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## **“The Air Belongs to the People”: The Rise and Fall of a Postwar Radio Reform Movement**

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### **Abstract**

The postwar 1940s witnessed the beginnings of a full-fledged broadcast reform movement composed of labor activists, African Americans, disaffected intellectuals, Progressives, educators, and religious organizations. Although this reform movement would never realize the full sum of its parts before it was quelled by reactionary forces, it would succeed in registering significant victories as well as laying the necessary groundwork for future reform. The following analysis draws from archival materials and interviews to recover a largely forgotten moment in broadcast history, one that holds much contemporary relevance for current media reform efforts and media policy issues.

### **Keywords**

Media Reform; Media History; Broadcast Policy; Radio Studies; Social Movements

### **Disciplines**

Broadcast and Video Studies | Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

# “The Air Belongs to the People”: The Rise and Fall of a Postwar Radio Reform Movement

Victor Pickard

*The postwar 1940s witnessed the beginnings of a full-fledged broadcast reform movement composed of labor activists, African Americans, disaffected intellectuals, Progressives, educators, and religious organizations. Although this reform movement would never realize the full sum of its parts before it was quelled by reactionary forces, it would succeed in registering significant victories as well as laying the necessary groundwork for future reform. The following analysis draws from archival materials and interviews to recover a largely forgotten moment in broadcast history, one that holds much contemporary relevance for current media reform efforts and media policy issues.*

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The vehemence with which segments of the U.S. public criticized 1940s radio is difficult to overstate. In its 1946 year-end review, the *New York Times* found “radio subjected to more obverse and insistent criticism than the industry had experienced in the whole of its previous twenty-five years” (Gould, 1946, p. 9). Another article claimed, “Criticism of radio is not new, but in 1946, as the industry enters its third decade richer, more powerful and more excruciatingly vulgar and meaningless than ever before, impatience has reached a higher peak of articulate disgust” (Young, 1946). A Harvard report on American media noted, “One need be no soft paternalist to believe that never in the history of the world have vulgarity and debilitation beat so insistently on the mind as they do now from screen, radio, and newsstand” (1945, p. 30). While there was significant agitation against media in general, the most pronounced activism focused on the airwaves, leading *Fortune Magazine* in 1947 to dub it the “revolt against radio.”

Although articulated most forcefully among intellectuals and activists, evidence suggests that the depth and breadth of public unrest was more widespread than a few malcontents. Community radio “listening councils” sprang up to monitor local programming. Films and novels such as *The Hucksters* depicting sinister media moguls and advertising agents attracted significant audiences and press attention. Major newspapers and opinion journals across the country – particularly on the left, but also in mainstream trade journals such as *Tide* and *Variety*, popular magazines such as *Reader’s Digest* and *Life*, and business journals such as *Fortune Magazine* and *Business Week* – railed against the state of American broadcasting.

Much postwar criticism centered on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the government agency founded by Congress in 1934 to regulate telecommunications and broadcasting, and increasingly a target of activist interventions and public outrage. Indeed, FCC files at this time were stuffed with listeners’ complaints, indicating a pronounced anger toward radio. While social movements pushed from below, progressive policy proposals such as the FCC “Blue Book” and the Hutchins Commission’s radio report emerged from elite circles (Pickard, 2010a, 2011a). Many believed the postwar changes sweeping American society also could lead to structural media reform.

## Postwar America

The postwar period saw a moment of transition and “reconversion” in the U.S., and core social institutions came under increased scrutiny. New Deal liberalism had begun to falter with the rise of an anti-communist, conservative resurgence (Brinkley, 1995), but, despite this political shift to the right, a window of opportunity arose in the mid-to-late 1940s when structural reform still seemed possible. American society was not yet in thrall to reactionary politics, and many social movements, including those supporting labor and civil rights, continued to agitate for reform. The former saw massive strike waves in the mid-1940s (Lipsitz, 1994), and the latter saw a spike in momentum as African American veterans returned from war (Barlow, 1999). As these groups sought fairer representation on the air, their activism increasingly focused on radio as a vehicle for advancing specific issues, as well as a target for interventions to restructure the medium itself to become less hostile to activist messages (Fones-Wolf, 2006).

A three-pronged assault against commercial radio came from social movements, progressive policymakers, and average American listeners who were upset with their typical radio fare. In particular, widespread condemnation of radio’s “excessive commercialism” galvanized a broad canvas of critical press coverage and irate letters sent to the FCC (Pickard, 2011b). The radio broadcasting industry already faced uncertainty given the impending competition from television combined with a steep decline in revenue and loss of lucrative wartime sponsors (*Time*, 1946). For a brief period, historical conditions seemed ripe for a structural overhaul. Although this contentious moment would help direct U.S. media’s trajectory for the ensuing generations, this chapter in the history of American media reform has only rarely been mentioned in prior research and has yet to receive its due attention.

## Previous Literature

Many historical accounts touch upon 1940s radio (for example, Barnouw, 1968; Sterling & Kittross, 1978; Brinson, 2004; Hilliard & Keith, 2010), but few address discontent regarding its commercialization. Horwitz (1997) situates these years as the second of three key media reform periods, occurring after questions of broadcasting ownership and control were decided in the 1930s, and before public broadcasting was established in the 1960s. Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2003) see 1945 as the starting point for a new policy paradigm of “public service” media policy, while Sterling & Kittross (1978) depict it as the “Era of Great Change.” Havig (1984) suggests that popular criticism posed as a great challenge to broadcasters as did technological and financial disruptions. However, few histories have specifically addressed the importance of social movements and their efforts towards media reform.

