the role of local radio in creating or speaking to sub-publics in Chicago.⁸ In light of this cultural and social resistance, the hunger and demand for national radio identified by Smulyan would appear less monolithic. This is not to suggest an "either-or" choice between network and non-network radio, since most listeners probably listened to both (and there is evidence that many did not understand the differences anyway). But it does seem that Smulyan might have underplayed the many listeners who were drawn in by the specialized content on local radio or often turned off by the fare available on the national stations. Furthermore, there is no evidence that radio ossified the listener into either a local or national identity, but instead enabled listeners to explore and develop multiple identities. Again, Susan Douglas reminds us that "we must remember that what radio really did (and still does today) was allow listeners to experience at the same time multiple identities—regional, national, local—some of them completely allied with the country's prevailing cultural and political ideologies, others of them suspicious of or at odds with official culture."⁹ This phenomenon was recognized at the time as well. In the Lynds' second study of Middletown, for example, the dual national-local pull of radio was already clear: "[Radio]

⁷ Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

⁸ Derek Vaillant, "Sounds of Whiteness: Local Radio, Racial Formation, and Public Culture in Chicago, 1921–1935," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (March 2002): 25–66.

⁹ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 24–5.

carries people away from localism and gives them direct access to the more popular stereotypes in the national life ... In the other direction, the local station operates to bind together an increasingly large and diversified city."¹⁰

But even though it is safe to say that people generally tuned in what they wanted to when they wanted to, the discursive construction of listener desire was much more regulated, less subject to the unpredictable, multiple, and circumstantial messiness of actual listener practices. For example, Federal Radio Commissioner Harold Lafount, an advocate of high-powered chain broadcasting, claimed to know that an entire city wanted national radio first and foremost: "[T]he people of Honolulu object to the granting of a license to another broadcasting station for the reason it precludes the possibility of their hearing stations in the United States." On the other hand, a petitioner for a new local station was sure to gather voices expressing a desire for more local radio in that town, as in a letter solicited from a leading citizen in Akron, Ohio in support of a new local station there: "I understand there is a possibility of another radio station coming [to Akron]; one that would be especially interested in local affairs. We would welcome this station."¹¹

These regularities help identify broad patterns not in actual listening practices, but in the uses of localism and nationalism in early radio. By examining the intersection of the structural development of the radio system and the construction of listeners and their desires, we can begin to identify some of the roles that localism played among audiences and citizens at the local level in the early years of broadcasting.

¹⁰ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown In Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1937), 264.

¹¹ Harry Williams to the United States Radio Commission, 29 April 1932. FRC Dockets: Box 342, "1574."

Ib. Civic Radio, Civic Boosterism

The first thing to note about local radio is the relative dearth of municipally owned radio projects, which, given the widespread rhetoric promising radio's social and political potential, remains one of the more curious features of early radio for the contemporary observer. Early radio stations were run by newspapers, radio dealers, department stores, flour mills, lumber companies, car dealers, and other enterprises, but precious few were run by municipalities or, with the oblique exception of educational stations at public universities, even state governments. It seems that government radio would have been a logical use of the technology and provided at least a partial answer to the perpetual question of the early 1920s: who shall pay for broadcasting? Educational and religious broadcasters comprised a significant portion of early radio, but municipalities were mostly absent from the field.

When WNYC in New York began broadcasting in 1924, *Radio Broadcast* noted that it was the only municipal station in the U.S. as yet, but promised more to follow: "[T]he day of the municipal station has definitely arrived; ... The personalities of cities are to be made familiar throughout the ether."¹² The magazine spoke too soon, however; several municipally owned radio stations did indeed follow—WRR in Dallas, WCAM in Camden, New Jersey, WPG in Atlantic City, and a few others—but despite the relative success of these projects, of the five hundred to seven hundred stations in the U.S. at any given time in the 1920s and early 1930s, never more than a handful were publicly owned (again, excepting educational stations at public universities). Among the possible explanations for this absence is a strong ideological resistance to public broadcasting. In particular, Michele Hilmes has explored the ways in which the specter of "government-controlled" radio in Britain at the national level worked to contain the possibility

¹² "Radio – the 'Voice of the City,'" *Radio Broadcast* 6, no. 3 (January 1925): 442.

of public radio in the U.S.: "Virtually any attempt to assert regulatory authority on behalf of public rights to access and representation in the United States has been met with 'slippery slope' arguments that pose the 'elitist, government-controlled' BBC as the ultimate bad result, from the 1920s on."¹³ Fear of government censorship and resistance to the additional tax burden of running a station (as long as private companies were willing to pay for radio service out of their own pockets) provided strong additional barriers to public investment in broadcasting.

Not only did few municipalities build stations themselves, however, they also were slow to use privately owned stations in their localities for civic purposes. For example, when WHB, a station owned by E. J. Sweeney in Kansas City, Missouri, put on "Civic Radio Nights" in 1923—roughly two years after the advent of broadcasting—it claimed to be the first government use of radio to increase civic access and participation; whether that was technically true, the idea was certainly new and novel enough to receive national attention. The project was largely the brainchild of Kansas City's new mayor, who was enthusiastic about the potential of radio, and it featured programs such as "Where Your Money Goes" and "Hospital and Health Board Night."¹⁴ The WHB experiment spawned various imitators, and many stations mimicked at least some of their civic programming; broadcasts from courtrooms, particularly night court and traffic court, were an especially popular peek into civic affairs around the country. But these followers were

¹³ Michele Hilmes, "British Quality, American Chaos: Historical Dualisms and What They Leave Out," *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 1, no. 1 (January 2003): 15.

¹⁴ J.L. Simpson, "'Selling' the Public on Better City Government," *Radio Broadcast* 3, no. 4 (August 1923): 299-302. It is a telling sign of the age that these civic programs were conceptualized using commercial vocabulary, as "selling" the public on government. Even listener feedback framed this precursor to today's government-access television in capitalist terms: "I had the good fortune to listen in on the civic program broadcast by the Sweeney radio station last night ... It is of the greatest importance that our citizens, who are all stockholders in this, our great Kansas City corporation, should be informed fully as to all our civic affairs."

also found primarily on privately owned stations rather than on any precursor to today's public broadcasting system or cable-based government-access channels.

Instead, any civic function in local broadcasting was shaped primarily by the socioeconomic discourses of civic boosterism. The paradigmatic broadcast on such stations conformed to the booster ethos of civic promotion, drawing on Jeffersonian localism to promote the town as a socioeconomic unit. The ideal local station should publicize to the outside world a town's openness to entrepreneurial capitalism, the attractiveness of its stores, and the general wonderfulness of its features, thereby attracting investment capital, shoppers from neighboring towns, and tourism respectively. To listeners within the locality, the assertion of local superiority should have the corollary effect of promoting citizen loyalty (economic as well as social) to a distinctive local identity. A typical example of this civic booster programming was a 1924 broadcast prepared by the Northfield, Minnesota Lions Club and aired over St. Olaf College's WCAL. Interspersed with musical numbers, the program discussed the area's agriculture, its two colleges (St. Olaf and Carleton), and Jesse James' famous botched raid on a Northfield bank. A local news source boasted the following day about the broadcast, illustrating the blurry line between outer-directed boosterism and the inner-directed cultivation of "local patriotism":

Cows, colleges, and contentment were in the air last evening. Northfield, Minnesota, was telling the world about herself by wireless. ... Almost everybody nowadays is discontented. ... Northfield folk are different. Their city is beautiful, their business is booming, their banks are solvent, their colleges are flourishing, their cows are making new butter fat records, and their people are contented. Let the Lions roar. Who has a better right.¹⁵

¹⁵ "Cows, Colleges, Contentment," n.s., n.d. (April 1924). WCAL Scrapbooks: Scrapbook I, page 28.

Business leaders seized on radio as a marker of progress and up-to-dateness (a nod toward ideologies of modernity that I will return to below) and often vigorously supported their local station as a commercial civic enterprise. Broadcasting was considered so integral to the economic success of a locality that if no one else had entered the field in a given market, the organized business community often took the lead in bringing a station to their town. In 1925 in St. Louis, for example, sixteen businesses each contributed \$15,000 apiece to build a station "as a civic undertaking to tell the world that St. Louis is 'the center of centers' in America."¹⁶ Of course, not every towns' merchants welcomed having yet another medium in which they were required to buy advertising. For example, when a petition for a new station in Salem, Oregon came before the FRC, local merchants and the local newspaper organized to try to stop it, only to fail when the FRC decided that their interest in the petition (the avoidance of competition) was too remote to grant them standing.¹⁷ But more commonly, business leaders believed that the increased competition with newspapers that a radio station promised would enable them to drive ad rates down. Radio could also reach customers that the newspaper missed; as one Texan remembered, "Many rural people never saw the inside of a library, never read a newspaper, never read a magazine. But nearly everyone had a radio."¹⁸

Local newspapers often reacted predictably negatively toward such pro-broadcasting efforts, and sometimes had the leverage to achieve at least temporary success, as when the paper

¹⁶ "St. Louis' New Station," *Variety* 30 September 1925, 45. On the state level, oil millionaire Edward Rolleston of Bristow, OK that same year bankrolled an effort by the Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce to build a \$200,000 station, to be run as a nonprofit "on behalf of the public," making Oklahoma the first state chamber of commerce to engage directly in radio. "Civic Station Costs \$200,000; No Profit," *Variety* 30 September 1925, 45.

¹⁷ George Porter to the Federal Radio Commission, "In re: Application of Oregon Radio, Inc." (Memo), 18 June 1934. FRC Minutes: Box 26, "6/22/34 #774."

¹⁸ Qtd. in Barfield, *Listening to Radio*, 21.

in one town in the mid-1930s threatened to call in promissory notes on any merchants who advertised on the radio, thus driving the upstart station out of town.¹⁹ Usually, though, the paper found its influence limited within the greater commercial community and eventually had to accept the competition. For example, when in 1931 the local newspaper in Greensboro, North Carolina stopped carrying WBIG's program listings, which it considered a form of free publicity for radio advertisers at the paper's expense, Greensboro's local merchants banded together to publish their own free radio guides.²⁰ In some markets, the local media countered such competitive pressures by working together to control the market and avoid rate wars amongst themselves, as when Topeka, Kansas' newspaper, vaudeville theater, and radio station coordinated efforts beginning in 1927 to provide cross-promotion, share content, and present a united front on advertising prices.²¹

Given the economic potential of radio, business leaders took seriously the gain or loss of a station, and the nature of their concerns can be seen in the frequent campaigns to influence the Commission's decisions on stations around the country. For example, when WLBW, Oil City, Pennsylvania, wanted to move to Erie in 1932, the local business community in Oil City organized a letter-writing campaign to the FRC to keep the station in their town. Many of the seventy-one letters in the FRC's docketed case file on WLBW are form letters, and all of them list one or more of just three reasons for keeping the station: concerns about the potential loss of business to Oil City, concerns about the loss of jobs, and concerns about the decreased value of

¹⁹ "Peace Pacts In Some Dixie Towns But Press-Radio Still Sniping," *Variety* 118, no. 6 (24 April 1935): 39.

²⁰ "Local Weekly Sheets Spring Up When Daily Omits Radio Programs," *Variety* 22 December 1931, 49. A similar case occurred in Charlotte, NC: the local papers refused to carry radio listings, so a farmer's weekly began to do so and saw its circulation surge. "Peace Pacts In Some Dixie Towns But Press-Radio Still Sniping," *Variety* 118, no. 6 (24 April 1935): 39.

