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Chapter 9

Sounds Local: The Competition for Space and Place in Early U.S. Radio

Bill Kirkpatrick

In 1932 an entrepreneur applied to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) for permission to build a new radio station in Jeannette, Pennsylvania, a town of 15,000 people about thirty miles from Pittsburgh (which then had a population of 670,000). He hoped to offer a more local 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.” The FRC summarily denied the application, arguing that Jeannette was already well served by broadcasters in Pittsburgh and did not need a station of its own.¹ The next year, the commission made the same point even more forcefully in the case of an applicant from Greensburg, Pennsylvania, a town of 16,500 about thirty-five 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.”²

On the one hand, these two cases (and hundreds more like them) confirm much of what we already know about federal bureaucracy. The FRC was not terribly interested in the fine distinctions between Jeannette and Pittsburgh, nor between Greensburg and Pittsburgh—nor, for that matter, between Greensburg and Jeannette. Surveying the radio landscape from their federal perch, the Radio Commissioners tended to perceive a *national* media system and, in the name of efficiency and rationalization, demonstrated little sensitivity to such local identities and

needs as presented in the Pennsylvania cases.³ On the other hand, these application denials tell us something profound about radio's contribution to Americans' sense of space and place in the early twentieth century. Larger cities like Pittsburgh were given a broadcast voice and with it a new source of local pride, regional economic advantages, and occasionally even national attention. Meanwhile, towns like Jeannette and Greensburg, which for decades had been merely *near* Pittsburgh, now found themselves, in part through the local radio signals they received, increasingly becoming part of "the Pittsburgh area." Given the civic orientation of much early radio, with local citizens and clubs producing a significant amount of volunteer programming on many stations, this refusal to recognize a distinctive local identity, expressed through the denial of broadcast facilities, radically curtailed public access to the airwaves. Residents of Jeannette and Greensburg, like millions of other Americans, were expected to orient their broadcast interests not toward a local station on which they potentially also had a voice as members of a local community but toward outside stations as mere listeners belonging to regional or national communities. The radio footprint itself thus became one important factor in struggles over the construction of regional and local identities, cultures, and economies.

Numerous scholars have observed that sound, especially through the medium of national radio broadcasting, helped to reorganize space in American life and create new iterations of the national imagined community. By promoting national brands, chain stores, and a national culture, radio worked to undermine local economies and cultures on structural as well as ideological levels; furthermore, by offering the possibility of a simultaneous experience across the country, broadcasting contributed temporally and spatially to a reconfiguration of Americans' sense of national belonging. This national community through radio was, in fact, the primary goal of early regulators, including commerce secretary Herbert Hoover, who declared national broadcasting to be the medium's most important mission: "Radio will not have reached its full service until we have such interconnection of our local stations that we may also enjoy each night the product of our greatest artists and the thoughts of our leading men and women, and may participate in great national occasions."⁴ In the words of historian Michele Hilmes, radio thus became "a machine for the circulation of narratives and representations that rehearse and justify the structures of order underlying national identity."⁵ It is not for nothing that the great national network programs and high-powered clear-channel stations of the 1930s and 1940s remain the bedrock of our cultural memories of early broadcasting.

Radio also had countervailing effects, however, privileging the local in

interesting, sometimes self-contradictory ways. For example, FCC decisions about which localities did or did not get a licensed station—and the kinds of radio programming that resulted—were just two of many aspects of radio sound effecting a local and regional spatial reorganization of the nation. As Jody Berland put it, “Radio, like other media, is constituted (and constitutes us) spatially as much as by genre, signification, or mode of address.” In the production of sound texts as well as the production of “local” audiences, argues Berland, we can recognize how radio’s spatiality intersects with economic and cultural power more generally.⁶ Specifically, the regulatory determination that localities A, B, and C should not receive stations of their own, but rather should all get their radio signals from locality X, strengthened emerging center-periphery relations and helped create new ones among previously discrete (or relatively discrete) local communities. This figurative remapping of local and regional geographical space through the airwaves contributed to the growth of the more centralized regional and national structures that would characterize much of twentieth-century American life. At the same time, such decisions also had the potential to remap cultural space, often boosting the reach and influence of urban culture (e.g., jazz, ethnic humor, urban civic concerns) while denying a radio outlet for rural or provincial tastes, talents, and concerns.