In fact, previous foundational literature has argued that people were generally happy with radio (Baughman, 1992) or that significant reform efforts had ended by the mid-1930s (McChesney, 1993). Baughman suggests that in the 1940s people were largely satisfied with radio and that “critics of radio’s commercial, oligopolistic foundations were few and far between” (1992, p. 20). Lazarsfeld ends his classic 1946 study with the observation that people generally accepted radio’s commercial nature. Other historians see less complacency toward radio, but conclude that the fundamental questions of ownership and control were largely settled by the mid-1930s (McChesney, 1993; Smulyan, 1994).

Although much was put to rest in the 1930s when a commercial, privatized system prevailed over public alternatives – as McChesney’s work convincingly shows – crucial questions involving broadcasters’ obligations to the public remained. More recent scholarship is beginning to provide a counter-narrative by uncovering evidence that many constituencies were unhappy with 1940s commercial radio and resistance was commonplace (Toro, 2000; Socolow, 2002; Newman, 2004; Fones-Wolf, 2006). Noting how this criticism differed from the 1930s, Newman asserts: “Instead of an intellectual elite attacking the commercial industry, a popular and widespread critique of the advertisers’ control over the American system of broadcasting emerged in 1946-1947” (2004, p. 291). Other historians have explored the media interventions of specific groups, especially labor (Godfried, 1997; Fones-Wolf, 2006) and African Americans (Barlow, 1999; Savage, 1999). In her study on the labor movement’s radio activism, Fones-Wolf (2006) argues that the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ (CIO) attacks on the NAB fomented a larger movement based on a “loose media reform coalition” that was both “wide-ranging” and now “largely forgotten” (p. 126). Similarly, Toro (2000) observes that postwar “political struggles over program regulation reveal the continuous presence of social reform groups as participants in the FCC’s broadcast policymaking.”

Despite these revisionist trends, a thorough history of the 1940s broadcast reform movement does not yet exist. While Fones-Wolf’s emphasis on labor’s role within this media reform coalition provides the first clear glance at how this movement operated, scholars have yet to provide a comprehensive view of its breadth, depth, and composition. Likewise, Toro observes that although a few scholars have looked at how media reform groups impacted policy after 1965, most “have fallen short in their examination of the role of social reform groups at the [FCC] prior to the 1960s” (2000, p. 9). Which social movement groups were involved in media reform in the 1940s, and what were their objectives? The following analysis is a first step towards answering these questions and recovering a largely forgotten postwar media reform movement.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methods**

This study uses a Gramscian theoretical framework (Gramsci, 1971), appraising the historical processes of simultaneous hegemonic blocs *and* currents of resistance as power arrangements constantly re-legitimate themselves. Such a conceptualization of history and power considers media policy as neither natural nor inevitable, but resulting instead from constant conflict and negotiation, with multiple, shifting terrains of struggle, particularly at the discursive level. The following analysis also draws from social movement theory, especially “movement framing” (McCammon et al., 2007). “Discursive opportunity structures,” as formulated by Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht (2002), suggests that social movements often begin as intellectual critiques that are opportunistically exploited by grassroots social forces. Media policy discourses in the 1940s reflect a growing cultural critique that dialectically combined with the beginnings of a popular radio reform movement. To make sense of these ever-shifting discursive realignments, this study relies on historical methods, including in-depth archival research of activist literature, memos, letters, and personal papers connected to individuals and groups that participated in 1940s broadcast reform activities. Close attention was given to the personal papers of FCC Commissioner Clifford Durr, whose range of contacts serve as a lens through which to glimpse the inner-workings of a postwar media reform movement. Additionally, phone interviews were

conducted with two Durr confidantes and long-term media reform activists central to the 1940s movement: Everett Parker, a leader of various progressive religious broadcast groups, and the late Norman Corwin, a famous radio personality and radio division director for a major progressive activist group.

Out of this research, a general narrative emerges that traces the rise and fall of a postwar media reform movement. Based largely on FCC Commissioner Durr's correspondences and various activist literature, the following analysis examines the anatomy of this movement – its tensions, successes, and failures – by focusing on particular groups, campaigns, and strategies. Groups not discussed in depth that were involved in specific postwar media reform campaigns include the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Jewish organizations, and women's groups (Proffitt, 2010). Although disparate, the core reform groups' media criticism and activism were remarkably similar and often coalesced around common goals and ideals, including fairness in media representation, the creation of alternative media, and increased access to media production. More specifically, to varying degrees all of these groups engaged with the policymaking process in an attempt to remake the American broadcast system along more democratic lines. Given the last decade's surge in media reform activism, this history is particularly relevant to our contemporary moment.