²¹ "Topeka Theatre, Journal, In New Radio Tieup," *Variety* 87, no. 12 (6 July 1927): 47.

radio sets if listeners could not pull in a groundwave signal. Importantly, and in an indication of the primarily economic nature of the effort to save their local station, none of the seventy-one letters raised concepts like local public service, a local public sphere, or even local identity apart from Oil City's commercial prospects.²² A similarly revealing case involved the transfer of KGFK, a 100-watt local station, from Moorhead to Duluth, Minnesota in 1934. When the FRC granted the removal of KGFK to Duluth, not one but two business communities reacted in protest. The first was obviously Moorhead's, who wanted to keep the station in their town, in part as a cheaper alternative to WDAY, the NBC affiliate across the river in Fargo, North Dakota. The second was Duluth's, whose merchants were content with the service from WEBC (just across the state border in Superior, Wisconsin) and, like the Salem merchants mentioned above, did not welcome a second station diluting their advertising efforts or forcing another media buy. As a leading Moorhead attorney wrote in a telegram to his congressman, "This is only station here and is essential to our welfare and future prosperity of Moorhead and Red River Valley Stop ... Leading citizens of Duluth have testified at hearing that no need exists there for our small station Stop Citizens are vigorously protesting such removal."²³ The Moorhead Chamber of Commerce joined in the protest, appointing three members to work on the case; the Moorhead City Council and the Clay County Board also got involved. As in the Oil City case, the surviving record reveals only economic arguments for keeping the station, with little hint that the station might serve a social function in the public life of the community as well. Although KGFK did eventually relocate to Duluth, these citizen efforts managed to delay the move by two full years until 1936.

²² These letters are in FRC Dockets: Box 375, "1724."

²³ Garfield Rustad to Thomas D. Schall, 1 June 1934. FRC Dockets: Box 490, "2320."

Such cases point to a larger circumstance about the intersection of local radio and civic boosterism during this period: the ways in which economic and social discourses of localism and modernity were negotiated by a traditional local middle class eager—even desperate—to secure its place in a shifting and increasingly national economy. Civic boosterism had always been a socioeconomic iteration of Jeffersonian localism that used discourses of independence and self-sufficiency to attract and retain capital and labor as well as elements of New England localism to discipline the behavior of local residents through local patriotism. But in the early twentieth century, civic boosterism had to carry the additional burden of defending the very idea of the local as an economic and social entity, mapping out the place of the local within the modern nation and protecting it against multiple threats to the traditional local middle class. These challenges came not only from without, as the corporate economy and national culture increasingly encroached on local economies and cultures, but also from within, as the behavior of local citizens became ever more difficult to police. Specific threats included: changing consumer habits in favor of non-local economic structures, represented by mail order, chain stores, and the desire for national brands; increased mobility due to the automobile, which intensified the competition among towns for shopping and entertainment dollars within a region; and continuing rural depopulation in the face of multiple farm crises and the lure of city jobs that eroded the local economic base of many small towns. These multiple threats challenged not only the economic security of the local middle class, traditionally based in real estate and retail, but also their cultural authority over local citizens who were increasingly exposed to discourses of the good life that conflated modernity, national popular culture, and consumer goods. Now able to drive to neighboring towns to shop for products and brands unavailable at their local general

store, or to partake of national culture at a nearby movie palace, rural and small-town folk became less subject to middle-class control in their economic and social behavior.

One important result of these shifts, discussed by Hal Barron, was the increased competition among towns for the economic and cultural loyalty not just of their own citizens, but of a region. This competition had long existed—Daniel Boorstin called it "community-ism"²⁴—but new technologies and economic practices after 1900 made possible the startlingly quick death of once-thriving towns, making economic and cultural competition with neighboring towns an increasingly urgent priority. The stakes were not merely bragging rights for the most wonderful place to live, but the continued prosperity or even existence of the town itself in very real, material terms. Barron recounts the booster efforts of Oregon, Illinois, population 2000, which was within driving distance of Rockford, population 80,000. In order to compete with the retail opportunities in the larger cities, merchants in Oregon had to offer special discounts, "dollar days" sales, and similar retail promotions, while also attempting to inculcate in residents the virtues of shopping at home. Extralocal competition also directly affected traditional local cultural life, for instance by forcing the repeal of blue laws to keep people from going elsewhere for their entertainment. As a local paper put it when advocating an ordinance allowing movie exhibition on Sundays,

[I]f Oregon did not have to compete with surrounding towns connected by good roads, then there would be no serious reason for having Sunday pictures here. Rockford, Dixon, Rochelle, and Polo have Sunday movies. ... Why not let Oregon have an equal chance with our surrounding towns? We must keep up with the times or go backwards. ... Good roads through 'dead towns' result in business failure.²⁵

²⁴ Daniel T. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 134.

²⁵ Qtd. in Hal Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 203.

At the same time, there was a paradox in keeping up with the Rockfords: in order to avoid having economic and cultural life sucked away by nearby towns, Oregon and similar towns had to suck away the economic and cultural life from even smaller towns and villages within its orbit. As Barron characterized this competition among towns, "Oregon merchants wanted their own people to heed the cry of localism, but they did not want anyone else to, and their older spatial conceptions of community became increasingly contradictory."²⁶ Towns that failed to poach capital and regional shoppers from their neighbors, as well as tourists from urban centers, faced a steady decline in population and prospects. Localism had become increasingly predatory, and the idea of "local" itself, always a flexible concept and label, became even more so in the hands of civic boosters. The local expanded and contracted as seemed politically and economically necessary (or expedient) to include weaker locales, exclude stronger ones, and articulate a local patriotism that corresponded to the geographical contours of economic possibility rather than patterns of population settlement, legal jurisdiction, or demographic clustering.

Arriving during this period of economic and social realignment, local radio broadcasting was freighted with the task of conferring structural advantages to local elites in competition not only with the national class but also with the local elites down the road. In that sense, local radio was not merely about encouraging civic pride and "city beautiful" programs, nor even about buying locally. Indeed, for all the noise and vehemence of the ceaseless "shop-at-home" and "support your local merchants" campaigns, evidence suggests that most citizens largely ignored

²⁶ Barron, *Mixed Harvest*, 203-4.

the rhetoric and shopped wherever they wanted to.²⁷ Instead, it was part of an increasingly urgent project to achieve economic and cultural hegemony over an entire area, vying with other potential commercial centers in the area to become regional financial seats. Radio was particularly well suited to this task because its reach usually covered surrounding villages and rural hinterlands, allowing merchants to advertise beyond the circulation of their local paper and keep business flowing into the town. In other words, local radio was not merely another advertising outlet comparable to display ads in the *City Bugle*, but became part of a political project by the traditional local middle class to find a place for itself within the emerging national-corporate economic order. The acquisition of a station also represented a move toward discourses of modernity in local self-representation; as one application for a station in small-town Arkansas put it, El Dorado is an "up-to-date little city" that promises to build an "up-to-date broadcasting station, if granted permission."²⁸ Like the ordinance to allow Sunday movies in Oregon, Illinois (which, tellingly, passed), radio allowed a locality to promise "local modernity" that was integral to predatory localism.

Perhaps predictably, national-class critics usually failed to see these processes at work and misread the social and economic discourses with which the traditional local middle class attempted to secure its position. When the Lions of towns like Northfield around the country roared their community's virtues through the ether, national-class critics usually had a good laugh at their expense, dismissing the yokels' provincial pride in their dull, one-horse town. And when local businessmen, besieged by the modern corporate economy of chain stores and national brands, sought to draw on the most modern tool at their disposal—radio—those who reserved the

²⁷ Ibid., 202.

²⁸ "Re Docket #736, Bensberg's Music Shop," 12 April 1930. FRC minutes: Box 5, "4/14/30 #198."

concept of modernity for themselves resisted vehemently. Primed to see civic boosters as so many "Babbitts" wasting valuable spectrum space on local stations, national-class critics ridiculed and marginalized these small-town efforts to distinguish their community through radio. As Carl Dreher wrote scornfully in *Radio Broadcast*:

Some village of 2000 out on the plains possesses a broadcasting station, perhaps by accident. A manufacturer of babies' diapers, say, has erected it to advertise his product. Incidentally, he advertises the town. The next village ... feels an irresistible impulse to have a broadcasting station bigger than the diaper broadcasting station. The local manufacturer of varnished pretzels thinks he might take a whack at it. His primary object is, of course, to advertise his varnished pretzels. But he also wants to shine at his luncheon club among his fellow business men. He wants to be slapped on the back by the President of the Chamber of Commerce.

Dreher completely missed the life-or-death struggle in which the traditional local middle class saw itself engaged, attributing the desire for a station—like the hillbillies drawn to hillbilly music in Chapter Four—to an "irresistible impulse." The *New York Herald-Tribune* was equally insensitive to the stakes in local radio, imagining local broadcasting to be nothing more than and exercise in ego-gratification that threatened no less than to stunt the country's mental growth:

It is pleasant for the owner of a [small] station to realize that he is the biggest frog in the puddle of ether that surrounds him for a hundred miles. It may even please the local citizenry to remember that it possesses any frog at all. ... Which is better for the country's mental growth, to listen each evening to local broadcasting that everybody knows about already or to hear programs of artistry and importance which everybody in the whole continent is hearing at the same time?²⁹

The preferred national-class solution was, of course, to reduce the number of these small local stations to free up room for more important and worthwhile broadcasters. As Dreher put it: "Instead of Podunk and Peadunk each having their own stations, they should share a transmitter

²⁹ "Frogs in Radio Puddles," *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 August 1928, n.p.

and just each have their own studios."³⁰ The FRC held similar views, urging stations to share facilities and consolidate their broadcasting ventures while reserving just six frequencies for local stations. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter Three, the FRC had no sympathy for regional merchants trying to protect their economic base from the pull of a larger city, arguing that adding a station to "afford listeners a purely local program service not now received and local merchants an advertising medium not now available, does not justify the granting of [an] application, especially in view of the limited broadcast facilities available for assignment."³¹

Whatever the merits of consolidation as a technical solution to limited bandwidth, however, Dreher, the *Herald Tribune*, and the Commission, influenced by national-class anti-localism, largely missed the point about local radio: Podunk and Peadunk were not merely provincial Babbitts with overblown pride in their respective burgs, but in fact saw themselves locked in a fight for their economic and cultural survival. Local stations were playing an increasingly important role in the social and economic reorganization of small-town and rural life, continuing a process that had begun in earnest with the arrival of the automobile in the early 1900s, and the marginalization of local radio among regulators, cultural leaders, and industry powerhouses reflected not just indifference but antagonism to that local project.

³⁰ Carl Dreher, "One Explanation for the Plethora of Broadcasting Stations," *Radio Broadcast* 11, no. 1 (May 1927): 36.

³¹ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of H. Verne Spencer, Docket 1787," 22 December 1932. FRC Minutes: Box 20, "12/22/32 #633."

Part II: Local Stations and the Uses of Localism

IIa. Local Radio and the Politics of Localism

While civic boosters, as both economic and social leaders within a community, had one set of interests in radio, local stations had different concerns, at times coinciding or overlapping, but occasionally colliding with merchants' needs and desires. In part these differences were due to the different audiences that local broadcasters had to please: audiences, regulators, employees, and advertisers—both local and national.