Many historians, including Derek Vaillant, Lizabeth Cohen, Alexander Russo, and Clifford Doerksen, have analyzed local resistance to broadcasting’s nationalizing effects, both in big cities like Chicago and in rural and small-town communities around the country.⁷ But radio’s complicated role in Americans’ spatial imagination through these local and regional cultural, economic, technological, and political flows deserves closer examination. Local radio participated in the spatial reorganization of the country in at least three distinct capacities: as *local boosterism*, which made local radio a tool of economic development in competition with other localities within a region; as *industrial strategy* on the part of local broadcasters seeking to attract local listeners and, importantly, both local and national sponsors; and as an *aesthetic mode* that both local and national broadcasters sought to reproduce and profit from. Each of these aspects contributes to our understanding of the growth of the media system and Americans’ shifting relationship to the nationalizing and modernizing projects of the early twentieth century.

Local Radio and Local Community

It is not easy to specify what we mean by local radio in the United States, especially for the early days of broadcasting. Technically and legally, *all*

American terrestrial broadcasting is local in that, since 1912, every station's license has been tied to a specific geographic locale (the "community of license"), and the licensee is expected to serve the needs and interests of those living within that locale.⁸ So even a 50,000-watt "national" clear-channel station of the 1930s, such as Pittsburgh's KDKA, though it carried mostly national network programming and could be picked up by listeners ten states away, was ostensibly mandated to serve the local Pittsburgh audience. At the same time, regulators also approved hundreds of low-powered "local" stations (up to 500 watts) in cities and towns around the country; their reach was usually just a few miles and they were never affiliated with the national networks. In between these two categories were "regional" stations, up to 15,000 watts, which might or might not carry both locally originated and national network programming. When radio historians talk about local stations during this period, they are usually talking about these independent low- and medium-powered broadcasters and their locally originated programming.

The connections between radio and listeners' sense of space are even more complex. As Doreen Massey has pointed out, one's "local community" is already less a place than an ever-shifting set of ideas about one's position in relation to others: what we imagine to be "local" to ourselves contracts and expands depending on need and context.⁹ Furthermore, these perpetual shifts in definitions of the local often have less to do with geographical or political boundaries than with social and cultural ideas about belonging and identity. Economic interests are central to this process (e.g., the suburbanites who happily think of themselves as part of a larger urban community until it comes time to fund infrastructure and services for the urban center), but transportation and communication also play important roles in our spatial imagination. In the specific case of radio communication, Harold Innis theorized radio as a space-binding medium, meaning that it can connect people across space but also works to erode the self-determination of peripheral groups. The struggle over what is central and what is peripheral, then, is an economic, cultural, and social contest in which communications media are necessarily deeply embedded.¹⁰

These definitional issues intersect in U.S. radio with the economic imperatives of the commercial system. The financial success of many local radio stations was closely tied to their transmitter power and thus the areas that they could reliably serve, even as they promoted the particularity of their hometowns. Radio sound thus played a complex role in American spatiality and capitalist competition. The permission to build and operate a station at a given locality (and thereby to have a proprie-

tary presence on the air at all) depended on federal regulators who were prone to ignore or erase local distinctions; those local distinctions nonetheless persisted, but the siting of local stations situated listeners in new relations—of center and periphery, of affinity and difference—to the towns and cities within a geographical region. At the same time, radio conveyed economic advantages to individual localities within those regions, and its programming often promoted new regional economic relationships even as it articulated local identities based on an assiduously constructed local specificity.