### **Labor Holds the Line in Dark Times**

Labor was arguably the first social movement to organize explicitly around media issues. Alongside other nonprofit organizations including churches and educational institutions, labor groups like the Chicago Federation of Labor were early owners and operators of AM stations (Godfried, 1997, p. 133). Yet by the mid-1940s, most of these nonprofits had been pushed off the air. Finding it increasingly difficult to gain airtime on commercial radio, the labor movement began contesting a rightward shift in the nation's news discourse, particularly its overt censoring of pro-labor views and voices. Labor historian Nathan Godfried, pointing to a 1943 Federated Press poll that found 92% of the press was anti-labor, notes that it was not surprising that “the mass media reflected business interests and values,” especially with groups like the National Association of Manufacturers disseminating anti-labor propaganda messages as “briefs for broadcasters” (pp. 210-211). An example of censorship included zealously purging scripts for a Heywood Broun memorial broadcast of any mention that he founded the Newspaper Guild (Ernst, 1946, 142-145). The *NAB Code Manual* gave broadcasters ample cover for excluding labor, claiming “Discussion – or dramatization – of labor problems on the air is almost always of a controversial nature” (quoted in Ernst, p. 145).

Although industry would benefit from the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act's chilling effects, the mid-1940s still held bright spots for labor's organizing and media strategies (Fones-Wolf, 2006; Lipsitz, 1994). The CIO, unlike the more accommodationist AFL, used radio as a public relations vehicle for organizing as well as a weapon against anti-labor employers. Godfried notes that while the AFL hierarchy had “no grievance against” commercial radio, the CIO wanted to “meet propaganda with propaganda” (1997, pp. 210-211). The CIO's political action committee galvanized reformers with its *Radio handbook* (1944), which contained instructions for getting on the air and promoting “freedom to listen.”

In the pamphlet's preface, CIO president Philip Murray wrote that the Labor Movement believes “that the years immediately ahead are the most critical we have ever faced,” and thus

“the people” must be “kept alert and informed as to their political interests.” “In this task,” he stated, “radio will inevitably play a very important part (CIO, 1944, pp. 2-5). Murray concluded that labor leaders and all those interested in “freedom of the air” must know their rights so that “radio is used as intended, namely, to serve the best interest of the people.” The people’s right to the air was a recurring theme throughout the handbook. Seeing radio as an underutilized resource, the pamphlet stated that workers “have not taken full advantage of their *right* to use radio broadcasting.” “Labor has a voice,” the pamphlet stated, and “people have a right to hear it.” Although radio stations and equipment belong to broadcasters, “the air over which the broadcasts are made does not belong to companies or corporations. *The air belongs to the people*” (CIO, 1944, p. 6 original emphases).

Variations of “The air belongs to the people” served as a common rallying cry for 1940s media reformers. For example, in the 1948 pamphlet “The radio listener’s bill of rights” (written by *FCC Blue Book* author Charles Siepmann) the Anti-Defamation League emphasized, “The essential knowledge you must have – and spread – about radio is the fact that it is yours. *The wavelengths of the air belong to the people of America*” (p. 44). This slogan struck at the central absurdity of a commercial system monopolizing a crucial public resource only to exclude voices of wide swathes of the population. This heavily biased system struck many as inherently unjust, as illustrated by one listener’s comments: “While I am not a member of any union, as a patriotic American I am greatly interested in all sides of a question” (Keator, 1947).

The *CIO Radio handbook* provided instructions for gaining radio time for a labor point of view via several discursive techniques, including “The straight talk,” “The round table discussion,” “The spot announcement,” and “The dramatic radio play.” The book encouraged activists to generate good publicity, advising them to “not hesitate to send out your announcements to consumer groups, cooperatives, women’s organizations, fraternal and religious organizations.” The book emphasized, “*The more all these community organizations know about you and your ideas on national and local problems, the better you will be able to cooperate with them in any problem requiring political action*” (p. 25). The handbook also provided advice about choosing optimal airtime (evenings, although difficult to attain), tips on making high-quality programs that were not “tight-laced” or “too dull,” and sample scripts for announcements and dramatizations titled “Are you registered?” and “What is the PAC?” Suggested topics included: “Labor’s war record,” “Child care and school lunch programs,” “G.I. Joe and CIO,” “Why we are for FDR,” “The need for farm-labor unity,” “The negro in 1944,” and “Women war workers” (p. 23).

The book recommended responses to denied airtime included asking for the station manager’s refusal in writing, writing a response, and sending copies of all letters to the FCC Chairman. Noting “the tremendous influence” a letter of protest can have if sent to contest “labor-baiting or any other objectionable programs,” the handbook also instructed readers to ask members “to report to your Radio Committee any programs or any statements over the radio which are unfair to labor, or tend to incite people against the Negro or the foreign-born, or sound pro-Nazi or pro-Axis, or in any other way are directed against the best interests of the people.” In these cases, the radio committee should “write letters of protest to the station, the sponsor of the program, the commentator or speaker” (CIO, 1944, pp. 30-32). The book concluded by asking readers about difficulty in placing programs; if their station carried pro-labor programming; and if labor representatives served on their local NAB listening council (CIO, 1944, p. 47).

The CIO also helped form the National Citizens Political Action Committee to organize petition and letter-writing campaigns urging the FCC to ensure equal time for labor perspectives and to provide more quality programming. Even as they continued fighting for an AM radio presence, many labor groups saw FM as a new theater of contestation, leading to an aggressive campaign for FM licenses to establish a foothold in radio markets across the nation. Unions attempted to gain airtime to offset propaganda and misrepresentation in the daily press and especially newspaper-owned stations (Ernst, 1946, p. 145). A major part of this struggle was challenging commercial stations' license-renewals for not upholding the public interest. The first of these campaigns was launched against WHKC, which had censored the UAW-CIO vice president's speech (Rosenberg, 1949).