As discussed in previous chapters, local broadcasters were operating within a discursive field that had come to associate local stations with insignificance, poverty, inefficiency, and cultural deficiency, making such stations politically vulnerable, at least among regulators and the more powerful industry interests. At the same time, the cultivation of local economies and local public spheres could frequently enable them to thrive despite challenging economic conditions. The result in many instances was the creation of participatory local public spheres in radio—not for primarily political reasons but for financial ones: localism became an economic discourse and a business strategy that allowed local stations to survive. Because of this, the Depression of the 1930s allowed both "national" and "local" radio to advance in nearly equal measure despite regulatory indifference to or discrimination against localism before 1934. Any affirmative localism that emerged under this system, then, did so not primarily by policy design, but as the result of negotiating these tensions. As economic conditions changed in the late 1930s and mostly closed the window for affirmative localism that the Depression had opened, policymakers were too slow to build new supports for localism into the system of incentives and disincentives for broadcasters, and it would be several decades before citizens again enjoyed access to the mediated public sphere to the degree they did in the early 1930s.

If, as discussed in Chapter Four, the networks often found it torturous to negotiate the tensions between the local and the national, smaller stations had a markedly different relationship to localism, especially those small broadcasters designated as "local" stations by the FRC. Given national-class prejudices among regulators, including hostility toward much of the programming that could often be found on these stations, their localness made them vulnerable to disadvantageous policy decisions and procedures.³² The FRC in particular demonstrated little sympathy for these stations' economic predicament in its rules and regulations, preferring in most instances to use their shaky finances to justify action *against* the stations. At the same time, hundreds of these stations were able to avoid wholesale "murder" (in Commissioner Henry Bellows' term) and even occasionally thrive thanks to the same discourses and structures of localism that also worked to threaten them. In part this was because, as described above, large broadcasters and networks needed the political cover that a plethora of local stations could provide; in part it was because these stations had the support of local politicians and business leaders, who had a stake in keeping local stations afloat to meet the needs of the traditional middle class; and in part it was because they were able to construct an idea of local community of which broadcasting was central part, an idea that helped them garner local support and participation despite their financial standing. In seeking to balance these advantages and disadvantages, small stations navigated a perilous economic and regulatory climate in ways that demonstrate the interplay of politics, economics, and localism.

Before 1927, small stations faced little existential threat from regulators. They might go out of business (and often did), but the Commerce Department lacked the explicit authority to

³² Henry M. Neely, "Editorially Speaking: High-Power Station WJZ Makes Good," *Radio in the Home* (undated): 27. NARA Correspondence: Box 139, "1732."

revoke licenses or kick smaller stations off the air. But weaker broadcasters were supremely disadvantaged by the A/B class system, as discussed in Chapter Two, and were further hurt by their relative lack of access to policymakers. Although a few small broadcasters attended each of the four radio conferences organized by Hoover and were occasionally able to inject their concerns into the proceedings, there is no question but that regulators were listening primarily to KDKA and WJZ, not KGDA and WHN. It is also worth noting that, prior to the Radio Act of 1927, local regulation assumed a much greater role than it would in the FRC/FCC era—and poorer stations were disadvantaged at that level as well. For example, before the creation of Class B stations in 1923, most broadcasting stations shared the same frequency; this led to often elaborate (and remarkably successful) time-sharing arrangements.³³ But in many of these instances, station "quality" was the factor that determined which stations got the prime hours, giving a strong advantage to the better-funded broadcasters in any given locality. In Los Angeles, for example, the fifteen stations who shared a frequency formed an association and ranked each other according to merit; the stations with the most votes received more and better time, while smaller stations made do with whatever hours were left.³⁴ Competition for local talent took its toll on smaller stations as well, especially as ever more stations began paying performers to appear on the air.³⁵ As this practice grew more common, even those Class A stations (and sponsors on those stations) that might have wanted to air more prestigious or better

³³ The creation of Class B stations relieved this situation somewhat, but it is still nothing short of amazing that in 1925 twenty-nine stations were able to come to a somewhat workable time-sharing agreement. "New York Has 29 Stations," *Variety* 30 September 1925, 45.

³⁴ F.W. Christian, "Avoiding the Jam in Southern California," *Radio Broadcast* 2, no. 3 (January 1923): 252-253.

³⁵ "New Idea for Better Radio Shows By WSB," *Variety* 30 April 1925, 45.

quality live programs found their possibilities limited by the challenge of trying to bid for talent in a market whose prices were set by better-funded stations.

Once the FRC took over, the threat to local stations increased dramatically. Much has been written of the ways in which the FRC discriminated against educational and "propaganda" (i.e. religious, political, labor, etc.) broadcasters, but small commercial stations were also very much in the Commission's sights for what regulators considered their technological and programming failings. I have detailed some of these battles in Chapter Three, where I demonstrated how the FRC used discourses and structures of localism to advance a more homogenized vision of national radio. But being "local" under the FRC meant being vulnerable in multiple ways beyond what I was able to touch on in that earlier chapter. In the summer of 1928, for instance, the FRC issued General Order 32, requiring 164 stations to defend their licenses. Although not all of these stations were low-powered locals, and although the FRC called itself "gratified" that so many of them "amply justified their continued existence," the hearings on G. O. 32 resulted in the deletion of sixty-two stations. The purging of local stations was so great that, in one case, the FRC even felt compelled to deny emphatically that it was "actuated by a prejudice against the small station serving local communities." Instead, it countered, "[T]he commission did not proceed on the theory that the community was not entitled to local broadcasting service but rather that the particular licensee was unworthy."³⁶

For those stations that did survive the purge of General Order 32 (including KGDA, the aforementioned South Dakota station that in a few years would be reduced to playing paper

³⁶ Federal Radio Commission, Second Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission for the Year Ended June 30, 1928, Together With Supplemental Report for the Period From July 1, 1928, to September 30, 1928" (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1928), 153; reprint, Federal Radio Commission Annual Reports, Numbers 1-7, 1927-1933, History of Broadcasting: Radio to Television, ed. Christopher Sterling (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971).

promotional records), General Order 40 in November, 1928 put them on tremendously disadvantageous wavelengths. The higher the frequency, the more difficult it was to maintain a stable signal, and all of the local stations were in the top third of the broadcast band, at 1200 kilocycles and above, whereas none of the high-powered clear channels were in that range.³⁷ This meant that the stations that most needed the most modern and precise transmitting equipment were usually the ones that could least afford it; this in turn led to proportionally more technical violations and listener complaints. Again, the FRC had little sympathy. In the winter of 1931-1932, the Commission passed General Order 116, mentioned briefly in Chapter Three, requiring stations to keep their transmissions within fifty kilocycles of their assigned frequency. For the regional and national stations lower in the broadcast band, this was not a great challenge: a five percent tolerance for a station at 1000 kilocycles. For the locals at the top of the band, however, this was only a three-to-four percent tolerance, and these stations were significantly harder pressed to afford the new equipment needed to comply with the regulation (up to \$1400 in 1932 dollars, according to one estimate) during the heart of the Depression.³⁸ Organizations such as the National Committee on Education by Radio (NCER) and the Associated Broadcasters of America, an industry alliance of small broadcasters, objected to the FRC's action, as did the Radio Division of the Department of Commerce: a majority of the Division's Supervisors of Radio objected to the fifty-kilocycle standard.³⁹ Local broadcasters and their allies also tried to

³⁷ Federal Radio Commission, *Second Annual Report*, 49.

³⁸ N. H. Schneider, "Will the Senators of the United States Allow this Shameful Thing to be Done?" n. s., n.d. (June 1932?). FRC Correspondence: Box 6, "File 7-116/ General Order 116, April 28, 1927 to August 1932."

³⁹ Charles N. Lischka at the Hearing Before the Federal Radio Commission, 20 April 1931; Thomas Stevenson to the Federal Radio Commission, 21 April 1931; W. D. Terrell to the Federal Radio Commission, 16 April 1931. All available in FRC Correspondence: Box 3, Folder 7-7.

get their voices heard; wrote one woman to First Lady Lou Henry Hoover, pleading for her intercession with the president:

If our government could give a moratorium to Europe surely it should be able to [give] our own people a moratorium for at least a year until times get better and they are able to buy the apparatus the Commission has ordered them to buy.... If general order 116 is put in effect the station [my husband] works for will have to close down throwing him out of work then what will we do? God only knows."⁴⁰

The Commission remained unmoved by such pleas, as well as by the advice of the experts in Commerce: the Order was adopted in June, 1931, and gave stations one year to install the necessary equipment.⁴¹

The Commission's actions in the case of General Order 116 were typical of the ways in which rules and regulations, which were established according to standard national-class ideas of order, efficiency, and procedure, most hurt those stations that operated on a more traditional and local—even artisanal—basis. One can hear this attitude in *Radio Broadcast's* dismissal of the small broadcaster trying to function without a "modern" organizational structure: "If a man tries to act as announcer, engineer, operator, program director, and publicity representative of a station he will inevitably turn out a half-baked job in each capacity. He may be a hero, but he is not a broadcaster by 1928 standards."⁴² Furthermore, the bureaucratic logic of federal regulation itself placed new demands on the harried individual already performing all of those other jobs at his 100-watt station. For example, the FRC asked for a significant amount of information and record-keeping from stations, a requirement that not only demanded major time investments

⁴⁰ Mrs. A. C. Ray to Mrs. Herbert Hoover, 17 June 1932. FRC Correspondence: Box 6, Folder "File 7-116/ General Order 116, April 28, 1927 to August 1932."

⁴¹ An extension until December, 1932, was granted, but the tolerances remained in force.

⁴² "The Small Broadcaster," *Radio Broadcast* 12, no. 2 (Dec 1927), 144.

from station managers, but also a familiarity and comfort level with bureaucratic formalism that many local operators lacked. The Commission also established licensing and appeals procedures that required stations to secure representation in Washington, forcing even the smallest and poorest local stations to conform to the business practices of the modern corporate economy. All appeals of FRC decisions were held in the D.C. Court of Appeals, and if a station was challenged for its assignment—a not uncommon occurrence—a preliminary hearing might be held by a regional Radio Supervisor but the final hearing was always in D.C. Elmer Beehler, who ran a 100-watt local station in Yuma, Colorado, made known his frustration with these national-class expectations during a proceeding in 1932. The following quotation is long but revealing, and I have retained the original grammar and orthography in order to convey the flavor of the cultural clash being played out here:

I trust that we have complied with the Commission rules in this matter, in as much as attorney in these small towns are not familiar with practice and procedure before the commission we have made these put to the best of our knowledge ... Its not the desire of my-self to appear in person to the hearing as set for June 30th. at Washington, D.C. due to sickness in the family and the unnecessary expence it would involve me in to make this trip, in as much all small station are being burden enough at this time in purchaseing Frequency Monitors in order to comply with general Order #-116 further more stations with broadcasting records from January 3rd. 1927 should not be force to make appearance in a hearing every time some new-comer thinks he ought to have a station, these are depressed times and should be consider so by the commission as well as any other business concerns do.⁴³

Within a few years, even *Variety* would call foul on the Commission's continuous demands from over-strapped broadcasters, decrying what it called "the FRC's tendency to reduce stations to the role of perpetual supplicant for favors" and noting, "Especially are

⁴³ Elmer G. Beehler to the Federal Radio Commission, 15 June 1932. FRC Dockets: Box 363, Folder 1672.

the small stations at a disadvantage with lawyer fees and trips to Washington being the luxury they are."⁴⁴ But *Variety's* belated concern was of little help or comfort to the broadcaster struggling to make it during the worst of the Depression in the early 1930s.