Radio thus complicated those ever-shifting ideas about one's position in relation to others and added new dimensions to the longer-term problem of defining local community, which was especially acute in the early twentieth century as Americans adjusted to the changes brought about by modernization, and struggles over the place of the local in American life intensified. In particular, the first three decades of the twentieth century were marked by numerous challenges to the spatial order of the nineteenth century, including new modes of transportation that helped expand the practical boundaries of one's geographic locale and new economic modes that strengthened the center at the expense of the periphery. Continuing through World War I and into the 1920s, local differences and practices were threatened by both mass production and governmental reforms like Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover's Division of Simplified Practice, established in 1921, which sought to impose uniform national standards on everything from the thickness of lumber to the weight of a loaf of bread to mattress sizes. Perhaps most interesting, this era was marked by cultural struggles over the place of the local community in modern America. An ascendant national professional-managerial class, loyal to no particular locality and often operating under the banner of modern efficiency, tended to privilege centralized political and economic structures that worked to disempower locally based economic elites.¹¹ This "national class" was invested in translocal cosmopolitan culture and corporate production that had little use for local idiosyncrasies and even less patience for local inefficiencies. At the same time, national-class spokesmen like H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis popularized a vision of small-town life as parochial and petty: attachment to the "local" itself came to be stigmatized as pre-modern and retrograde, antithetical to the power and potential of the modern American nation. This national class was, not coincidentally, the social formation that most profoundly shaped U.S. radio according to its own translocal ideals, laying the foundations for a nominally local but largely national media system that is still with us.¹²

Radio and Civic Boosterism

Recognizing the power of broadcasting in these struggles over the place of the local community in modern America, local business leaders around the country seized on radio during the 1920s and early 1930s as both an important advertising medium and a marker of “up-do-date-ness” akin to good roads and electrification. Although there were surprisingly few publicly owned broadcasters during this era (New York’s municipally owned WNYC was the most visible of the rare exceptions), local economic elites often vigorously supported privately owned local stations as commercial-civic enterprises. Radio, in other words, gave new form—and importantly, new urgency—to the very old strategies of civic boosterism. 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: “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.”¹³ In its focus on creating a congenial business climate, attracting outside investment, discouraging outside spending (a growing problem for local retailers, thanks to mail-order and automobile-enabled shopping trips to larger localities), 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 the booster’s 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.”¹⁴ Although Boorstin’s analysis emphasizes the undeniable energy of the boosters themselves and the competition among communities (which he calls “community-ism”),¹⁵ 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 localist rhetoric to police how people used their time, spent their money, and oriented their behavior toward a posited communal good. Significant social pressure encouraged residents 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 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.”¹⁶ Timothy Mahoney argues that through such rhetoric, “the booster ethos operated upon and through individuals and groups to contour and coordinate action and stimulate and promote town development.”¹⁷

Civic boosterism had long used discourses of independence and self-sufficiency to attract and retain capital and labor as well as to discipline residents’ economic behavior, but in the early twentieth century it had to carry the additional burden of defending the very idea of the local community as an economic and social entity. Boosters had to map out the place of the local within the modern nation and protect it from multiple threats to the local business community, whose economic prospects depended largely on real estate and local retailing. 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 as represented by mail order, chain stores, and the desire for national brands; increased mobility due to the automobile, which intensified the competition 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. Now able to drive to neighboring towns to shop for products and brands unavailable at local general stores, or to partake of national culture at a nearby movie palace, rural and small-town folk became less contained by geography and, as a result, less subject to local business-class control in their economic and social behavior.¹⁸

One important result of these shifts 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, but new technologies and economic practices after 1900 made possible the startlingly quick death of once-thriving towns; economic and cultural competition with neighboring towns became 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. For example, historian Hal Barron recounts the booster efforts during the 1920s of Oregon, Illinois, population 2,000, which was newly 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 in 1927 when advocating an ordinance allowing movie exhibition on Sundays, "If 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."¹⁹

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 cities, Oregon and similar towns had to suck away the economic and cultural life from even smaller towns and villages within their orbits. As Barron put it, "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."²⁰ 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, making localism increasingly predatory. The idea of "local" itself expanded and contracted as seemed politically and economically necessary (or expedient): business and social leaders sought to define the local community to include weaker locales while excluding stronger ones, and to articulate a local loyalty that corresponded to the geographical contours of economic possibility rather than patterns of population settlement, legal jurisdiction, or demographic clustering. Tellingly, such local loyalty was often called "local patriotism" during this era, a phrase that conveys the expected depth of active commitment to the identity and well-being of the town.

