A BUZZ IN THE ETHER:
THE SACRAMENTO BEE, RADIO, AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST, 1922-1950

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THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HISTORY

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SPRING
2010
A BUZZ IN THE ETHER:
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A Thesis

by

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Abstract

of

A BUZZ IN THE ETHER:
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Between the end of World War I and the passage of the Radio Act of 1927, the business of radio broadcasting in the United States developed rapidly. When Congress passed the Radio Act of 1927 as a means of regulating broadcasting, it did so without an understanding of either the realities of the new medium or its potential. The phrase “public interest, convenience, and necessity” in Section Eleven of the Radio Act was never clearly defined in regard to broadcasting, and the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) created by the Radio Act was vested with broad regulatory powers driven by the undefined public interest standard. The Communications Act of 1934 replaced the FRC with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The Communications Act gave the FCC authority to regulate all communications by wire and radio and reaffirmed the concept of the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” as a key, although largely undefined, component of broadcast regulation. The Communications Act of 1934 also upheld the interests of commercial broadcasting over the interests of non-profit and
commercial-free broadcasters. Public interest became synonymous with general audience appeal, not with any form of public service or community need.

Media historians have largely ignored the West when studying the early years of radio broadcasting. While historians have studied several angles of radio’s development—technical, regulatory, cultural, debates over advertising—their work has primarily focused on those regions of the United States where radio had its initial corporate launch. Much of the examination of radio’s beginnings and early growth have focused on public policy, the development of national networks, and the advertising campaigns that supported nationally broadcast programs. This thesis examines one West Coast company’s early entry into, and development of, local and regional radio in California from the early 1920s through the 1940s. I argue that the development of radio broadcasting was different for a regional business located far from the national networks, the industry lobbies, and the point of legislative and governmental control. The McClatchy Company and the McClatchy family, publishers of the *Sacramento Bee*, entered broadcast radio at the industry’s beginnings with a single five watt radio station that later grew to a mere 100 watts where it stayed until 1935, well into radio’s so-called “golden age.” Although operating a number of low-powered radio stations and lacking in political influence, the McClatchy Company achieved success in its initial broadcast ventures by consistently adhering to its own definition of what constituted the public interest. Operating within the shifting and changing regulations of the new broadcast industry, the McClatchys focused on serving their listeners using the tenets adhered to by
their newspapers: the media outlet serves a local audience, meets local needs, and does not bow to outside influence.

Using archival and manuscript collections, newspapers and periodicals, and U.S. government and broadcast industry publications, I show how legislative developments and the differing ideas of what constituted the public interest had a more immediate impact on the operation of regional stations like McClatchy-owned Sacramento station KFBK. In addition, I examine how local broadcasters—those most likely to serve a specific regional audience rather than a generalized national audience—had to struggle as their businesses adapted to shifting regulations, and how one company’s concept of what served the public ultimately could not succeed within the commercial broadcast model upheld by the Communications Act of 1934.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Chloe S. Burke, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the 1960s when I was a child, my parents gave me a General Electric transistor radio. About three inches wide and less than five inches long, it came in a leatherette case with a strap that I found perfect for hanging on the handlebars of my bicycle. I kept the dial set at Sacramento station KROY so I could listen to a DJ who went by the name “Wonder Rabbit.” As a teenager in northwest Louisiana, I spent many nights with my tabletop AM/FM radio carefully tuning the dial on the AM band to see what distant stations I might pick up. My favorite was WLS in Chicago. At the time, I had no idea I was engaging in my own version of “distance listening.” This practice of carefully tuning the radio receiver to pick up signals from distant stations was the primary activity of many radio enthusiasts in the 1920s, something I did not know when I was trying to keep the volume low enough so my parents would not know I was still awake, but loud enough so I could hear the broadcast.

As an adult, I spent a significant part of my advertising career writing commercials for radio. I preferred to write for radio rather than television primarily because of radio’s “theater of the mind” aspect—I could “show” anything on radio if I could get the listener to imagine it. Suffice it to say, radio is something in which I became interested at an early age and I never lost the fascination. This thesis developed out of that early interest.

No one undertakes an endeavor like this alone, and I have incurred many debts along the way. I am particularly appreciative of the staff of California State University, Sacramento Interlibrary Services who worked rapidly and effectively to find what I viii
needed, no matter how distant or obscure, and always greeted me with a smile when I stopped in to retrieve more “radio stuff.” The staff at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley was most helpful. I would especially like to thank Susan Snyder for her assistance with the specifics of getting permission to use the material I found in the Bancroft’s collections.