As Beehler's letter hints at in its mention of newcomers, the FRC's implementation of the Davis Amendment added yet another realm of vulnerability for local stations. As noted in Chapter Two, the Commission chose to implement Davis on a "challenge" basis: if a broadcaster wanted to start a new station or increase transmitter power in a state or zone that was at or over its quota, he was required to identify the station or stations whose facilities should be thereby deleted. Although it is difficult to imagine how else the FRC might have handled new applications in such instances without establishing an official priority right to the spectrum, this procedure clearly favored better-funded stations. Wealthier broadcasters could usually point to their financial solidity, technological competence, and programming suitability, while poorer broadcasters often had to assert that their stations were operating in the public interest despite shaky finances, a record of technical violations, and sometimes a file full of listener complaints. Network affiliates could also draw on the backing of NBC or CBS, affording them better representation in Washington from the class of knowledgeable and well connected attorneys that quickly arose to navigate the politics and procedures of the FRC—attorneys that an Elmer

⁴⁴ "Cry Baby Stations: No FRC Mother to Guide Them," *Variety* 6 March 1934, 41. It is also worth remembering that the FRC was not the only governmental body that stations had to answer to and whose red tape they had to process; Congress and the Federal Trade Commission could also dabble in radio, and in 1934, the National Recovery Administration sued twelve local stations for NRA Code violations. "12 Stations Sued By NRA," *Variety* 19 June 1934, 52. See also Dennis W. Mazzocco, "Radio's New Deal: The NRA and U.S. Broadcasting, 1933–1935," *Journal of Radio Studies* 12, no. 1 (May 2005): 32–46.

Beehler could unlikely afford.⁴⁵ The unsurprising result was that local stations were at a significant disadvantage in comparative hearings for their facilities.⁴⁶

At times this also produced an internecine battle among local stations sharing time: if one station could gain even a small advantage over its time-share partners, it could often parlay that into more hours by having the other stations deleted. WHOM, Jersey City, for example, was an unimpressive station losing \$50,000 a year in a four-way time share, but it had the advantage of being slightly less unimpressive than the other three stations on its frequency. Its owners were socially and politically well connected (the FRC's report described them as among the "outstanding citizens" of Jersey City), and they were able to secure financial guarantees that would enable them to improve the station if they could wrest hours away from their time-share partners. In 1931, the time was ripe. One of those partners, WKBO, went into receivership; desperate for advertising support, it was reduced to charging a mere fifty cents for a spot announcement. Another partner was WNJ, which had incurred multiple technical violations, including frequency deviations, excess power, and failure to properly announce phonograph records (which the Commission took more seriously than one might imagine). Although the owner had responded by upgrading the station's equipment, the FRC found much to fault in its programming as well, which featured heavy direct advertising for its owner's radio store.

Operating at a loss, WNJ was also willing to sell time "at any price which can be secured,"

⁴⁵ NBC's Frank Russell even boasted about his success with the FCC in improving the assignments of NBC affiliates. Between 1929 and 1934, 82% of NBC affiliates had received favorable treatment from the FRC, including full time, more power, or better wavelengths. At the same time, no NBC affiliate had its service impaired during that time. Wrote Russell: "Maintaining the status quo frequently becomes the most important function of your Washington office. As many as 25,000 applications are received a year by the regulating body and many of them seek facilities of some station associated with us. To resist this onslaught of applications is a vital matter not only to our stations but to our company." F. M. Russell to R. C. Patterson, 15 November 1934. NBC: Box 90, Folder 54.

⁴⁶ The same dynamic, not coincidentally, also worked to disadvantage nonprofit stations that were less able to work within the FRC system than their commercial rivals.

including for foreign-language spot announcements of whose contents, the FRC noted ominously, the station's management was unaware. In a comparative hearing against these struggling stations, WHOM was able to promise significantly better operation in the public interest, backed by its owners' economic and social standing. The FRC deleted both WKBO and WNJ and gave their time to WHOM.⁴⁷ The case is just one of many similar illustrations of the tremendous vulnerability of independent local stations, exposed through FRC procedures to attack by better-funded and better-connected rivals.

Given this set of interrelated, even interlocking challenges—simple financial desperation, regulatory discrimination, and a system of winner-takes-all attacks favoring stronger competitors—it is in some ways surprising that weaker local stations were able to survive at all. But the discourses and structures of localism could also be turned to a station's advantage, allowing small broadcasters to define themselves against the national chains and their cultural offerings, securing an economic, political, and cultural base that enabled them to survive and in some cases thrive, even during the worst U.S. economic crisis of the twentieth century.

One weapon that local stations wielded was the rhetoric of positive localism itself: that set of discourses that articulated the "local" to values of neighborliness, community, and public order. Indeed, while one interpretation of the outcome of General Order 32 (above) is that more than half the named stations were deleted, another interpretation—the "glass half-full" perspective—is that almost half of those stations were spared. Most of those that made it

⁴⁷ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of New Jersey Broadcasting Corp. (WHOM), Docket 1150." FRC Minutes: Box 13, Folder "10/23/31 #449." It is worth pointing out, to illustrate again the FRC's shifting rationales and justifications, that just five months prior to complaining about WNJ's foreign-language programming in the WHOM case, the Commission had praised that very programming for serving "certain elements of the listening public that were not ordinarily able to obtain a broadcasting service peculiarly fitted to their needs." Howard W. Vesey, "Digest of Examiners' Reports and Decisions of the Federal Radio Commission," *Journal of Radio Law* 1 (1931), 322.

through the hearings did so because of one of two reasons. First, many of them were able to arrange local political protection; as *Variety* put it, "When a station saw the axe coming the congressman from the district up for re-election came down on the commission in full force--and the next case on the list was taken up only to be passed over for the very same reason."⁴⁸ Second, others were able to survive because they were able to successfully articulate their performance to ideals of a local public sphere in radio. Thus in the case of one spared local station, the FRC wrote of its "altruistic purpose in serving its community. It has devoted itself to furnishing wholesome amusement and information to the patrons of the three high schools in the city; it is distinctly a community proposition, with programs furnished by the various clubs and organizations."⁴⁹

As one might expect given the stakes, the proceedings were not without a degree of cynicism and hypocrisy. *Radio Broadcast* scorned the hoards of direct advertising stations "parading before the commission as altruistic local service stations," and reaffirmed its typical support of larger stations: "[I]t represents a greater sacrifice to restrict the range of regional and national stations ... than to lose the chamber of commerce and the local glee club program, indifferently released by an inadequately financed and low-power local broadcasting station." But even *Radio Broadcast*, no friend to the small station, also had to acknowledge that some of those low-powered stations had made a compelling case for localism:

So eloquently did some of the owners of the condemned stations present their story, that many a hard hearted enemy of broadcasting congestion felt that means must be devised to take care of as many worthy local stations as possible. Not

⁴⁸ "Duplicate Radio Chain Programs Protested," *Variety* 8 August 1928, 50.

⁴⁹ Federal Radio Commission, *Second Annual Report*, 158-9.

only must the rights of listeners to good reception be considered but also that of communities to broadcast.⁵⁰

The FRC occasionally seemed to agree, although when it did, it tended to couch its agreement in national-class terms. This was not localism for localism's sake, but rather localism for nationalism's sake: "It has also been gratifying ... to have the importance of the small community to the welfare of country so clearly demonstrated in the field of radio broadcasting."⁵¹ Along these lines, even WGL, the station notorious for the aforementioned "shrieking inmates" stunt, was nonetheless renewed based (at least officially) on its claims of public service for the national preparedness movement.⁵² Furthermore, like *Radio Broadcast*, the FRC was only willing to tolerate local stations to the extent that they did not impinge upon national broadcasting. Speaking of Norfolk, Virginia's WBBW, for example, the Commission wrote, "Naturally a station such as this could not expect to enjoy a large assignment of power, but should be allowed to continue in serving the community as it has been doing in the past."⁵³

Although many stations were able to play up their affirmative localism to save their stations in the summer of 1928, it is important to recognize that the FRC's profession of appreciation for local stations—even if couched in nationalist terms and backed by dozens of license renewals—occurred not just in a micro-political context in which senators could drop by the Commission's offices for a friendly chat, but also in a macro-political context of anger toward the FRC over the relentless rise of chains and the continued dominance of the radio trust.

⁵⁰ "The Low-Power Stations Plead Their Case." *Radio Broadcast* 13, no. 6 (Oct 1928), 337-338.

⁵¹ Federal Radio Commission, *Second Annual Report*, 153.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 159.

The Commissioners had just suffered through a brutal re-authorization and re-confirmation process; at the same time, politicians were breathing down their necks, calling them names, and smacking them upside the head (legislatively speaking) with the Davis Amendment. Such a politically fragile creature as the FRC in 1928 could not easily ignore these critics and their fears, and even its moderate and defensive support of localism reflects, I would argue, the policymaking climate more than the true sentiments of the Commissioners. The Republican-dominated Congress had shown itself receptive to supportive discourses of localism, so even a politically tin-eared figure like Commissioner Orestes Caldwell could figure out the value of the occasional trope of positive localism.⁵⁴ In that sense, localism could sometimes work as a political discourse for stations because it could also work for the Commission to protect itself politically. As evidence, it is notable that the already tepid celebration of localism by the FRC

⁵⁴ To see how Caldwell and his fellow Commissioners began to learn how to play the political game, compare the tone of two of Caldwell's statements, one in the spring of 1928, and one later that summer after a series of attacks on his motives and character by Republican Congressmen. The first statement, discussing the proposed Davis Amendment, insinuates that the Southern representatives pushing for localism are technological illiterates hell-bent on destroying broadcasting: "Having thus wrecked some of the greatest and pioneer stations of New Jersey and the East, let us see, for a minute, in whose interest this destruction would be done ... If the American people want to see our present wonderful radio-broadcasting structure wrecked, enactment of this abominable 're-distribution' clause is the surest way for Congress to carry out that purpose." Unsurprisingly, such outbursts won him few friends in the traditional local middle class and its representatives, with Ewin Davis himself accusing Caldwell of having "repeatedly and persistently misrepresented and endeavored to discredit the law, in an effort to save the excessively high power of a few stations, whose cause he champions in season and out."

In contrast, by later that year, Caldwell had learned to modulate his critique—still marginalizing local stations, but now couched in significantly less inflammatory language: "In order that local broadcasting stations desiring to reach only a restricted area may have an opportunity to operate, it is important that provision be made for a relatively large number of such local stations with powers of from 10 to 50 watts, and perhaps even up to 100 watts in a few cases. Such a plan will extend the usefulness of every listener's receiving set by making possible local reception in communities with station programs covering purely local events and features." The difference in style is striking, showing the Commission's increasing sensitivity to (if not sympathy for) the concerns of the traditional local middle class.

Orestes H. Caldwell, "Regarding Cuts in Broadcasting Power Imposed by Provisions of House Bill to Amend Radio Act of 1927" (Letter to Thomas F. Burley, Mgr of WCAP, Asbury Park, NJ, released to the press on 27 February 1928), Caldwell Papers: Box 1, Folder "Press Releases"; "Davis Amendment to Radio Law Just, Its Author Insists," n.s., n.d. (May-June 1928), Caldwell Papers: Box 1, Folder "1928 Clippings & related"; "Caldwell to Oppose Upsetting of Popular Radio Stations," *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 July 1928, 12, Caldwell Papers: Box 1, Folder "1928 Clippings & related."

during the ordeal of G. O. 32 would rarely be repeated—and never strengthened—in the remaining six years of the Commission. Furthermore, as discussed at length in Chapters Two and Three, subsequent FRC actions belie any heartfelt and durable commitment to local service. The Commission continued to disadvantage local stations and work toward homogenized national radio throughout its tenure. In a hearing with the FRC, promises of local service would not secure a broadcaster a license, and failure to live up to those promises would not cost him one. The tactic of local stations playing up their affirmative localism continued throughout the FRC era, but from a policymaking standpoint, such rhetoric was largely a pro forma exercise to legitimate the policy system rather than proof of suitability for a broadcast license.