Arriving during this period of economic and social realignment, local radio broadcasting was especially well suited to this more predatory localism, reaching local citizens with "shop-at-home" propaganda and the regional population with advertisements for the town. Thus, while independent local stations often aired a wide range of programming, the ideal broadcast modeled the booster ethos of civic promotion, publicizing a town's openness to entrepreneurial capitalism, the attractiveness of its stores, and the general wonderfulness of its appurtenances. To listeners within the locality, the desired effect of such civic programming was the promotion of citizen loyalty (economic as well as social) to a distinctive local identity. To regional listeners in nearby towns, the goal was to attract investment capital, shoppers from neighboring towns, and tourism. A typical example of this civic booster programming was a 1924 broadcast prepared by the Northfield, Minnesota, Lions Club and aired over WCAL. Interspersed with musical numbers, the program discussed the area's agriculture, its two colleges (St. Olaf and Carleton), and Jesse

James's famous botched raid on a Northfield bank. A local newspaper from the following day illustrates the blurry line between outer-directed boosterism and the inner-directed cultivation of local loyalty: "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[?]"²¹

Local radio was thus freighted with the task of conferring structural advantages to local elites in competition not only with national economic forces but also with the other 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 "support your local merchants" campaigns, most citizens seem to have largely ignored the rhetoric and shopped wherever they wanted to.²² Instead, the desire to have a local radio station in one's town 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.

By the mid-1920s, radio was already considered so integral to the economic success of a locality that if no one else had entered the field in a given market, the business community often took the lead in opening a local station. In 1925, for example, sixteen St. Louis businesses each contributed \$15,000 to build a station "as a civic undertaking to tell the world that St. Louis is 'the center of centers' in America."²³ Merchants liked the competition between radio and newspapers that drove down ad rates, and radio could also reach customers that the newspaper missed—regional listeners who had no access to the local paper, and local and regional listeners who didn't read the paper at all. Similarly, business leaders took the possible loss of their stations very seriously. For example, when WLBW in Oil City, Pennsylvania, wanted to move sixty miles north to Erie in 1932, the Oil City business community organized a letter-writing campaign to the FRC to keep the station in their town. They offered just three reasons, all economic: concerns about the potential loss of business to Oil City, the resulting loss of jobs, and the decreased value of radio sets if listeners could not pull in a clear local signal. None of the letters preserved in the FRC case file raised concepts like local public service, a local public sphere, or even local identity apart from Oil City's commercial prospects.²⁴ Such issues of localism may have been important to the residents of Oil City, but the way that

the business community attempted to motivate those residents to write letters to the government was to construct the station as vital to Oil City's competitive stature within the region, indicating what the town's boosters felt was their best argument during the depths of the Great Depression. Even though Erie already had a station at the time (WEDH) and Oil City had only WLBW, the FRC allowed the move and Oil City lost its "voice on the air," and with it a crucial instrument in remapping north-west Pennsylvania to Oil City's economic advantage.

Perhaps predictably, nationally minded cosmopolitan critics usually failed to see these competitive processes at work and misread these social and economic discourses. When the Lions of towns like Northfield roared their communities' virtues through the ether, big-city observers had a good laugh at their expense, ridiculing the yokels' provincial pride in their dull, one-horse towns. Such critics were primed to see civic boosters (it's easy to imagine Sinclair Lewis's George Babbitt among them) as wasting valuable radio frequencies on local stations—frequencies that would be better used for "high-quality" national stations. The *New York Herald Tribune*, for example, was indifferent to the stakes in local radio, imagining local broadcasting to be nothing more than a wasteful exercise in ego-gratification that even threatened 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?"²⁵

Similarly, Carl Dreher, a prominent radio expert with close ties to RCA, completely missed the life-or-death struggle in which the traditional local business class saw itself engaged, attributing the desire for a station to an "irresistible impulse" to feel unduly important. As he scornfully wrote 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.

The preferred national-class solution was, of course, to reduce the number of these small local stations to free up room in the ether for the

high-powered network affiliates and large independent stations that they considered more important and worthwhile. In Dreher's words: "Instead of Podunk and Peadunk each having their own stations, they should share a transmitter and just each have their own studios."²⁶

Whatever the merits of consolidation as a technical solution to limited bandwidth, however, these critics largely missed the point about local radio: business leaders in Podunk and Peadunk were not merely provincial Babbitts with overblown pride in their respective burghs, but in fact saw themselves locked in a fight with each other for 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; indeed, one could argue that local radio promised a modern "repair" to the social changes of modernization, giving an ironic twist to the emergence of car radios in the 1930s. In any case, the marginalization of local radio among regulators, national cultural leaders, and industry powerhouses reflected not just indifference but antagonism to that project of local retrenchment.