Despite agreeing that demonstrable anti-labor bias ran counter to a station's public interest mandate, the FCC rejected the union's petition and renewed WHKC's license. The commission nonetheless agreed to hold hearings on the union's "petition to reconsider," which drew luminaries like the inveterate media industry attorney Louis Caldwell. Caldwell challenged the entire premise of the hearing as an attack on the First Amendment and the FCC's original mandate to not police programming. In response, the UAW began a long tradition of media reformers using media content analyses to marshal evidence disproving commercial radio's purported neutrality. Ultimately, the station agreed to stop censoring labor-friendly scripts and to air a diversity of viewpoints on issues important to labor groups. Moreover, the FCC's decision forced the NAB to amend its code's "no controversial issues" clause (Toro 2000).

In addition to establishing an important role for reform groups during regulatory debates, this episode set an important precedent for defining broadcasters' affirmative responsibilities to the public, helping set the stage for the later Fairness Doctrine (Simmons, 1978, p. 39). Stations across the country began to include labor voices, often in direct opposition to powerful anti-labor politicians. Broadcasters' policy shift drew praise from labor's sympathizers. An article by Corwin and Reitman (1945) noted that "Labor had waited a long time for this recognition." According to the article, it was inconceivable that organized labor, the second largest membership in the country after churches, was not allowed to pay for airtime, while employer associations were given millions of dollars' worth of free time to present their views. Supporters also noted that Labor had been forbidden to recruit members over the air, while employers could recruit employees and "anti-labor agitators" who were "permitted to air their biases daily" (p. 219).

Later that year, in a significant victory for the labor movement, the NAB formally discontinued its code. For a brief time, labor enjoyed greater parity on the air. The price of inclusion, however, was often to force more leftist groups off the air and to silence the radical edge of labor's critique of capitalism. These concessions arguably discouraged on-air labor groups from confronting postwar repression and racism (Razlogova, 2007). Nonetheless, the CIO's radio strategy was consistent with its larger social democratic vision emphasizing egalitarianism and expanded First Amendment freedoms. Although internal divisions undermined their effectiveness somewhat, unions often joined forces with African Americans, educators, religious groups, and intellectuals to mount campaigns against commercial radio's excesses.



## African Americans' Radio Activism

African Americans had many reasons to work toward a more democratic and inclusive media system. They were

especially astute to radio's unique power, reach, and influence, an awareness that emerged in the protests against *Amos 'n' Andy* and grew as the medium matured through the 1930s and 1940s. [Radio's] ability to present politically charged aural images repeatedly and simultaneously to millions of listeners moved what we now call "the politics of representation" into a whole new realm. Attempts to manage and influence those representations would have to become a part of ongoing strategies for African American political and economic advancement. (Savage, 1999, p. 11)

Contesting powerful commercial broadcasters would be an uphill but essential battle. African Americans also acutely understood how commercial media's structural biases – especially labor and economic relations – produced such demeaning imagery and fostered bigotry and disenfranchisement. A letter to FCC Commissioner Durr from a prominent member of the National Negro Congress stated the problem as being two-fold: "First, the widespread discrimination in the employment of Negroes in almost every job category; and second, the stereotyping of Negro characters over the air" (Cadden, 1947). Another letter from a returning African American veteran, disgusted by the radio fare he was subjected to and the "race hatred" it fostered, wrote: "It is too often the practice of vehicles of American propaganda such as . . . the radio to depict the American Negro as a buffoon, lazy, shiftless, superstitious, ignorant, loose and servile" (Tymous, 1946).

Economic concerns drove much of this criticism. During a discussion of the "Social Responsibility of Radio," organized by the Institute for Education by Radio, Lester Granger, a representative from the National Urban League, noted that his organization's "first concern" was the "equality of economic opportunities for Negro citizens" (Tyler & Dasher, 1946, p. 162). Radio had stymied economic progress by perpetuating "some of the stock characterizations and caricatures of the printed word, the stage, and the screen, thus advancing stereotypes and continuing racial misconception." Noting that depictions of African Americans had not changed for many years – exemplified by popular shows such as *Duffy's Tavern* and *Amos 'n' Andy* – Granger (Tyler & Dasher, 1946, p. 162) pointed out that a young person in 1946 "may not recognize the black-face minstrel caricature of by-gone days as radio's 'Rochester' of today." He also observed that African American bands were passed over for contracts given to white bands, primarily due to advertisers' influence. Finally, his greatest indictment against radio was its lack of job opportunities for African Americans:

Outside of the entertainers in radio – the musicians, singers, actors, and comedians – there are scarcely two dozen colored men and women employed in the radio industry, behind the scenes where the wheels of radio are turning. And there are thousands of jobs in an industry that provides 130 million people with almost continuous radio listening. And there are hundreds of job classifications – pages and pagettes, file clerks, messengers, stenographers, typists, cashiers, bookkeepers, teletypists, research assistants, librarians, sound effects technicians, electricians; studio, maintenance, and recording engineers; artists, telephone operators, news analysts, announcers, scriptwriters,

carpenters, firemen, private police – but almost no faces of my hue appear until . . . the janitors, the porters, the maids! (pp. 162-166)

In some cases, African Americans were hired temporarily as freelance voice coaches or programming consultants, but never as permanent staff (Rothenbuhler & McCourt, 2002, p. 373; Barlow, 1999). African American advertising also faced discrimination. One letter from Gainesville, Florida to the Southern Conference for Human Welfare complained that “although a substantial proportion of radio listeners and total business in the community is Negro, all radio stations in the community refuse to accept advertising by Negro businesses at any time, on more or less spurious grounds” (Dombrowski, 1947).