I conducted the bulk of my research at the Center for Sacramento History (formerly SAMCC), a jewel of an archive that Sacramento is fortunate to have. Staff past and present proved indispensable at helping me wade through the fascinating McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting collection, and I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Carson Hendricks, Rebecca Crowther, archivists Patricia Johnson and Dylan McDonald, and director Marcia Eymann, an invaluable resource who has become a dear friend.

I have received tremendous support from faculty at CSUS. Chloe Burke, Scott Lupo, Rebecca Kluchin, Charles Postel, and Chris Castaneda in particular provided encouragement, counsel, and many helpful comments and suggestions. Chloe Burke and Scott Lupo, as committee chair and second reader respectively, were tireless in their help and unflagging in their enthusiasm. I am grateful to both of them.

Friends and family have had to endure hearing about this project constantly, but these bear special mention. My mother, always an inspiration, has supported this endeavor from the beginning. Fellow graduate student Diane Barclay provided a ready ear, humorous outlook, and wonderful ideas as I worked through my research and early drafts. Steven Avella offered me helpful research opportunities, including a chance to assist with his own research into the life of C. K. McClatchy. My best friend and
business partner Roma Heerhartz gave me the valuable gift of time. By taking on much of my workload as well as her own, she gave me an opportunity to attend class, engage in research, and otherwise accomplish all those things one must accomplish in pursuit of an M.A. She is interested in everything and engaged me in many in-depth discussions about my research, discussions that proved valuable as I slogged my way through final drafts.

Finally, I want to thank my son Michael and husband Rich. Their love and good humor has kept me going throughout this entire process, and their understanding has provided me with the time to work and the space in which to do it. Rich in particular showed me what a real partnership could be. He took on this challenge with me and smoothed the path with love, support, understanding, and that all-important and ever-present marvelous sense of humor. I could not have done this without him, and it is to him that I happily dedicate this thesis.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1921, Carlos McClatchy, the thirty-year-old son of Sacramento newspaper editor C. K. McClatchy, visited a friend in the East. The friend, who owned a radio receiver, invited McClatchy to don the headphones and listen to the hiss, crackle, buzz—and occasional music—of the “ether.” Through the experience, Carlos became excited about the long-term possibilities of radio and returned to Sacramento where he convinced his father to invest company resources in Sacramento’s first broadcast radio station. Wireless was so new that many, including C. K., still regarded it as a toy, a hobby for young boys and dabbling amateurs. However, Carlos’s enthusiasm convinced him. The *Sacramento Bee* became the first newspaper on the Pacific Coast to enter the business of broadcasting.¹

Carlos McClatchy saw potential in the new technology. As a newspaperman, he was in the business of reaching masses of people with information through the pages of the *Sacramento Bee*, and he recognized the possibility of reaching even more people with this new technology as well. His vision truly was on the forefront; at the time the *Sacramento Bee* went on the air in 1922 with its first broadcast radio station, KVQ, there were only seventy newspaper-owned radio stations in the United States out of 570 active radio stations across the country.² Most of these stations were located in the Midwest and Northeast.

¹ “Newspaperman Foresaw Radio as Public Service Medium,” *Sacramento Bee*, October 1, 1948.

In the decade prior to KVQ’s initial broadcast, wireless had been the province of amateurs who built their own equipment to receive, and in some cases transmit, the signals. By 1912, wireless telegraphy (the wireless sending of dots and dashes) gave way to radiotelephony (the transmission of the human voice). The number of amateurs grew significantly after 1912, when the Department of Commerce published a “call book” naming all amateurs who had passed the government licensing test. The call book gave these amateurs a sense of how many others like themselves were across the country communicating in the ether.\(^3\) In April 1917, when the United States declared war on Germany, all amateurs were ordered to close and dismantle their stations. In some cases, German-Americans who possessed wireless stations were questioned on charges of espionage, their stations were destroyed, and their homes were ransacked.\(^4\)

Wireless was important to the military, however, and many of the amateurs put their skills to use for the military during World War I. After the war, the federal government lifted the ban on amateur receiving on April 12, 1919, and the ban on amateur transmitting on September 26 of that year. All expired licenses had to be reissued, and by the fall of 1919, just after the creation of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), the amateurs began transmitting again.\(^5\) These amateurs, many of whom served in the military during the war, were eager to use the new transmitting tubes that had been developed as a result of the federal government’s wartime emphasis on


\(^4\) Ibid., 297-299.

research and development. These tubes, which allowed for the transmission of speech and music, were not available on the market; only those who worked for electrical businesses were able to acquire them.\textsuperscript{6}

RCA began selling the tubes to the public in the spring of 1921, and the subsequent rise in amateur use revealed an intense interest in what might be “out there” to which these enthusiasts could listen.\textsuperscript{7} This is the point at which Carlos McClatchy would have first listened to the radio and formulated the idea that the \textit{Sacramento Bee} should embrace the new technology.