Selling the Local

While civic boosters, as both economic and social leaders within a community, had one set of interests in radio, local stations often 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 constituencies that local broadcasters had to please: audiences, regulators, employees, and advertisers—both local and national.

Whereas network affiliates could count on a strong market presence and healthy listenership for their national programs, as well as a steady source of relatively inexpensive programming with which to fill the hours that they could not sell to advertisers, nonaffiliated local stations were much more reliant on an imagined "local" to survive, especially during the lean years of the early 1930s. As Robert Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd 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."²⁷

These local stations did not necessarily attempt to construct or appeal to an idea of a "local community" in the geographical sense, often focusing instead on ethnic identities, language groups, religious and political ideologies, or class identities. Class in particular often correlated with the kind of radio one enjoyed: working-class audiences frequently preferred popular (even "vulgar") musical genres, transgressive

politics, and oppositional speaking styles that tended to put off middle- and upper-class listeners.²⁸ Derek Vaillant has 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.²⁹ 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, when stations did posit a geographically local identity, it 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, such 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 poor second in the local races. The small stations have showmanship and the big ones often have only their oscillation.”³⁰ Like the local independent merchant competing with chain stores (and radio networks like NBC were often called “chains” in this era, with all the divisive connotations of that term), local broadcasters could sometimes exploit knowledge of the local market to successfully compete with national rivals. One such broadcaster 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.”³¹ In part this competition was waged through simple counterprogramming for local or niche taste communities neglected by the networks (“When the chains have dance bands and dramatic skits, we give them hill-billy”), but more frequently there was a direct appeal to local interests and attachments, from broadcasting municipal traffic court, to airing “locally popular talent with tested audience appeal,”³² to programming what another *Variety* article called “the flux and reflux of municipal life, with stunts, prize fights, wrestling, sports events, and court trials.”³³

Additionally, a local station could take advantage of the phenomenology of place, helping to make that slippery and shifting notion of the “local” more concrete by inviting people to watch in person the shows being aired, thereby articulating performer, audience, station, 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's department store in Kansas City drew an average of 1,400 people per day for twenty-eight weeks. Similarly, the "man-on-the-street" genre in which an announcer stood on a busy corner and chatted with passersby instantiated the local community by blurring the line between broadcaster and audience.³⁴ Additionally, a station could open its doors to local citizens and organizations to use the radio facilities, a move that had the effect of strengthening an idea of a local community that was centered on the radio station *and* providing the station with free programs to fill unsold airtime.

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. KFIZ, a local independent in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin (population 60,000 in 1930), was equally adroit at deploying discourses of localism. Begun in 1922 as a sideline for a local car dealer, the station specialized in recorded music, news, and "chatter," giving away a car annually as a promotion.³⁵ Once an alliance was struck with the local newspaper in 1926, KFIZ's schedule became quite typical for a broadcaster of its size, integrating the station into an imagined local community using local talent, interests, and social networks.³⁶ 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's department store in Kansas City took place in the (presumably less festive) surroundings of the Dugan Funeral Home, a main sponsor that hosted radio concerts in its parlor; additionally, ads for KFIZ emphasized local station personalities and invited listeners to visit the engineer in his booth at the station.³⁷ 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 see who makes the noise—what the game is all about and why all this wild-eyed cheering and yelling."³⁸ In addition to encouraging local groups and politicians to use its airtime, the station actively cultivated a local 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.³⁹

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 KTSA’s “Hillbilly Wedding” in San Antonio.⁴⁰ 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 in Denver, for example, aired a highly successful regular program called *Nuggets of the Rockies* composed 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.”⁴¹

Articulating the station’s offerings to the local community also enabled broadcasters to contextualize what might have been considered second- or third-rate programming for easier consumption. Often relying on amateur or semiprofessional talent, stations embedded these performances in a discourse of locality that encouraged audiences to approach such shows with different expectations and interpretive lenses than they would a high-budget network program featuring Eddie Cantor or Rudy Vallee, counting on such discourses of localism as “neighborliness” and “unpretentiousness” to guide listeners’ reception of locally originated shows.