Increasingly, this blatant racism served as a rallying point for all progressive radio reformers. Reform groups called for removing on-air negative stereotypes and for hiring more African Americans. They encouraged communities to exercise their rights as listeners, scrutinize local radio, and not be afraid to call stations to complain when they failed to serve the public. Setting up “listening posts” to monitor broadcasts for balanced commentary, they coordinated with progressive allies in the FCC, especially Durr, who joined with labor and civil rights leaders to advocate for “listener’s rights” (Toro, 2000; Fones-Wolf, 2006). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), whose Radio Committee teamed up with other reform groups in the late 1940s, organized consumer boycotts and used the courts to pressure media outlets to improve their treatment of African Americans (Toro, 2000, pp. 52-54). Their tactics raised awareness of stereotypes and helped increase the number of African-American-oriented shows, many with black disc jockeys. Benefitting from African Americans’ growing clout as a consumer group, these shows jumped from a handful in the late 1940s to over 200 by 1952. Although black-owned radio outlets were rare – unlike newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* – legitimating African American programming was a significant accomplishment.

Despite these advances, the overall success for African American reform efforts was mixed. The practice of blacklisting and other red-baiting tactics ruined many of the most outspoken activists’ careers and helped demobilize progressive groups. Those victimized during this period included some of the most accomplished African American artists and intellectuals such as Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and Canada Lee (Biondi, pp. 176-177). Robeson would never recover from having his career destroyed; Hughes was harassed by Senator McCarthy; Lee faced continued blacklisting and died in 1952 at the age of 45, shortly before he was to be questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

### **Progressive Dissident Intellectuals**

Dissident intellectuals provided the media reform movement with another base of support. One exemplar, the People’s Radio Foundation (PRF), was a NYC-based organization composed of left-wing and progressive groups mobilizing around media issues. Founded in October 1944 and composed of trade union leaders, labor activists, editors, publishers, writers, and artists, the PRF sought a “people’s FM network” to air uncensored labor and progressive views. Its vision came out of discussions between the future PRF director, Joseph Brodsky, a prominent labor lawyer; Leslie Goldman, a labor editor; and Eugene Konecky, a former director of radio publicity, commercial, and program for an NBC affiliate station. Konecky had written *Daily Worker* and

*Sunday Worker* articles about the potential of liberal and labor-owned FM stations, which reportedly drew hundreds of positive letters from around the country.

The PRF was stymied by a triad of powerful interests: state officials such as J. Edgar Hoover and HUAC; reactionaries such as ultra-conservative American Legion members; and industry representatives such as the Chamber of Commerce (Konecky, 1948, pp. 102-106). Despite formidable adversaries, the PRF's campaign for a broadcast license received considerable support: charter members included labor leaders from the New York Newspaper Guild, the National Maritime Union, and the American Communication Association. The new organization also included women's leagues, African American groups, and veterans associations as well as many leading intellectuals and artists, big-name backers such as Eugene O'Neil, Norman Corwin, and Charlie Chaplin. Following a 10-month campaign, the PRF sold \$60,000 in preferred stock to approximately 400 individuals and organizations for the proposed station.

PRF programming plans included a show called *The Minorities are Major*, relying on various musical and dramatic formats to raise awareness about anti-Semitism and racism. To explore feminist history and experimental children's programs, they proposed a show called *Past, Present, and Future* (Fones-Wolf, 2006, pp. 140, 157-159). The PRF campaigned on an overtly pro-labor platform, with plans for shows like dramatizations of the history of labor; the story of the African Americans from 1619 to present day; forums with local high schools to discuss political questions; studies of American folk music; and experimental theater laboratories. Proposed programming took on political issues, including "frank criticisms of Congressional activity," and "case histories of social problems." The PRF promised only "informative advertising," for consumers union-endorsed products and vowed to bar "singing commercials" and "descriptive advertising." Permitted commercials would state "the facts about the product's function without spiraling off into a superlative exaggeration of that product's performance." Advertisers would be allowed no editorial influence; instead, the PRF's organizational model would be sustained by "the civic groups, unions, and the organizations represented among the stockholders" (Konecky, 1948, p. 108).

Pledging listener control over programming, PRF director Brodsky hoped to see community productions of "people's music, people's drama, people's dramatization" (Konecky, pp. 106-107). Prior to public FCC hearings, over 75 performers and technicians simulated a broadcast of several shows that the major networks had deemed too controversial – including one titled "Heil, Columbia!" whose scripts dealt with recent lynchings in Columbia, Tennessee. Another show addressed the specter of an atomic war. After the success of these performances, the PRF continued to rent out theaters to enlist local talent to perform shows, hold workshops, satirize commercial radio, and draw attention to local social problems. The PRF created a mobile company of actors and writers and a speakers' bureau of young people from unions and veterans groups to spread the PRF story to clubs and organizations throughout the city. Through a letter-writing campaign, they sent thousands of wires and handwritten notes urging the FCC to grant PRF a license (Konecky, 1948, pp. 108-109; Fones-Wolf, 2006, p. 158).