IIb. Local Radio and the Economics of Localism

If affirmative localism usually had limited value as a political discourse when dealing with regulators, however, it could prove much more effective as an economic discourse when dealing with a broadcaster's audience and, above all, sponsors. This was not the exclusive property of local stations, of course: network affiliates, who normally profited more from local sales than network commercial programs, also had a stake in constructing a local identity in order to cultivate loyalty to a construction of local community. The object, said a Miami local broadcaster, was to "[create] in each local listener the sub-conscious thought that the station is HIS station, a definite part of his daily life, and not merely a medium of occasional entertainment."⁵⁵ But whereas network outlets could count on a strong market presence and healthy listenership for the chain programs as well as a steady source of relatively inexpensive sustaining programming, local and non-affiliated regional stations were much more reliant on an

⁵⁵ "My Conception of Radio Showmanship Is --" *Variety* 26 August 1936, 46.

imagined "local" to survive, especially during the lean years of the early 1930s. As the Lynds put it in their second Middletown study, "A small city station has an especially heavy and direct financial stake in featuring local matters that will attract and hold listeners."⁵⁶

It is important to note that these local stations did not necessarily appeal to a geographically "local" construction, often focusing instead on different ethnic identities, language groups, political ideologies, or class identities. Class in particular was a prime determinant of what kind of radio one enjoyed, with working-class audiences much more receptive to popular (even "vulgar") musical genres, transgressive politics, and oppositional speaking styles that again tended to put off middle- and upper-class listeners.⁵⁷ Derek Vaillant has also emphasized the various ethnic and racial communities of Chicago and the ways in which different radio stations constructed their identities to appeal to different groups. Clearly, the concept of a geographically based "local" was not the only option available for a station trying to carve out a niche for itself against its competitors, including network stations. Furthermore, as pointed out above, the geographical local posited by these stations was as much defined by economic and political imperatives as by actual geography, population, or legal jurisdiction. Nonetheless, in hundreds of towns across the country, stations claiming to be the "Voice of ..." (Portland, Maine, Coffeyville, Kansas, wherever) found places for themselves within a difficult and competitive broadcasting field.

In fact, given the right market, localism could often help these stations do better than the network-affiliated competition. As *Variety* pointed out, "In radio we have the spectacle and the seeming paradox of stations with 500 or 1,000 watts making more powerful transmitters run a

⁵⁶ Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown In Transition*, 264.

⁵⁷ See Doerksen, *American Babel*, especially Chapters One and Two.

poor second in the local races. The small stations have showmanship and the big ones often have only their oscillation."⁵⁸ One broadcaster who would have agreed with *Variety's* assessment was Don Davis, the station manager at WHB, a part-time, independent station in Kansas City. "It's tough to go up against some of the networks' big musical shows," Davis wrote in 1934, "and, of course, the indie seldom broadcasts spot news events of national importance—but in other respects the independent can lick its chain competitors time after time."⁵⁹ In part this was through simple counter-programming ("When the chains have dance bands and dramatic skits, we give them hill-billy"), but more frequently there was a direct appeal to local interest and attachment, from broadcasting municipal traffic court to airing "locally popular talent with tested audience appeal."⁶⁰ In short, it was about airing what another *Variety* article called "the flux and reflux of municipal life, with stunts, prize fights, wrestling, sports events, and court trials."⁶¹

Additionally, a local station could take advantage of the phenomenology of place, i.e. concretizing the local imaginary by inviting audiences to watch the shows being aired, thereby articulating performer, audience, and place to a local community in which they were all included. An example from the WHB case demonstrates the potential of this practice: the noontime program broadcast from Jones' department store in Kansas City drew an average of 1400 people per day for twenty-eight weeks. A station could also open its doors to local organizations to use the radio facilities, a move that had the effect of strengthening an idea of a local community that

⁵⁸ Bob Landry, "Take Off Those Handcuffs," *Variety* 1 January 1935, 85.

⁵⁹ Don Davis, "Indie vs. Network Setups," *Variety* 113, no. 3 (2 January 1934), 57.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶¹ "Air Showmanship Ratings," *Variety* 114, no. 3 (3 April 1934), 37.

was centered on the radio station *and* providing the station with essentially free sustaining programs. I will return to this practice below.

A station did not need to be in a relatively large and musically rich market like Kansas City for the construction of a profitable localism to work. For example, station KFIZ, a local independent in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, was equally adroit at articulating itself to an imagined local community. Begun in 1922 as a sideline for a local car dealer, the station specialized in phonograph records, news, and "chatter," giving away a car annually to help promote the station.⁶² Once an alliance was struck with the local newspaper in 1926, KFIZ's schedule became quite typical for a station of its size, integrating the station into an imagined local community using local talent, interests, and social networks. Thus the "Fond du Lac Players" presented regular radio plays, including religious dramas for Holy Week; the Fond du Lac Fireman's Band and the Elks Glee Club were regular features; the station aired live coverage of the county fair; and so forth. Fond du Lac's equivalent of the noonday concerts at Jones' department store in Kansas City was the (perhaps less festive) surroundings of the Dugan Funeral Home, a main sponsor that hosted radio concerts in their parlor; additionally, ads for KFIZ emphasized local station personalities and invited listeners to come visit the engineer in his booth at the station.⁶³ Local sports were another popular feature, and a rise in attendance was noted at the high school basketball games after the station began airing them, suggesting a further elaboration of radio's ability to exploit the phenomenology of place. As a team official explained, the broadcasts "cannot help but create a desire for the radio fan to attend a game and

⁶² Stan Gores, "Car Dealer With Radio Sideline Sought Business, Started KFIZ," *Fond du Lac Commonwealth Reporter* 24 March 1967, 2:4.

⁶³ "KFIZ Spotlight" (advertisement), *Fond du Lac Commonwealth Reporter*, 12 September 1936, n.p.

see who makes the noise—what the game is all about and why all this wild-eyed cheering and yelling."⁶⁴ The station, in addition to encouraging local groups and politicians to use its airtime, actively cultivated a civic image, for instance by promoting the local VFW's poppy sale, or sending KFIZ performers to provide the entertainment for such events as the Annual Badger Picnic.

The construction of a local community gave broadcasters the ability to imagine and program for a somewhat coherent audience. It helped them select which records to play and inspired them to dream up the kinds of novelty shows that might work—stunts like KSO's "Small Town Band Competition" in Des Moines; WHN's contest to saw a sponsor in half in New York; and—in a show that could have aired as a Fox special last week—KTSA's "Hillbilly Wedding" in San Antonio.⁶⁵ Regular features were often derived from the supposed interests of this imagined audience, and a station that hit the mark could do quite well with such local shows. KLZ, Denver, for example, aired a regular program called *Nuggets of the Rockies* comprised of skits based on the history of the old west; as a pamphlet for potential sponsors described the show's appeal, "Fact is, such material finds its natural target in Denver, because both city and state are littered with hand-me-downs from the pioneer mining days, and the citizens foster a strong interest therein."⁶⁶ The pamphlet noted that the show pulled the highest unsolicited mail response on the entire station. Articulating the station's offerings to the local community also enabled broadcasters to contextualize what might have been considered second- or third-rate

⁶⁴ E. D. Fruth to the Sponsors of the Radio Broadcasts of the Fond du Lac High School Basketball Games of 1934–35, 28 March 1935. KFIZ: Box 1, Scrap Book: 4/8/35–10/10/36. KFIZ: Box 1, "Newsclippings, 1936, 1967 and Radio Schedules, 1940."

⁶⁵ "1935 Showmanship Stunts in Radio," *Variety* 1 January 1936, 158.

⁶⁶ Tide Publishing Company, "Sustainer Check List," 26 December 1935. NBC: Box 42, Folder 20.

programming for easier consumption. Often relying on amateur or semi-professional talent, stations embedded these performances in a discourse of locality that encouraged audiences to approach them with a different set of expectations and reading practices than they would a high-budget network program featuring Eddie Cantor, counting on such discourses of positive localism as neighborliness and unpretentiousness to guide listeners' reception of locally originated shows.

More important than guiding programming decisions, however, was that the construction of a local community gave local broadcasters something to sell to sponsors when larger stations and the networks had the big-name talent and higher production values. In that sense, just as nationalism was for the network, so too was localism for the small station an *economic* discourse first and foremost, produced by the station for the advertiser in order to justify, legitimate, and perpetuate the commercial underpinnings of the radio industry—what I will call "market localism." As *Variety* casually put it, "Community showmanship is expressed in a great many ways. But never hard to recognize. Enterprise is the core."⁶⁷ Market localism was related to the discourses of civic boosterism discussed above and often served the same ends. For instance, one insider advised local station managers to find and exploit those intersections of local radio with local civic and commercial life: "Be appointed the official station for municipalities, Service Clubs, Association of Commerce and independent groups of grocery stores and druggists."⁶⁸ Those intersections were the same ones that were supposedly weakened when a Minneapolis local station shut down: "Instantly the city government, the community's business

⁶⁷ Landry, "Take Off Those Handcuffs," 85.

⁶⁸ "My Conception of Radio Showmanship Is --" *Variety* 26 August 1936, 46.

men, and the community itself, felt the loss of prestige."⁶⁹ Likewise, traces of both civic boosterism and market localism can be seen in an application to the FRC for a new local station in Pontiac, Michigan. In a clear attempt to defend Pontiac's place distinct from and in competition with Detroit for regional influence, the application connected local shows to their local economic base, arguing, "None of the programs broadcast [in the area] may be considered local to Pontiac and any advertiser desiring to advertise in Pontiac ... must also pay for the entire advertising coverage" including Detroit.⁷⁰

Although market localism and civic boosterism often overlapped, a key distinction is that market localism constructed a local community that was available for sale to anyone, including national sponsors who were advancing the same translocal economic structures that the Jeffersonian localism of civic boosters was designed to resist. When stations sold the idea of local community, then, they were not necessarily boosting the community, but rather positioning themselves as the ideal intermediary between sponsors—especially out-of-town sponsors—and audiences. In attracting non-local accounts, it was to the station manager's advantage to play up the uniqueness and local loyalties of his listeners. This tactic worked for both the local independent station as well as the network affiliate attempting to drum up more non-network business; stations of all sizes had a strong financial stake in convincing sponsors that only they knew the peculiarities of the local market. Thus we see Henry A. Bellows, now in his role as manager of WCCO in Minneapolis, practicing market localism when he claimed in *Broadcast Advertising*:

⁶⁹ "Radio – the 'Voice of the City.'" *Radio Broadcast* 6, no. 3 (January 1925), 442.

⁷⁰ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of Theo. F. Zemla et al., Docket 1445," 6 May 1932. FRC Minutes: Box 17, "5/6/32 #546."

[T]he majority of [WCCO's] radio listeners prefer a good local program to a program of equal merit coming from a distance. We find, for instance, that there is vastly more enthusiasm among the listeners over the broadcasts of the Minneapolis Symphony orchestra than there has ever been over broadcasts of symphony concerts from New York or Chicago.⁷¹

Similarly, Charles G. Burke, the manager of WDAY in Fargo, warned sponsors about the importance of respecting local differences: "[A] vast majority of our listeners go for hill billy music, if it may be called music, in a big way. They would tune out a symphony. Yet we have accounts, desiring to sell to the farmers, who provide beautiful music, when hill billy music is needed."⁷² As was often the case in market localism, Burke's reference to different cultural tastes had the dual effect of exploiting not just the national sponsor's ignorance of local markets, but also his national-class anxiety about the "locals" and their pre-modern ways. The seemingly gratuitous aside "if it may be called music" culturally aligned Burke with the national class, putting him on the side of national corporate sponsors and advertisers while securing for himself the privileged position of understanding his puzzling audience in a way that New York ad men could not.⁷³ Perhaps the best example I have found of a station exploiting this national-local tension, although from slightly past the date of this study, comes from an ad for WIBW, Topeka. It describes the Kansas "farmer's daughter" in terms seemingly designed both to lure sponsors to the Topeka market and at the same time undermine the confidence of a cosmopolitan ad man trying not to screw up a big account:

⁷¹ H. A. Bellows, "Broadcasting--A Universal Advertising Medium," *Broadcast Advertising*, August 1929, 25.