In that sense, sound could have yet another spatial correlate, with the polished and professional talent of the networks “sounding” national and the slightly-less-ready-for-primetime glee club “sounding” local. Here, too, national-class critics had little sympathy for the ways in which local stations sought to promote a lens through which the available local talent could be appreciated by their local listeners. Just as Carl Dreher had complained about Podunk and Peadunk clogging up the dial, so too did John Wallace, writing in *Radio Broadcast*, complain about the “provincial minded” yokels whose baffling willingness to listen to Aunt Millie read her poems threatened to overrun the “real” talent on the network stations. In an article provocatively titled “Should the Small Station Exist?” Wallace agreed to tolerate small broadcasters only if they kept their local offerings out of the way of national programs:

The farmers and other dwellers in the Centerville area are just as likely to prefer the wares of Centerville’s 10-watt broadcasting station to those of WCCO as they are likely to prefer the Centerville *Bugle* to the Minneapolis *Tribune*. Probably they are personally acquainted with most of the performers who appear before the Centerville station’s microphone, or at least they know the announcer’s cousin Nellie or their nephew goes to the same District school as the Staff Organist’s son. Hence their interest in the local program is natural enough, and since they enjoy it they are entitled to it. But we are all in favor of abolishing the small station from the metropolitan area.⁴²

“Sounding local” may have worked financially for local stations, then, but it also offended the national-class critics who disproportionately

influenced the federal policy decisions that could disempower local independents, and fed the Babbitt stereotype that helped fuel the local-national struggles of the period.

More important than guiding programming decisions and shaping listeners' tastes, the idea 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, localism was an economic discourse first and foremost for the small station, produced for the advertiser in order to justify, legitimate, and perpetuate the commercial underpinnings of the radio industry. This "market localism" was related to the discourses of civic boosterism discussed above and often served the same ends, as 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.⁴³

Although market localism and civic boosterism often overlapped, they were not completely compatible projects. The key distinction is that civic boosterism sought to cultivate "local patriotism," while market localism constructed a local community that was available for sale to anyone, including national sponsors who were advancing the very translocal economic structures that civic boosterism 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-mindedness 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, a former radio commissioner who subsequently went back through the revolving door to become manager of CBS-affiliate WCCO in Minneapolis, practicing market localism when he claimed in *Broadcast Advertising*: "The 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."⁴⁴ Whether this claim was true or not,

it did put sponsors on notice that they should strongly consider working with WCCO locally rather than with CBS nationally if they wanted to do well in the Twin Cities market. Similarly, Charles G. Burke, the manager of WDAY in Fargo, warned national 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.”⁴⁵

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 cosmopolitan anxiety about the “locals” and their strange, pre-modern ways. Ad men themselves often contributed to the success of this strategy; as T. J. Jackson Lears argues, advertisers tended to hold themselves apart (and above) the consumers they were trying to reach: “This outlook required that admakers emphasize the social and intellectual chasm separating themselves from their audience.”⁴⁶ Michael Curtin adds that Chicago advertising agencies took particular advantage of this supposed chasm, claiming that their midwestern sensibility allowed them to know what would “play in Peoria” and thus bridge the cultural gap between urban cosmopolitanism and small-town life.⁴⁷ What worked for ad men vis-à-vis sponsors also worked for local stations vis-à-vis advertisers. Thus, Burke’s seemingly gratuitous aside—“if it may be called music”—culturally aligned him 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.⁴⁸ Perhaps the best example I have found of a station exploiting this national-local tension comes from an advertisement in a national advertising industry journal 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 to undermine the confidence of a cosmopolitan ad man—an ad man who himself was trying to maintain a sense of cultural superiority while simultaneously not screwing up a big account: “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.”⁴⁹ Through this kind of manipulation of local-modern cultural differences and national-local tensions, local station managers attempted to woo lucrative national accounts away from the networks. This is not

to suggest that it was a fair fight. Local stations could still struggle mightily—one South Dakota station was in such dire straits in the early 1930s that it was reduced to playing not shellac phonograph records but lower-fidelity paper records that it received as free promotions from record companies—and network affiliation was still the key to assured profitability in 1930s radio.⁵⁰ These economic realities help explain the hundreds of petitions for increased transmitter power filed with the FRC and the FCC during this period: the desire of the business class to poach business from ever farther outlying towns coincided with the desire of the station owner to get a powerful enough signal to secure network affiliation. But in lieu of such FRC-conferred advantages, “sounding local” to listeners as well as advertisers proved a viable strategy for small broadcasters around the country.