The PRF's decidedly left-wing orientation earned the ire of anti-communists who operated through various media. The pro-industry trade magazine *Broadcasting* repeatedly played up the PRF's communist links, including how Brodsky served as the Communist party's chief counsel for many years. Prior to the FCC hearing, the *New York Herald Telegram* ran a headline: "Reds in a drive for foothold in FM radio." Similarly, the *Chicago Journal of Commerce* saw the PRF's radio campaign as an attempt to please its "Masters in Moscow"

(Fones-Wolf, 2006, p. 159). Despite this smear campaign – and the sudden appearance at the July 1946 hearing by The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigators waving around FBI files on several PRF activists – hundreds of witnesses testified during the weeks-long hearings in favor of the PRF’s requested broadcast license.

Months later, the FCC awarded licenses to five NYC applicants, but not the PRF. Following their rejection, the PRF disbanded and published a book titled *The American communications conspiracy* that explained the “aims of the foundation and of the FCC’s decision which destroyed it.” It insisted that any successful media reform movement must lead a “curb-the-monopolies drive” not reliant on the FCC’s presumed progressive tendencies (Konecky, 1948, p. 33). “The strengthening of a people’s anti-media movement is a better answer” (Konecky, 1948, p. 166), the book concluded. “Radio belongs to the people it must be given back to them” (p. 42).

Despite its forcefulness, the book failed to impact radio-related policy debates and even drew criticism from some liberals, who were increasingly retreating from structural criticism (White, 1948, pp. 193-194). This was at least partly a result of intensifying red-baiting that rendered all unapologetically left-wing groups officially suspect. The PRF was included in the 1948 Attorney General’s list of communist classified organizations (*Federal Register* 13, March 20, 1948), and was targeted by reactionary groups such as the American Business Consultants, which was formed in 1947 by several former FBI agents and published *Counterattack*, a weekly “newsletter of facts to combat Communism.” Alleging PRF connections became a standard method of red-baiting intellectuals (Cogley & Miller, 1971, p. 94; Barranger, 2004, pp. 228-229). *Counterattack*’s infamous 1950 report, *Red channels*, which smeared a number of artists and performers, listed many people associated with the PRF and similar reform initiatives, including Commissioner Durr.

The void left by the PRF’s dissolution was in part filled by the Voice of Freedoms (VOF) Committee, headed by Dorothy Parker and sponsored by an impressive cast of left-wing luminaries including Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and Orson Welles. In the spring of 1947 the VOF held a public rally that included recently fired broadcasters such as William Shirer, William Gailmor, and Frank Kingdon – victims of what many saw as a “purge” of liberal radio commentators. The rally staged an “imaginary broadcast” from an “underground” radio station to contest HUAC and other reactionary trends. The VOF would go on to organize nearly a thousand monitors and listening-post volunteers. These efforts were credited in forcing broadcasters such as the NYC station WOR to moderate their Cold War rhetoric (*Variety Magazine*, 1947; Konecky, 1947, p. 110; Fones-Wolf, 2006, pp. 125-126). The VOF also sought to cultivate relationships with progressive policy elites such as Commissioner Durr, who was invited to present an award to the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers’ Union for “its outstanding contribution to American Radio” through its weekly broadcasts of “Let the People Speak” (Parker, 1948).

Another leading left-wing intellectual group engaged with media-related issues was the Progressive Citizens of America (PCA), which formed after a merger in early 1947 of two other progressive groups (*Time*, 1947a). Henry Wallace gave a keynote address at their merger, with Paul Robeson listed as a vice-chairman. By mid-1947, the PCA had 25,000 members, with chapters in 19 states (Adams, 1985, p. 11; *Time*, 1947b). At a meeting in New York Durr encouraged the PCA to write complaints to the FCC (Clark, 1947). The PCA kept in close contact with Durr via its radio division, directed by Norman Corwin. Corwin (2008) would later reminisce fondly about his experiences working with Durr, whom he said was a “broadminded

commissioner,” a “rare American,” and an “inspiration,” who had a “very benign role in the governing of radio,” driven by the “common sense” of providing a “safety net for radio.”

In April 1947, the PCA’s radio division held a conference titled “Crisis in Radio,” aimed at “dealing with the problem of radio today.” Durr was asked to address “the legal and administrative basis for the public ownership of the air; rights, limitations, enforcement methods.” Also invited was the NAACP’s Oliver Harrington to discuss “the treatment of Negroes, Jews, Foreigners and Labor on the air” and to provide “an analysis of the objective of the stereotype.” William Shirer, the purged liberal radio commentator, offered “a critique of the editorial role of the radio station as shown in its reporting of news” and discussed the challenges facing liberals on the radio. The Conference’s statement stressed the FCC’s importance in defending radio: “We reaffirm the principle that the air belongs to the people – to all the people.” The FCC is the “proper defender of this heritage,” and “must be adequately financed and staffed” and receive the “full support of the Congress” to “assure the reappointment” of Commissioner Durr “whose actions and statements have consistently backed these [public interest] principles.” Durr deserved continued support because “American radio does not now speak” for “labor unions, Americans who belong to racial and religious minorities, Young Americans who must be prepared for our future,” and who together constitute a majority of people who are often under- or misrepresented by radio. The PCA also called for the “voices of liberal men and women” who were “deliberately and consciously shut off” to be restored to the airwaves (Anthony, 1947). Ultimately, however, progressives failed in establishing a major radio presence and much of their energies dissipated after 1948 when the Wallace campaign deflated and escalating red-baiting undermined many reform efforts.