⁷² Charles G. Burke, qtd. in "How Can We Improve Radio? A Station-Agency Symposium," *Broadcast Advertising*, April 1932, 24.

⁷³ See also the discussion of *The Real Folks of Thompkins Corners* in the previous chapter.

Smart without being sophisticated, she leads her sex in High School or University. Her needs, as well as those of her parents, are those of Broadway, of Hollywood. Main Street and R.F.D. are disappearing. WIBW is keenly aware of this transition period and the increasing need for proper sales approach. Kansas is still Kansas. Its people respond best to sales messages from their own people in their own language. That's why you can't reach Kansas without WIBW.⁷⁴

Through this kind of manipulation of national-modern cultural difference and national-local tensions, local station managers attempted to woo lucrative national accounts away from the networks. While such efforts brought dollars into the local community, however, they did so by further nationalizing their locality in ways that were contrary to the objectives of civic boosterism, for example by promoting national brands and the practices of national consumption themselves. Nonetheless, in the depressed years of the early 1930s in particular, this tension would open a window for participatory local public spheres in radio.

IIc. Affirmative Localism, Market Localism, and the Great Depression

As Michael Curtin has pointed out in his study of the 1962 hearings on localism in Chicago television,

the most vexing problem [with localism] was defining the contours of locality. ... What marked the boundaries of locality? Could one really speak of Chicago without reference to the suburbs, the agricultural heartland, or the constellation of cities throughout the Midwest? Wasn't the city itself an amalgam of different factions vying for influence over the levers of social and economic power?⁷⁵

In untangling this "vexing problem" in relation to the above discussion of civic boosterism and market localism, it is important to emphasize the discursive nature of the local community that stations constructed for listeners and sponsors. KFIZ did not represent Fond du Lac, for

⁷⁴ "Meet 'The Farmer's Daughter' From Kansas" (WIBW advertisement), *Printer's Ink* 34 (January 1937), 62.

⁷⁵ Michael Curtin, "Connections and Differences: Spatial Dimensions of Television History," *Film & History* 30.1 (March 2000): 57-8.

example, but rather an *idea* of Fond du Lac that was fully subject to the questions of boundaries, inclusions, exclusions, difference, and power that Curtin identifies. This is not to say that it was a ruse—there is every reason to believe that most broadcasters were quite sincere in attempting to articulate a coherent identity for the people within their signal range and the sponsors to whom they sold that signal—but it should not be mistaken for an "accurate" depiction or description of a community. To take just one dimension of the problem, the programming on a station like KFIZ was a blend of local and national sponsors, local and national programming (including Father Coughlin), local and regional sports, and local and national culture. Some notion of a local community was central to the station's identity, but never the sum of it.

At the same time, however, it was a notion with real social, economic, and political effects. As Derek Vaillant has argued, "More than a 'radio imaginary' or an 'imagined community,' local broadcasting promoted face-to-face community life among its audiences, whether encouraging listeners to participate in programs as talent or guests, support ethnic institutions and causes, attend church, ... or even cut loose at neighborhood dance halls."⁷⁶ Christopher Anderson and Michael Curtin have argued that the concept of localism "simply cannot account for the diversity of modern societies,"⁷⁷ yet it is equally true that the rhetoric of localism nonetheless constitutes a potentially powerful political discourse and a crucial component of individuals' identities and behaviors. "Broadcasting altered public culture," writes Vaillant, "because it linked public and private spaces into new on-air configurations that offered

⁷⁶ Derek Vaillant, "Sounds of Whiteness: Local Radio, Racial Formation, and Public Culture in Chicago, 1921–1935," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (March 2002), 25.

⁷⁷ Christopher Anderson and Michael Curtin, "Mapping the Ethereal City: Chicago Television, the FCC, and the Politics of Place," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 16.3-4 (1999): 294.

listeners fresh ways of mentally and physically locating themselves and others within the neighborhood, the metropolis, and the nation itself."⁷⁸

This effect that Vaillant identifies is, in essence, how the local became an -ism. Broadcasters, citizens, and audiences advanced localist discourses and structures because it made sense politically, economically, and ideologically to do so, not because the federal policy regime supported that outcome. Local radio was effectively at the intersection of a defensive civic boosterism and an offensive and hegemonic project of national economic and cultural modernization. In that context, a strategy of linking public and private identities within a discursive construction of place, often at least partially instantiated in physical space, cultivated a source of social power through which citizens could attempt to encounter social change on their own terms. In the face of nationalizing forces that, among other things, reorganized space, they asserted a politics of place, taking their local and turning it into localism.

With that in mind, let us return to the question of affirmative localism and its function in early radio. My research indicates that the discourses and structures of localism were assisted by the economic crisis of the 1930s. At its simplest level, as discussed above, local stations turned to localism because it was a business strategy that enabled them to survive brutal economic conditions. Localism enabled them to contextualize their program offerings, articulate their value to sponsors, and demonstrate their public-interest stewardship of the airwaves to regulators. Many of these stations were living on the edge; if *Variety* expressed amazement that the "smallies" were surviving "despite the impossibility of figuring with a pad and pencil how they do it," much of the credit must be given to their ability to market localism as an economic

⁷⁸ Vaillant, "Sounds of Whiteness," 25.

strategy. This localism coincided with the needs of the wider local business community to secure its place in an emerging national order.

But affirmative localism in the early 1930s went far beyond that economic dimension or the demands of civic boosterism: local radio did frequently function as a local participatory public sphere, allowing citizens to gain access to the mass media to an unprecedented (and for many years unrepeated) extent. Looking over the archival record, it is hard not to be astounded by the number and range of community groups and civic organizations that produced programming for a typical local station. At times it was reminiscent of nothing so much as public access television in the late twentieth century, as stations allowed dozens of local groups—from churches to the Boy Scouts to the Lions Club to the Stamp Collectors club—to use the airwaves. Of course, the stations were directly responsible for what went out over their transmitter and carefully controlled who was allowed to broadcast, making the analogy to public access less than perfect; fringe and marginalized groups, including racial and ethnic others, often did not need to bother applying. But compared to contemporary commercial broadcasting, the degree of openness to citizen participation is striking. A 1933 report on WAAT, Jersey City, for example, noted that forty-four different Jersey City groups had been allowed to put programs on the air, while KMLB, Monroe, Louisiana, turned over its microphone to the local Chamber of Commerce, the Red Cross, the Parent-Teacher's Association, and an organization working on New Orleans flood relief.⁷⁹ WCGU, a struggling local station in Brooklyn sharing time with three other stations, was particularly impressive in the wide range of charitable and public organizations it allowed to use its facilities, as listed in an FRC report in 1933:

⁷⁹ Unsigned (Paul Segal?) to Herbert L. Pettey, 3 May 1933. FRC Minutes: Box 26, Folder "5/4/34"; Federal Radio Commission, "In re applications of Liner's Broadcasting Station (KMLB), Dockets 1536 & 1539, and Valdemar Jensen (WJBO), Docket 1514," 22 July 1932, 4. FRC Minutes: Box 18, Folder "7/22/32 #583."

The facilities were given to the Public Health Department of the City of New York, to the United States Government, Post Office in broadcasting early Christmas mailing appeals, to churches of various faiths, to orphan asylums and associations for aiding the poor, and associations to help the blind, to organizations engaged in the distribution of Christmas baskets, and associations feeding the poor.⁸⁰

Even a wealthy network affiliate like Milwaukee's WTMJ, for a long time one of the most politically powerful non-clear-channel stations in the country, turned hundreds of hours of airtime a year over to community groups, civic organizations, religious institutions, and government agencies.

While the utopian rhetoric surrounding radio in the 1920s no doubt contributed to the willingness of stations to allow a variety of groups to use the airwaves, it is not cynical to point out that economic conditions were an even more powerful influence. Given the depressed economy, local stations often found it extraordinarily difficult to sell airtime to sponsors, especially in the years 1930-1934, leaving them with hours that they were forced to program on a sustaining basis. As Commission Lafount pointed out, "many of the 450 stations not affiliated with [the] chains, and fifty others who broadcast chain programs only a small portion of their time, are having difficulty in providing worth while sustaining programs."⁸¹ They could not simply remain silent: if they failed to use a sufficient percentage of the time allotted to them by the FRC, they became extremely vulnerable to attack from another applicant seeking their facilities—the FRC did not look at all favorably on stations that failed to make best use of the public's airwaves. Network affiliates like WTMJ had already paid for sustaining programs from

⁸⁰ Federal Radio Commission, "In re application of United States Broadcasting Corp. (WCGU), Docket 1801," 31 March 1933, 6. FRC Minutes: Box 21, Folder "3/31/33 #659."

⁸¹ Harold A. Lafount, "Extract of Remarks Made By Commissioner Harold A. Lafount of the Federal Radio Commission at the Annual Assembly of the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education in New York City, May 19, 1933," 1. NBC: Box 17, Folder 34.

the networks, so they had no special incentive to produce local sustainers themselves. But for both independent and affiliated stations, unbought time could be turned over to community groups at virtually no expense to the station itself. This had the quadruple benefit of filling the time for free, staying on the regulators' (and, in the case of affiliates, the networks') good side, building goodwill among listeners, and giving form and legitimacy to the imagined local community that the station needed to sell to sponsors during the rest of their broadcast hours.

The result was that, as at practically no other time in broadcast history, the *discourses* of affirmative localism intersected with the *structures* of affirmative localism as stations around the country functioned as local participatory public spheres for hundreds of towns and cities. There are even many accounts of vigorous political dialogues taking place through the radio as political leaders rebutted each other over some local issue. Again, the caveat applies: there is no denying the exclusions and controls that often limited this phenomenon to mainstream and "safe" voices, and no one would claim that anything like a truly free and open public sphere emerged. However, economic conditions did open up a window in which ordinary citizens enjoyed greater access to the airwaves than they would for many years.

Conclusion

In the late 1930s, as economic conditions improved and local stations were able to sell time more easily, the window for affirmative localism began to close. Transcriptions, sometimes of network shows, increasingly solved the local station's sustaining programming needs, reducing the incentive to air traffic court or produce programs like *Nuggets of the Rockies*, much less let the Lions Club or the local college's chemistry faculty take over the station for an hour. This consolidation also coincided with the expansion of the networks and an increase in their

control over affiliates' schedules, further restricting the time available for stations to give away to local civic groups or to devote to local-interest programs and stunts. As one critic grumbled in 1936, "Between competition, imitation, and the mass production of platter libraries, local station programs are now about 95% standard stuff. Barring a few surface deviations due to locale, the fare brewed daily in Bismarck would sound okay in Boston."⁸² It is, in that sense, no coincidence that the late 1930s also saw renewed anxiety about the power of chains, the homogenization of radio, and the standardization of American cultural life. One result was the beginning of significant regulatory action at the federal level to promote affirmative localism in broadcasting.