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. Lears calls this the “universalist rhetoric of modernity” and argues that the discourses and practices of the new economy “helped rural folk submerge local and regional idiosyncrasies in standardized commercial style . . . [and a] growing uniformity of taste.”⁵¹ Hal Barron links the same phenomenon to the kind of reorganization of space that radio facilitated: “The growing centrality of cities and the rise of consumer culture threatened to erode traditional sources of authority and diminish the social and cultural primacy of local communities.”⁵² The irony, then, is the significant degree to which market localism and the local identities it precipitated helped make local radio an important part of this process of local diminishment.

Sounding Local and Translocal Localism

A similar irony may be found in the ways in which national network shows found ways to tap into listener interest in the “neighborliness” and “unpretentiousness” of local radio: the production of what Hal Barron identifies as a transregional local identity. In other words, even big-city producers of national programs for NBC and CBS could learn to “sound local,” using aesthetic markers of “local” broadcasting (e.g., regional accents, colloquial speech, a “common man” persona, plots involving small-town life) to posit shared “local” values of simplicity, neighborliness, independence, and face-to-face communication while advancing national economic and cultural structures.⁵³ Specific examples of such shows will be discussed below, but the most prominent ones

include *Memory Lane*, *The Real Folks of Thompkins Corners*, *Lum and Abner*, and *National Barn Dance*.

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” (for example, Figures 9.1 and 9.2). In a particularly absurd iteration of this phenomenon, small-town presses around the country ran mass-produced, nationally distributed ads for civic boosterism, prepared by syndicators, that urged readers to “buy local.” But although the discourse was well established by the mid-1920s, the national networks were slow to draw on its power, not least because of the hostility to the “local” that equated socially responsible programming with national-class norms of propriety, decorum, and cosmopolitan taste. Over time, however, national programming increasingly employed an aesthetic of localism to overcome resistance to urban culture or appeal to different market segments, even as it continued to advance national radio at the expense of local radio and a shared national culture over local cultures and public spheres.

“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 in Shenandoah, Iowa, or the exuberant hucksterism of a Nils Thor Granlund (better known as “NTG”) on WHN in New York. “People don’t care about gentle, modest talk,” argued William K. Henderson, a notorious populist radio personality who ran Shreveport’s KWKH, “They want it strong.”⁵⁴ As for the cultural selections themselves, in 1924 “farmer radio” pioneer Henry Field described his station’s style to a conference of mostly corporate broadcasters: “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 “sounding local” 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.”⁵⁵

Although national-class publications like *The Nation* continued to mock figures like Field for “talking familiarly to the folks,”⁵⁶ large broadcasters increasingly began taking Field’s advice during the late 1920s and early 1930s, abandoning the elevated speech and mid-Atlantic

BILL BOOSTER SAYS



Fig. 9.1–9.2: Syndicated cartoons such as “Bill Booster” and “Mickie Says” (both by Charles Sughroe) and other features constructed a generic, translocal “local” identity for hundreds of localities around the country. Sources: *Mountain Democrat* (Placerville, Calif.), 30 June 1923, 10; *Cuba City News-Herald* (Cuba City, Wisc.), 8 Feb. 1924, 8. Images courtesy of International Paper Company.

accents known as “potted-palm” programming for more “home-town stuff,” and to great success. In 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 Gentlemen” 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*.”⁵⁷ Advertising trade journals and the networks’ own promotional literature from the era 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 a few years later in *Variety* another advised his colleagues to develop “original program ideas through broadcasts having ‘Main Street’ appeal.”⁵⁸ Similarly, by 1935 an NBC pamphlet urged sponsors to follow the advice of a former BBC director of talks: “The 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.”⁵⁹

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 during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Michele Hilmes discusses this phenomenon at work in non-musical programs like *Memory Lane*, *The Real Folks of Thompkins Corners*, *Smackout*, and *Lum and Abner*. These and other broadcasts 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 localism through the ether; as the creators of *Memory Lane* admitted, “There 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.”⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹ 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 locale were white, presumably Protestant, and safely middle class. On radio’s generic Main Street, if 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.