## Religious Groups

Media reformers in the 1940s included among their number various religious groups who mobilized to gain greater access to the air and to monitor representations of religious ideas and institutions. These Christian and Jewish groups would play an instrumental role in a number of policy battles; however, few were as active as the liberal Protestants led by Everett Parker, a mainstay in media reform efforts for over seven decades. Over the years, Parker played a key role in forging new coalitions and winning important victories, earning him the title “father of the citizen media reform movement” (Korn, 1991, p. 95). Through the mid-to-late 1940s he headed the Joint Religious Radio Committee (later renamed the Protestant Radio Commission). During the 1950s he worked closely with the former FCC chief economist Dallas Smythe in studying broadcasters’ commitment to educational programming (Parker, Barry, & Smythe, 1955). Parker also would be instrumental in key civil rights victories around radio in the 1960s, particularly the landmark WLBT Supreme Court case. A campaign against the station WLBT’s failure to serve the local African American community culminated in the Supreme Court determining that the FCC had to consider public interest complaints regarding license renewal even from groups not attempting to buy the station (Horwitz, 1997). Parker (2008) has noted that many of his media reform successes in the 1960s built upon earlier media reform efforts in the 1940s and 1950s.

In the 1940s Parker was a close ally to Durr, whom he befriended through frequent letter exchanges and meetings about radio reform. They collaborated around the FCC *Blue Book* as a vehicle to engage different communities and “teach minority groups how to protect their

interests” in relation to radio. Noting that people in the 1940s were agitating not only against excessive advertising but also about programming quality, Parker recalled the strategic advantages of many different groups “working on the same issues at the same time in different places” (2008). Parker’s testimony regarding the quality of local broadcasting during the 1948 Mayflower hearings led to revision of the FCC’s no-editorials rule, eventually resulting in the FCC’s Fairness Doctrine.

Sharing the assumption of many postwar media reformers, Parker saw in radio both democratic and fascist potential, a fate hinging on whether listeners engaged with the regulatory process (Parker, Inman, & Snyder, 1948). Parker (1946) expressed gratitude to Durr for having “taken an interest” in the work “to improve the quality of religious broadcasting over local stations.” Parker hoped that “if our ministers and others who represent religion on the air can obtain an understanding of the problems and possibilities of radio” from people like Durr, “they will make a sincere effort to use radio effectively.” Parker invited Durr to a workshop focused on “the question of how ministers of churches may lead in enlisting public-spirited business men to organize, erect, and operate FM stations solely in the public interest.” Durr was to speak on “The American Ideal for the Broadcasting Station” followed by a discussion of “FM radio’s advantages, costs, and potential services to the community.” In general, Durr received much positive feedback from religious progressives for helping to prevent radio from becoming merely a profit-making tool.

Other religious groups joined the fray. A Methodist official wrote to Durr: “The evangelicals are beginning to come together for a serious approach to this vast field [of radio].” He added that “the upsurge of interest in religious life of the community from the standpoint of radio owes more to you than any other man in the Commission” (Tyler, 1946). Various Baptist groups contacted Durr to set up public service FM stations and promote other reform issues. However, the late 1940s saw a split in the religious broadcasting community between the liberal Protestants’ radio commission led by Parker, and the Southern Baptist Convention, which sought to reserve radio spectrum to service rural communities via low-power stations. The Baptists sought to gain favor with the FCC over educators, while apparently lacking resolve in sticking with a nonprofit model. “The more I reflect on the radio picture with the coming of so many FM stations into operation,” the Baptists’ Radio Committee director wrote Durr, “the more I am convinced that the absolute key to any sort of success in broadcasting whether it be religious or otherwise, is programming.” He was “convinced that we must move from the educational type station over to the commercial type” so they that we may “earn enough money to finance the best program of a varied type on the air.” Fearing financial vulnerabilities, he notified all Baptist state radio committees to “swing from the educational type station over to the commercial type” (Lowe, 1946).

By the late 1940s, many advocates, including Durr, felt let down that the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) and other educational groups were making little effort to defend their 20 allotted stations from the Baptists. In the end, media reformers compromised by pushing for set-asides for general noncommercial nonprofit stations. Although the PRF and ACLU supported this revised petition, its lack of support from nonprofits other than the Baptist Convention led the FCC to reject the proposal. Instead of allocating spectrum to general noncommercial use, the Commission limited special reservations to educational institutions, despite their sometimes-reluctant participation in broadcast reform efforts (Toro, 2000, pp. 70-75).

## Educators

Educators comprised a core contingent within the 1940s media reform movement. Largely based at big land trust institutions in the Midwest, these reformers were adamant that a significant allotment of spectrum be set aside for educational purposes. By the mid-1940s, most noncommercial radio had been displaced by commercial broadcasters. One hundred twenty-eight educational institutions had launched broadcasting schedules in the 1920s, but only 35 remained by 1941 (Sterling & Kittross, 1978, 158), with a slight increase of 51 by 1945 (Ernst, 1946, p. 163). Although largely defeated in the 1930s, educators had regrouped to some extent in the 1940s to advocate for FM radio stations. They were aided by the U.S. Office of Education (Toro, 2000, p. 67) and the FCC, especially Durr, FCC staffer Edward Brecher, and Commissioner Walker's assistant, Walter Emery (Durr, 1945). Sometimes they coordinated to the extent of instructing schools on the precise wording of their official testimonies (Durr, 1974). Durr was an eager advocate, writing that there was "no subject" for which he had "a greater interest" than that of educational broadcasting" (1946). He saw existing university stations as potential seeds for a more democratic system. Expanding their presence in the new FM band would, Durr thought, force even commercial stations to raise their standards. "A few dozen or preferably a hundred – good university stations operating on FM might not solve all of our problems [with commercialism], but they certainly would be a tremendous help" (1944a).