In considering this period in radio history from the vantage point of localism, two poetic twists suggest themselves. The first concerns the discourse of national and local stations. In the early 1920s, that discourse worked to contain smaller and poorer stations, justifying and legitimating large broadcasters' privileged position in radio. In the mid-1920s, that discourse was meant to eradicate small stations as Sarnoff, Aylesworth, GE's Martin Rice, and others predicted the eventual establishment of a national radio system that would thoroughly marginalize or even eliminate local broadcasting. But in the late 1920s and early 1930s, while the networks were struggling with the enduring local structures that disrupted their smooth national organization, those now-officially-local broadcasters used the discourses and structures of localism to distinguish themselves from networks, program for a particular audience, and attract sponsors despite their disadvantages in programming, power, and frequency. One might call this the "making lemonade" irony: The national class in the 1920s condemned them as

⁸² Edgar, A. Grunwald, "Trend is to Novelties: Favor Programs for Audiences," *Variety* 26 August 1936, 47.

"just" locals, but despite persistent discrimination these small broadcasters found ways to survive and even thrive with and within that local label.

The second poetic twist concerns the interrelationship of policy, politics, and economics: the era during which public participation in radio's public sphere was arguably at its greatest was also the time when official governmental support for affirmative localism was arguably at its weakest. Policymakers spoke of service to the local community, but they pushed and regulated for homogenous national radio, almost never penalizing a station for failure to live up to localist rhetoric, nor rewarding one for exceptional local service if its financial and technical qualifications fell short. Despite this official neglect, participatory local public spheres emerged on hundreds of local stations around the country, primarily as an economic response to challenging conditions. Then, as times got better and stations were able to sell more time or procure inexpensive transcriptions, the financial conditions favoring affirmative localism diminished. This in turn led to increased governmental support for localism, aided by national-class fears of homogenization and mass culture as discussed in Chapter One, as well as concerns about the increasing power of the networks. In other words, policymakers—and the rest of the national class—tried to enforce affirmative localism in radio *after* the economic conditions that had favored it had mostly disappeared.

Radio did "re-localize" in the 1950s, as the networks shifted their energies to television and the growth of FM dramatically increased the number of stations around the country. This shift led to a burst of local radio, opening up spaces for underrepresented groups to gain access to the airwaves. For the first time, blacks and women would become licensees in significant numbers, while nonprofit and educational broadcasting enjoyed a revival. This 1950s localism allowed a significantly greater range of voices, tastes, and perspectives to be represented on

radio, largely in the interstices of national corporate culture. At the same time, radio (and subsequently television) became substantially less open to public participation and popular program origination than in the early 1930s. This distinction illustrates one site of the shift that Lawrence Lessig discusses in his analysis of the transformation of U.S. culture in the twentieth century: the transition from "read/write" to "read-only" culture. Lessig argues that broadcasting gradually eliminated most possibilities for a "read/write" structure in which ordinary citizens could act as both consumers and producers, and replaced it with a "read-only" model of radio that shut most citizens out of the production process.⁸³ This is not to deny the importance of active reading and popular acts of cultural production such as fan fiction, but merely to note that, in the case of radio after the early 1930s, broadcasting became significantly less accessible to citizens for their own participatory public efforts, especially in commercial radio and television. Thus, despite the importance of local commercial radio from the 1950s until the 1990s in fostering local public spheres and more cultural diversity on the airwaves, local civic organizations, educators, charitable and religious groups, political figures, and others were largely shut out of the studio until non-commercial community radio efforts gained steam in the 1970s and 1980s, an important change in the character and uses of broadcasting.

Various scholars have claimed that the relative weakness of localism in American broadcasting suggests the limits of a policymaking regime disconnected from economic incentives in a commercial system; as Robert Horwitz claimed, "To truly uphold localism would have inevitably undermined how the industry actually functioned."⁸⁴ My findings call that

⁸³ Lawrence Lessig, "Creatives Face a Closed Net," *Financial Times*, 28 December 2005. <<http://www.ft.com>> (30 September 2006).

⁸⁴ Robert Britt Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of American Telecommunications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 129.

conclusion into question; specifically, there was nothing inevitable about it. One might even say that to some extent, during the critical period of the early 1930s, localism *was* how the industry actually functioned. The FRC was more concerned with ensuring financial stability for the industry and with eradicating "bad" local programming than it was with encouraging positive localism during this time, but hard times enabled localism to thrive nonetheless. Had regulators responded sooner to changing economic conditions, beginning in 1934 and 1935 to reward efforts at affirmative localism and punish its neglect, effectively changing the system of incentives and disincentives even with so blunt an instrument as license renewal, the incipient economic shift away from discourses and structures of localism may have been slowed and contained. But policy trailed rather than led economic structure; an economist would be better positioned than I to judge the inevitability of that phenomenon, but either way it would be years before citizens would again enjoy the ability to participate in the mediated public sphere to the extent they did before 1934.

Over the course of the 1930s, the traditional local middle class continued to lose economic (and, increasingly, political) power, while the national economy continued to advance. The reorganization of the geographies and meanings of local life continued to shift, and notions of locality and "local patriotism" continued to adapt to new socioeconomic conditions such as chain stores and suburbs. At the same time, with the local middle class in decline, discourses of localism increasingly became available for those nationalizers who grew ever more disillusioned with the cultural changes wrought by the corporate economy and national mass culture. Even as the Second World War again undermined resistance to discourses and structures of nationalism, then, the FCC tried to encourage more affirmative localism in American life through policy

shifts like the 1941 Chain Broadcasting Rules⁸⁵ and other measures. Out of these struggles, as well as major shifts in broadcasting technologies, a new set of national and local tensions would emerge, and Americans would once again renegotiate the discourses and structures of place, power, and the media.

⁸⁵ See *NBC v. U.S.*, 319 U.S. 190, 193-196 (1943) for a concise history of these regulations.

Conclusion

I opened Chapter One of this dissertation with a quotation from one of the most engaging writers of the early twentieth century, Anne O'Hare McCormick, about the rediscovery of localism by cosmopolitans. Let me wind down this study with a quotation from one of the most engaging writers of the early twenty-first century, Michael Bérubé, on the persistence of localism within the cosmopolitan worldview:

[W]hen I got around to wondering why academic leftists and liberals would be so enthusiastic about "local knowledges" (either as postmodernists or as feminist standpoint theorists), I realized that when the left uses the term "local," we tend to imbue it with all the good feelings we have for local independent media, local independent bookstores, and local independent produce ... Sometimes, however, "local" simply means "parochial," and "parochial" means "never leaving one's parish." When I lived in rural Illinois, "local media" didn't mean NPR or Pacifica. It meant right-wing newspaper owners and Christian radio. ... [I]n a way, the preservation of the local is a condition of possibility for the continued existence of the cosmopolitan. That's a great argument, I think, and worth considering at length.¹

This study has explored this problematic using terms that are cognate to Bérubé's; indeed, I am not sure whether to cite Bérubé as confirmation that I am on the right track, or as further evidence of the politics of localism at work (either way I am pleased that Professor Bérubé finds it a great argument). As I have shown, terms such as "local" and "national" are not merely geographical positionalities, nor even merely geographically inflected social discourses, but in the context of shifting and unstable political and economic arrangements can also become markers of one's cultural distinction, class identity, and political project. In my concluding remarks, then, I wish to suggest some of the forces at work in the present construction of

¹ Michael Bérubé, Pandagon (response to blog entry), 1 September 2006. <<http://www.pandagon.com>> (2 September 2006).

"localism" in U.S. media and political thought, drawing on the insights gained in the previous chapters to ground this dynamic historically.

The local became an -ism in an era in which modern American cosmopolitans used the local to help secure class status in a changing economy. At that time, cosmopolitan white-collar professionals often defined themselves against the local, establishing their identity as urban, modern, and national rather than villatic, pre-modern, and provincial. The situational embrace and rejection of the local, always fluid and partial, but also always political on the part of both the national class and the traditional local middle class, worked to reorganize spatial and social relations in ways that empowered different social formations at different times. Furthermore, each class attempted to deploy both positive and negative valences of localism to its economic and political advantage. Tensions between positive and negative localism, between the local and the national, and between the local and the modern greatly influenced the way that both radio and American culture and politics developed.

Today, the cosmopolitan still rejects provincialism and remains urban (or at least, as Ron Becker has pointed out, urban-minded), but in contrast to the 1920s now derives much of his or her status and cultural distinction from a commitment *to* affirmative localism.² Now it is the unenlightened philistine, in the cosmopolitan imagination, who embraces the dominant national and global cultural and economic forces in their lives: shopping at Wal-Mart rather than supporting independent merchants, preferring the comfort and familiarity of the Olive Garden to a local family-run trattoria, and caring not a whit for the funky little record shop downtown that

² Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

specializes in local artists.³ Naturally this fails to describe, as did the national-class discourses of the 1920s, how people actually see the world and live their lives, which is to say that the local, now as in the 1930s, is an -ism, a set of discourses and structures by which differently positioned and differently empowered groups attempt to secure their interests within a volatile and complex social context. Only the sides seem to have switched.

Localism as a media policy reflects this same reversal. In the 1920s and 1930s, the cosmopolitans of the national class pushed professionalism, efficiency, and quality as key values around which to structure a media system, driving many nonprofit and artisanal stations off the air through onerous technical and administrative requirements, and encouraging national class-based programming standards on those that survived. It was the more conservative local middle class that pushed for more localism in the system through measures like the Davis Amendment and efforts to bolster local economies through radio. Today, the increasingly transnational cultural heirs of the national class, including what Becker calls the socially liberal urban-minded professionals ("slumpies"), tend to be more sympathetic to the values of amateurism, authenticity, citizen activism, and the DIY ethic of "read/write" cultural production: public access television, community radio, zines, blogs, citizen-produced journalism, low-powered FM, podcasts, and other forms of "grassroots media."⁴ In the meantime, criticisms of these projects come almost exclusively from conservatives concerned about unregulated speech and other ostensibly leftist features of alternative media. Although elites from across the political spectrum

³ Two recent and influential discussions of the class-cultural differences are David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) and Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

⁴ See for example Marty Durlin and Cathy Melio, "The Grassroots Radio Movement in the U.S.," May 2000. Online: Grassroots Radio Coalition, <<http://www.kgnu.org/grassroots/>> (20 October 2003).

can sometimes find common cause and rally broad popular support for more localism in media, such as during the 2003 debate over media ownership limits, media democracy and various media reform movements are almost entirely the passion of a very narrow spectrum of the populace.⁵ As the Bérubé quotation suggests, there remains a disconnect between cosmopolitans' embrace of positive localism and what they would consider the negative localism of actual local culture throughout much of the country, featuring Evangelical broadcasters, "hick" music, and the like.⁶

The period in which the broadcasting system was established was also the period in which the economic and political disempowerment of the local was well on its way toward reshaping American society, with mutually reinforcing results. This process of disempowerment is not yet complete, in part due to local resistances of the kind I have described in this study, but it continues apace and within an increasingly transnational context. It no longer makes sense to talk of a traditional local middle class, since the local economic foundation of that class identity has long since been eclipsed by or integrated into the national economy. Many economic sectors in which place still matters from an operational standpoint, including retail, service, and utilities, have been subsumed within national or international structures, with local authority and control continually under attack.

The media, just as in the 1920s, are still an important part of this process. After a period of partial media re-localization driven mainly by new technologies, especially the rise of FM in

⁵ See Robert W. McChesney, "Media Policy Goes to Main Street: The Uprising of 2003," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 223–258.

