

American Broadcasting and American Identities, 1920 – 1950

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My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in August 2013 was designed to contribute to my current book-length project analyzing how manifestations of national, regional, and local identity shaped reactions to radio programming from the 1920s through the 1940s. Prior to my research at the RAC, my emphasis had been on programs deemed “foreign” or “un-American.” These programs might have originated from abroad, such as those programs that crossed into the U.S. from neighboring Mexico or Cuba. At other times, a program garnering a hostile reaction might have been broadcast from a U.S. station, such as a program delivered in a foreign language. The reaction against “foreign” radio might even come from Americans abroad in response to programs heard over another country’s airwaves. Many listeners recorded their judgments of these types of programs in the volumes of letters they wrote to stations, networks, newspapers, and government officials. Whatever the origins of the offending program, listeners reached judgments about international broadcasting after “filtering” its content through a constellation of existing personal values, beliefs, and assumptions that defined who they were. I argue that in the case of broadcasts or radio policies deemed “un-American,” identity emerged as a prominent filter through which one engaged that content, particularly when a listener reluctantly encountered some presumably foreign program.

The Rockefeller Foundation's (RF) philanthropic efforts to develop educational radio, both within the United States and abroad during the period I explored, offers another avenue to consider this intersection between radio listening and identity. The breadth of available sources at the RAC will allow me to move my study beyond the "American vs. foreign" dichotomy. Through the lens of educational radio and related efforts to use broadcasting as a tool of "cultural uplift," I intend to explore the ways in which programming and funding choices geared towards certain types of historical, musical or other cultural broadcasts reflected certain assumptions about programming that would presumably be appropriate or inappropriate, as the case may be, for American audiences. The RF's funding of many such educational broadcasting initiatives, including those of a multitude of universities, the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education, the National Committee on Education by Radio, various state departments of education, and even the commercial radio networks, has left in its wake a vast amount of archival resources and lengthy reports that allow for the exploration of these issues.

For example, efforts to promote the broadcasts of "fine music" offer one avenue of inquiry in how American elites and upper-class professionals defined appropriate and valuable programming for the U.S. airwaves. In an address delivered before the RF-funded National Conference on Educational Broadcasting in December 1936, NBC President David Sarnoff noted that "in analyzing the structure of American broadcasting, we find a variety of presentations truly reflecting all phases of American life." In addition to the variety of programs dedicated to straightforward education topics (and which often included "American" in the title), he singled out the broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera as particularly significant. "These broadcasts made opera available to the listening public," Sarnoff effused, and with self-congratulatory bravado insisted that "the financial contributions of our organization [NBC] to the Metropolitan, have

helped save for our nation, the world's most famous institution of grand opera." Sarnoff then went on to praise NBC's own "Music Appreciation Hour" in which the host had a "fifty piece orchestra at his disposal to illustrate the variety of musical themes he discusses."¹

The National Music League, in its own foundation-funded effort to promote highbrow musical tastes, echoed Sarnoff's attitude. Just a few months after Sarnoff's speech, that group launched a project dedicated to "determining how radio could be used to advance public appreciation of fine music."² In some cases, programming explored different types of international music as a means of fostering a more cosmopolitan outlook among listeners, but even here the contrast drawn between "American" and "foreign" music can itself subtly underscore what is defined as specifically "American" content and programming. Regardless of the specific focus of any given program, the cultural reference points that the National Music League, David Sarnoff, and others used to determine what constituted "fine music" can speak volumes about how American elites, including educators, philanthropists, and business leaders conceived of radio's value as a tool of cultural uplift. As Sarnoff put it in his 1936 address, "In the field of music ... radio is fully meeting not only entertainment but highly cultural objectives." That the title of his address was "Broadcasting in the American Democracy" underscores how perceptions of fine music intersected not just with educational objectives, but also with assumptions about what was best for the nation as a whole.³

At the same time, one must be cognizant that there was not necessarily a consensus of listeners who would agree with what network or educational broadcasters determined was in the best interest of American radio and the American nation. Recent works by Alexander Russo, Hugh Slotten and Elena Razlogova have underscored that the popular embrace of what Sarnoff and others proudly referred to as "the American system of broadcasting" (a system dominated by

national networks) was far from complete. Russo reminds us that national network radio did not fully blanket the nation's airwaves as is frequently presumed, and that void in coverage left extensive opportunities for smaller stations to broadcast programming that appealed to more locally—and regionally—focused tastes. Slotten demonstrates in his analysis of non-profit (often Midwestern-based and university-affiliated) stations during the 1920s and 1930s that the awareness of distinctions between national and regional, as well as urban and rural, helped carve out an enduring space on the airwaves for local and regional radio. In the process, Slotten also shows that rural audiences were not necessarily fully or enthusiastically engaged with national network radio (with the networks seen as more attentive to an urban-based audience). Razlogova's analysis of listener correspondence during the early years of broadcasting found persistent opposition to the "mainstream" radio favored by the urban-based networks. Razlogova demonstrates how those disenchanted listeners made dogged efforts to persuade the networks that their programs should better reflect their particular interests.⁴