Such shows became just one of many different genres, not all of them reacting against urban culture,⁶² but they remain a significant part of the story of local radio. While small, independent local broadcasters like Mr.

Davis in Kansas City sought to use their localness as a way to compete with national radio, the emergence of translocal localism represented competition from the networks in the realm of imagining—and giving sound to—the “American local community” even as the economics of national radio sucked dollars and cultural influence away from actual local communities around the country. And while local elites were trying to use local specificity to remap the spatial (and economic) relations within a region, national broadcasters were using local *non*-specificity to remove the spatial dimension altogether, constructing a localism whose place in modern America was only on the ether, a vast radio elsewhere that nonetheless sounded “local.”

Conclusion: Assessing the Legacies of Early Local Radio

The purpose and importance of local radio remain contested today, and struggles over the place of the local within the national economy and the national media system continue; these battles often center on the question of whether we should be concerned about localism at all. This chapter puts such issues in historical perspective. The technical, economic, and semantic characteristics of local radio during the 1920s and early 1930s became integrated into larger struggles over the spatial, economic, and cultural reorganization of American life at a key moment in the emergence and consolidation of a national culture. The devaluation of local radio in favor of national radio at the time—paralleled in radio scholarship ever since—was no innocent endorsement of “quality” broadcasting but a significant aspect of class, cultural, and geographical realignment. As the cases of Jeannette and Greensburg (and hundreds more such “Podunks” and “Peadunks”) demonstrate, the marginalization of local radio during this period was part of a nationalizing project underwritten by federally minded authorities in the name of efficiency and rationalization, and by nationally minded cultural critics in the name of quality and progress.⁶³ In that sense, it was part of a broader cultural project supported by urban, cosmopolitan elites to privilege national culture at the expense of local and regional cultures and identities (a marked difference from our present era, when urban-minded cosmopolitan elites consider “buying locally” an act of civic virtue). But putting it this way, in an oversimplified local-national dichotomy, understates the complexity of the local and regional reorganization of space of which local radio was a central part—the predatory localism of Oregon, Illinois, or the defensive localism of WHB in Kansas City. That the role of local radio in these struggles was unpredictable and contradictory speaks less to the value of localism as a media policy than to the success of the forces of national culture and national economy in remapping

and resituating the local in American life. It also illustrates the shortcomings of overly political-economic approaches that attribute the relative weakness of localism in the U.S. media system primarily to network corporate power and the failure of regulators to keep that power in check: yes, national economic forces were strong, but questions of the local in policy, economics, and culture were too complex and too interwoven with larger cultural and spatial trends to reduce to a simple David and Goliath story. Like sound itself, Americans' senses of local and national space—both geographic and social—shifted and echoed well beyond the scope of national-corporate control.

What is at stake in the ways that local radio developed over this period? Beyond the role that it played in remapping Americans' sense of space, which was profound, the growth of local broadcasting within a system of capitalist competition also had important effects on American culture and media democracy. As the worst of the Depression eased during the late 1930s and available advertising dollars increased for sponsored programming, even small local radio stations began to professionalize by using paid talent and syndicated programs, gradually reducing space for civic radio of the kind that the Northfield Lions Club or the Fond du Lac Elks Glee Club actively participated in during the 1920s and early 1930s. The spatial and cultural valence of local radio shifted as the public's access to the airwaves diminished. The local would continue to be an important signifier and a major part of what a radio station had to sell, but increasingly that local was defined primarily by the station and its sponsors: the construction of local identities and public spheres in and through radio became less of a collaborative process in which citizens had a voice. It would be another forty years before cable access television and community radio made possible the degree of public media production that was common in early local radio. And as the advent of the Internet indicates, the competition to define space and place through the media system is far from over.