An important ally in both radio and educational radio campaigns was Morris Novik, the former director of WNYC (the municipal radio station connected to NYC mayor La Guardia). Helping to form the NAEB and serving as its director from 1941 to 1948, Novik was also the program director for the socialist-created New York station WEVD, and was the CIO's adviser on "radio propagandizing." He helped write, direct, produce, and distribute CIO unions' radio programming, including skits performed by steelworkers and dramatizations of labor news that were advertised via public demonstrations and handbills (Godfried, 1997, p. 197). Novik is also credited with coining the term "public broadcasting" and remained active into the 1980s.

Another active group of educators congregated at the University of Wisconsin and affiliated with radio station WHA, the "oldest station in America" and the first to launch an FM station in the state. In partnership with the U.S. Office of Education, this group had formed the FM Educational Radio Institute (ERI), which held annual two-week conferences to "serve persons concerned with the development of FM educational broadcasting in the various states" (FM ERI, 1945). The director described the conference's purpose to Durr as "concentrating on radio as a social force" (McCarty, 1945). Inspired by similar efforts in the 1930s, Durr advocated for 15% of new FM allocations to be reserved for educational radio. Acknowledging the "financial hurdle" for "nearly all colleges and universities whether supported by tuition or taxes," he confessed he did not "expect any great boom in educational broadcasting stations" to happen immediately. Yet, "if a few good ones get started," Durr predicted, "many others will follow along and in the course of five or six years there will be enough of them on the air to make a significant impression on our general broadcasting picture" (1974). Durr's plan was to ease in a handful of successful FM educational stations that would eventually overtake the commercial system.

Despite falling short of this goal, educators were more successful than other nonprofit groups, largely because the FCC, especially Durr, advocated aggressively on their behalf and requested special set-asides for educational radio. Durr urged colleges, nonprofit commercial

stations, and other FM stations to embrace educational radio, because “the present interest among educators in FM is high.” There was enough momentum, he thought, “to assure a good nucleus of university and college stations.” Durr believed they could learn from the “experience of the AM educational stations which have managed to survive the trials and tribulations” (1944b). However, despite their general passion for educational radio, educators did not always unite behind the aggressive efforts that their FCC advocates and others felt were necessary (Gibson, 1977, p. xi). Harry Skornia (1945) confided to Durr, “I’m more convinced than ever that if education fails in the FM field it’s education’s own fault.”

## Conclusion

The major critiques driving a postwar broadcast reform movement can be summarized as the following: minority groups were neglected in representation and in hiring practices; programming avoided controversial subject matter; entertainment appealed to the lowest common denominator to maximize audience size and profits; advertisers’ influence led radio to be solely concerned with selling unnecessary and trivial products; and, overall, radio programming failed to serve society’s democratic needs. This criticism helped launch a nascent postwar media reform movement composed of labor, African Americans, disaffected intellectuals, political progressives, educators, and religious organizations. Although these groups often cohered around shared goals, they should not be seen as comprising one monolithic movement. However, their similar tactics included monitoring commercial broadcasting, intervening in broadcast policy debates, and advocating for their own representations, especially in the new realm of FM radio.

While Durr, Smythe, Siepmann, and other progressive policymakers hoped that an “aroused” public could rescue the stalled reform efforts in Washington, D.C., anticommunist hysteria undermined the last of the liberal New Dealers still in places of power and demobilized much of the nascent movement’s media reform activism. By 1948, Siepmann’s influence was mostly limited to academia and policy debates outside of the U.S., and policymakers such as Durr and Smythe had fled an increasingly hostile D.C. The FCC would be dogged by red-baiting and continue to exclude leftists well into the 1950s (Brinson, 2004). Moreover, many of the most prominent and aggressive activists in major social movements were removed from the political field by blacklists and sundry witch hunts. The Progressive Party lay in ruins after Henry Wallace’s presidential defeat, and with the radical left purged from the ranks of the Labor and Civil Rights movements, many liberals were co-opted into corporatist, industry-friendly arrangements. Media criticism would persist, and lone progressive policymakers like Frieda Hennock would still serve at the FCC, but at least until the 1960s, despite significant exceptions, reform efforts rarely moved beyond the symbolic. The 1940s reform movement’s defeat would leave in place a self-regulated commercial broadcasting system that would endure, with increasingly fewer public-interest safeguards, until the present day (Pickard, 2010b).

Quelled by red-baiting and a sudden rightward shift in the American political terrain, the postwar media reform movement would never realize the full sum of its parts. Coordination between various groups was often limited, and media reform a secondary goal. Yet despite its often inchoate nature, the movement did register some small but significant victories, and created a foundation for future reforms such as the Fairness Doctrine and public broadcasting. Overall, however, the movement failed in advancing its goals or enacting lasting structural changes.



Contemporary media reformers have much to learn from their 1940s counterparts' successes and failures. Much has changed politically and technologically, but recovering past alternatives may inspire future reform efforts as today's media activists carry on where previous struggles were defeated.

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