My research at the RAC presented several different avenues to further pursue the lines of analysis that Russo, Slotten, and Razlogova introduced in their own respective studies. Indeed, the RF funded many educational radio initiatives that had a distinct regional purpose to them and thereby specifically sought to appeal to those regional tastes of the presumed listeners. They included educational projects run by—just to name a select few—the Texas Radio Council, Louisiana State University, and the Rocky Mountain Radio Council (RMRC). The Rocky Mountain group very explicitly tried to balance national and regional outlooks in developing its educational programming. The RMRC described its purpose as one dedicated to "interpret[ing] the region" and "develop[ing] a practical program service harmonized with the American System of Broadcasting through which more effective public service broadcasts can be brought to the

people of the Rocky Mountain region *by their own local and regional stations*” (emphasis in the original).⁵

Moreover, the various radio archives available at the RAC contain a wealth of listener correspondence and other forms of audience response specifically solicited to help gauge the progress of the different programs the RF was supporting. Such correspondence and surveys can be useful in discerning how different types of programs engaged their respective audiences, and demonstrates the ways in which local, regional or national identity informed how certain listeners responded to certain programs. Much of the information on audience responses and reactions in the files was a product of the RF’s collaborations with and funding of sociologist Paul Lazerfeld, who pioneered efforts to measure and interpret how audiences reacted and responded to radio programs. The RF not only provided funding for Lazerfeld’s audience analysis through the Office of Radio Research, first based at Princeton University and then at Columbia, but also consulted with him on several of their other projects. Lazerfeld, for example, was consulted on the Rocky Mountain Radio Council’s project. He was particularly enthusiastic about what the RMRC was accomplishing, writing to the Humanities Division associate director John Marshall that the results of its efforts evidenced through 1943 “justifies the great hopes you and we always had for the council.”⁶ Even if certain aspects of Lazerfeld’s methods of collecting and interpreting this audience data are somewhat outdated, the data in these files can potentially still offer valuable insights into how the creators of this foundation-supported programming viewed and understood their presumed audience and its interests. That insight, in turn, is important to understand why the producers of content created the radio programs they did.

All that said, this project is at a very early stage and I still have much work to do as I try to make sense of the vast amount of information I acquired from researching more than fifty

radio education initiatives funded by the RF. In terms of identity, my overall research has so far expectedly underscored that what it meant to be an “American” was itself a contested concept that held different meanings for different individuals, whether they were listeners or producers of radio programs. My current focus is on exploring how radio listeners of the 1920s through the 1940s possessed the agency to impose their own meanings onto the programs they encountered, whether those programs were deemed foreign or American, or presumed to threaten or benefit the audience that listened to them. By recognizing that identity is multidimensional, I expect my analysis to demonstrate the myriad of ways in which a listener’s complex sense of self shaped his or her understanding of broadcasting content heard on the American airwaves, regardless of what the producers of that content may have intended. I also expect that in its final form, the project that is emerging from this research will ultimately devote considerably more attention to the producers of radio programs rather than either the introduction or conclusion that this report would seem to suggest, with its emphasis on listener perspectives. That too will be a product of spending more time delving into the research I completed at the RAC and elsewhere, a process that is just underway at this point.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ David Sarnoff, “Broadcasting in the American Democracy,” address before the National Conference on Educational Broadcasting, Washington, D.C., December 12, 1936, Folder 3035 (National Conference on Educational Broadcasting, Press Releases, twenty-two items, 1936), Box 254, Series 200R, Record Group (RG) 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RF), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Sleepy Hollow, New York.

² “National Music League Radio Survey—March 1, 1937-December, 31 1937,” Folder 3040 (National Music League, Radio Study, 1938-1940), Box 254, Series 200, RG 1.1, RF, RAC.

³ David Sarnoff, “Broadcasting in the American Democracy.”

⁴ Alexander Russo, *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio Beyond the Networks*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010; Hugh Richard Slotten, *Radio's Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009; Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

⁵ “The Radio Council and Its Job,” c. 1943, Folder 3316 (Rocky Mountain Radio Council, 1943), Box 278, Series 200, RG 1.1, RF, RAC.

⁶ See, for example, Paul Lazerfeld to John Marshal, October 26, 1943, Folder 3316 (Rocky Mountain Radio Council, 1943), Box 278, Series 200, RG 1.1, RF, RAC.