⁶ A good example of these cultural distinctions at work occurred in October 2006 when the voraciously cosmopolitan musician Moby, speaking on the program *Soundcheck* (a show on public radio, of course) boasted that New York is the only major market in the country that does not have a country music radio station. "Is Music Ownership a Thing of the Past?" *Soundcheck*, 27 October 2006. Available at <<http://www.wnyc.org>> (2 November 2006).

the 1950s and the growth of the cable television industry in the 1960s and 1970s, affirmative localism in media is again being suppressed and/or contained by translocalizing forces. In part this is due to the two large media trends discussed in the introduction: changes in the economic incentives of the media industry, including consolidation and concentration, and changes in media technologies that have fragmented and diversified the range and number of interpellations with which localist discourses have to compete for attention and loyalty. As a result, I would argue that the construction of a persuasive and politically effective sociospatial "local" identity is becoming more difficult, especially for media activists. Another important contributing factor is the well documented change in the structure of American social relations and a resulting decline in most indicators of social capital. Such shifts reduce the power of local resistance to these nationalizing and globalizing trends. For example, as phone companies seek to disempower the local by eliminating local cable franchising, local resistance depends on the existence of effective structures of information distribution, organization, and activism, all of which are heavily dependent on strong local social networks.

So what can the history I have presented reveal about localism today? How might it help activists think about localism and ways to strengthen the power of localist structures and discourses?

First, my hope is that the taxonomy of localism that I have established throughout this study will provide new vocabularies to assist a re-examination of the possibilities and limitations of localism as both a political project and a discursive strategy. Because localism is frequently invoked as a unitary and self-evident principle, there is value in breaking it down into the different forms and valences that it can take in order to better understand what it is, how it works, and in whose interests it functions. For example, the relationship between political localism and

market localism needs to be revisited. My research reveals that localist rhetoric has often been driven by economic concerns—not always successfully, as the advocates of "buy local" campaigns in the early twentieth century found out, but nonetheless powerfully. In other words, both New England and Jeffersonian iterations of localism gained visibility and effectiveness from an alliance with economic interests in everything from "city beautiful" campaigns to the establishment of local radio stations. Thinking about potential alliances between political and market localism suggests a fundamental and possibly artificial tension between localism and non-commercialism as key philosophies of alternative media. My research supports the contention that, at the very least, consumerism, citizenship, and community are not the incompatible modes of public life that many alternative media practitioners imagine.

In practical terms, practitioners need to revisit their suspicion of commercialism and strive to collapse the citizen-consumer dichotomy that structures much of their thinking, a binary that masks potential sites of overlap between political localism and market localism. While I am not necessarily advocating the abandonment of non-commercialism for public access television, community radio, and other alternative media forms, I do believe it is time to question the strategic cost and benefits of a too-strict separation between local economic interests and media projects that seek to foster local identities and local public spheres. As Chapter Five illustrates, discourses and structures of market localism can be supportive of local identities and public spheres, and examples are not difficult to find today. Those of us fortunate enough to have lived in Madison, WI, for example, likely understand the intersections of consumerism, citizenship, and community that occur weekly at the Farmer's Market: Madisonians circle the Capital on Saturday mornings buying fresh produce, signing petitions, accepting political and social fliers, encountering their fellow citizens, and generally instantiating a vibrant public sphere that fosters

a local Madisonian identity, yet that depends almost wholly on commerce for its existence.

While the Farmer's Market is not without its informal exclusions and structuring mechanisms, its political and social importance should not be discounted simply because it speaks primarily to particular class identities and is designed to maximize private commercial gain.

Similarly, media reform movements should welcome potential intersections between affirmative localism, political localism, and market localism, not hold them at arm's length. Many alternative media outlets, of course, already accept "underwriting," but often with great reluctance and at some damage to their mission statements. Concerns about the dangers of commercialism are not unfounded, and the slippery slope argument is persuasive in such instances. Also, I am mindful of and sympathetic to concerns about the ubiquitous commercialization of our culture and the distortions thereby introduced into our public life. Nonetheless, any worthwhile re-conceptualization of the social and spatial relations that constitute the local must take account of our commercial selves if localist projects are to improve their effectiveness. I have no golden rule to offer, but hope that the various valences of localism I have identified will make it easier for others to productively navigate the complexity and diversity of modern local interests, finding points of overlap, collaboration, and mutual advantage among them.

Second, I hope to have called sufficient attention to the class implications of invoking discourses of localism (even in the example of the Farmer's Market above). Anderson and Curtin, in their article about hearings on localism in Chicago in the 1960s, point to the fact that the proponents of localism were primarily middle-class white reformers who used it to battle the problems of mass culture as they saw them, while the masses themselves demonstrated widespread indifference to the principle of localism. Embedded in an assimilationist social

framework (i.e. expectations that class and ethnic others would assimilate to white middle-class norms), what emerged from these hearings was "a vision of community that suggested an integrated social system threatened by centrifugal forces of difference," marking any assertion of difference as contrary to the interests of the community as a whole.⁷ Anderson and Curtin's characterization of the politics of localism may no longer obtain: as discussed above, localism in media has become much more the preferred discourse of a largely disempowered left embracing cultural pluralism and anti-commercialism. This is not to say that only the left uses localist discourses and structures, but rather that the left is more likely to use the local as an -ism; this is what Bérubé was getting at in his contrast between the local media that the cosmopolitan left thinks about when it thinks about localism and actual local media on the ground in various places.

The point is that the politics and class basis of localism have shifted over time, but localism remains a principle that appears inseparable from certain class-based and politically motivated assumptions about the good life and the most desirable structures of social relations. It seems ironic—and from a strategic standpoint potentially maddening—that the dominant contemporary iteration of affirmative localism, positing an inclusive, culturally pluralist vision of local community, would be so class-based and politically alienating. Inclusivity can be a frustratingly exclusive idea. For example, free speech as practiced within public access television perpetually agitates cultural conservatives, even though they themselves are (in principle) just as welcome to add their own speech to the mix. Furthermore, alternative-media practitioners have no shortage of stories of their often disappointing efforts to bring marginalized

⁷ Chris Anderson and Michael Curtin, "Mapping the Ethereal City: Chicago Television, the FCC, and the Politics of Place," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 16, no. 3-4 (1999): 299.

and underrepresented groups into the alternative media universe. As Anderson and Curtin found, difference is still threatening, but those who find it threatening are no longer those who are the primary advocates of localism. Did conservative elements of the middle class, finding that localism was increasingly inadequate at containing difference, abandon the principle to the left? Or has this merely been a discursive shift: the left claims affirmative localism for itself, while the right continues to build local social networks through classical localist structures such as religious congregations.

What the political polarities of localism reveal about the social shifts of the past forty years must remain an interesting question for now; it is beyond the scope of this study to analyze the nuances of social difference and differentiation that structure this dynamic. But one important area for further exploration is exactly how and why the positing of "local community" often fails to be as inclusive as it might be. This is not to deny or understate the many successful examples of relatively inclusive affirmative localism in and through media around the country, bringing together citizens from a wide range of political perspectives, social classes, and demographics. Nonetheless, media reformers need to grapple with the ways in which localism remains a largely class-based discourse that fails to speak to large segments of the population within any given posited local.

Third, I hope to have made a modest contribution to media policy studies, in particular of the kinds of questions historians ask about the media policies of the past. Previous studies of localism, for example, made a range of assumptions about the intentions and motivations of policymakers and regulators that, on closer inspection, turn out to be unsupported. Whether arguing that early regulators intended localism to promote program diversity or assuming that these regulators were indulging a sentimental fantasy of small town life, scholars have repeatedly

mischaracterized how and why radio policy developed as it did. My point is not to criticize these previous scholars, many of whom have provided invaluable insights that inform this study, but rather to suggest that policy studies might be especially susceptible to historical projection, in part because "policies" themselves appear so declarative and definitive. After all, one can see the policy in black and white, and one can read what they said about it at the time, making it a deceptively straightforward object of study. My research shows that the intentions and motivations of official policy are best understood when legal and political perspectives are contextualized within broader social conflicts. Furthermore, the "success" or "failure" of a policy's stated or presumed intentions is not necessarily the best measure of its effects or importance. Media policy, I argue, must be examined at the interface of official regulatory acts and the ways in which those acts were adapted by differently positioned actors to the lived conditions of media in a range of social contexts. Through a greater emphasis on cultural approaches to policy, wider historical patterns are likely to emerge.

The importance of this point to localism today, outside of a handful of media policy scholars, perhaps, is to at least remain agnostic on the "failure" of localism as a viable and workable aspect of American media and cultural policy. As discussed in the introduction, the reputed inability of localist media policy to efficiently foster local identities and local public spheres can only support deregulatory measures that are indifferent or even hostile to the needs of local communities and the political empowerment of local citizens. If localism is based on a social fantasy, or if regulators cannot be expected to adequately enforce it, then why bother? We should instead shape the system according to other values, or simply let the market do its work. But if discourses and structures of localism can result, at least partially and situationally, in a redistribution of political, economic, and cultural power, as my study shows that it can, then

deregulatory or anti-localist policy approaches may not be the most desirable way forward as we shape the media landscape of the twenty-first century.

Fourth and finally, effective media localism cannot be separated from the larger problem of social capital and local public spheres, both as precondition for and outcome of localist structures. One of the intended contributions of this study was to suggest some avenues for research into the intersections of media, localism, and an embodied public sphere, and the literature on social capital seems to present an excellent if problematic starting point for those inquiries. It is an excellent starting point because, as argued throughout this study, localism cannot be thought outside of social networks and social identities, themselves structured in and through the relations thematized in the literature on social capital. But it is also a problematic starting point in that much of the literature is antagonistic toward electronic media, making it difficult to incorporate media structures into workable strategies for increasing social capital. Indeed, the most influential contemporary scholar of social capital, Robert Putnam, has explicitly identified television itself as the primary cause of the decline in social capital in the U.S., a position that silences productive conversations about the potential role of television in fostering local identities and local public spheres.⁸ Thankfully, other scholars of social capital are beginning to question Putnam's conclusions about the media, for instance by examining the role of place and spatial organization in the development of Americans' social capital, and clearly that literature needs to be brought into productive dialogue with studies of media localism.⁹

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁹ See for example Sam Abrams, "The Trouble with Television: Understanding Rational Consumption of Mass Media in the Digital Age," (paper presented at the conference "Inventing America," Charlottesville, Virginia, 4 November 2006).

As the above suggestion for further research implies, however, our ability to strengthen local identities and local public spheres in and through media is contingent upon larger factors than mere media policy, narrowly construed. In that sense, the fate of localism in American media as discussed in this study is cause for both pessimism and optimism. The pessimism must be occasioned by the breadth, enormity, and complexity of the forces of social change within which media policy is formulated. Everything from the physics of skywave propagation to the Great Depression contributed to the development of localism in American media; the human actions of policymakers, regulators, broadcasters, audiences, sponsors, and ordinary citizens were but one small piece of the puzzle, and even those were partly structured by broader cultural clashes and class disputes. In light of that, it appears that any attempt to exert control over our cultural systems will inevitably contribute only slightly to their future. Indeed, my interpretation of the class reversal by which cosmopolitans have now come to champion localism is that it is a response to these large forces that seem only marginally susceptible to change: Realizing their inability to control the power of nationalization and corporatization that they had previously supported, the former national class turned to the local as the site at which human action and therefore social control could most effectively be exercised.

But the story of localism I have presented here also gives cause for optimism. Despite the entrenched power of the national corporate system and the world-historical events and conditions beyond individual control, individuals and groups did manage to exploit gaps and contradictions within that system in order to bring some of their own social and political vision of modern America into being. They were able to use discourses and structures of localism to bend the cultural system ever so slightly in their direction—perhaps, as Bérubé reminds us, not always to the political ends that they themselves support, but nonetheless proving that policy and

citizen involvement in that policy can make a social difference. As we continue to search for ways in which to improve the media system and society as a whole, the history of localism in American media, 1920-1934, serves as reminder of the difficulty of social change, but also the value in the effort.

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