For many of radio’s early listeners, the owner of the station and the content of the broadcast were far less important than the station’s call signal. “Distance listening” was the primary focus of many early radio enthusiasts, with radio magazines arranging contests for the most miles logged through tuning the receiver to pick up a distant station. Indeed, for these early listeners, those who had built their own receivers and spent their evenings “fishing” for far-off signals, station identification was the main item for which they listened.\textsuperscript{8} As the number of broadcast stations grew, interest in listening grew as well. This trend created a conflict between the engineering and technical-focused amateurs and the “broadcast listener,” or BCL. A 1924 article in \textit{Radio Broadcast} titled, “Is the Broadcast Listener at Fault?” defined the heart of the conflict. The BCL, by not


\textsuperscript{7} Douglas, \textit{Inventing American Broadcasting}, 300-301.

bothering to learn anything about the technology itself or the proper methods of tuning a receiver, created problems with the receivers of his neighbors. The amateur, blamed for all manner of interference, was at odds with the BCL whose primary interest was broadcast content. Amateurs saw broadcasting as just one application of the technology; the amateurs also wanted to communicate with one another, receive news and agricultural reports, and actively participate in development and advancements.\(^9\) Large stations broadcasting programs to a mass audience was not how they envisioned radio.

In addition to the differing points of view of the amateurs and the BCL’s, there were also conflicting opinions about how radio should be used. Some saw radio as a means of education, moral uplift, and a tool to combat the “debasing effects of mass culture,” and a means of properly assimilating “millions of foreigners.”\(^10\) A 1923 article in *Radio Broadcast* boldly asserted that radio must be used to conquer an “insidious” enemy, the unassimilated foreigner (the term “immigrant” is not used by the article’s author).\(^11\) “Each is a parasite living upon the natural resources and under the protection offered by America, yet giving little or nothing in return.”\(^12\) This group, the author stated, included not just recent immigrants, but those millions who enjoyed American citizenship and all its privileges but who secretly clung to the ways of their native country. Radio would not only teach a familiarity with American political and social

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\(^12\) Ibid., 238.
ideals, but would also instruct the newcomer in “correct English.” “English correctly heard is English correctly spoken, and the foreigner landing on a strange shore is almost as imitative as a child.”

Social reformers, who viewed themselves as the “custodians of American culture,” felt leisure pursuits should uplift and educate people, not stimulate or debase.

Prior to the passage of the Radio Act of 1927, a number of colleges and universities operated their own radio stations, conducted “radio extension schools,” broadcast lectures, and sought to bring educational programs to those listeners in rural areas. The results of these efforts were mixed. Letters from rural listeners to University of Wisconsin, Madison station WHA stated that programs such as market news and the weather were popular among both men and women. The men, however, “expressed impatience” with evening programs of education or cultural uplift while the women wrote to the station that they found such programs enriching and wanted those programs sustained and strengthened. One group of farmers in Darlington, Wisconsin was so annoyed at the amount of educational programming by WHA in the evening hours that

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15 Douglas, Inventing American Broadcasting, 309-310; and Randall Patnode, “‘What These People Need is Radio:’ New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America,” Technology and Culture 44, no. 2 (April 2003); and Derek Vaillant, “‘Your Voice Came in Last Night…But I Thought it Sounded a Little Scared:’ Radio Listening and ‘Talking back’ during the Progressive Era in Wisconsin, 1920-1932,” in Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002). Patnode argues that in the early 1920s the popular press cast the farmer as an anti-modern “other,” showing by comparison the benefits of modernity and urban life, specifically the benefits of radio. Vaillant examines a program by the University of Wisconsin, Madison to bring cultural and educational programs to rural Wisconsinites as a means of social and cultural uplift.

16 Vaillant, “Your Voice Came in Last Night…But I Thought it Sounded a Little Scared,” 73-79.
they lodged a formally worded protest with the station expressing their exasperation at not finding entertainment to enjoy after a hard day’s work. “However much we appreciate the efforts of the extension division of the University…these lectures have become an absolute nuisance. A lecture weekly would be all right, but we, after our day spent about our business, desire, in the evening, to listen to musical programs, news items, weather, market reports, etc., but your station comes in so strong that no set in Darlington seems to be about to tune you out.”17

Some felt radio should be the tool by which rural folk were put on more of a cultural par with urbanites in terms of their access to information and their exposure to elements of higher culture such as classical music. But an unintended consequence was that radio also became the means by which rural “producers” adopted more of the traits of urban “consumers.”18

While radio was lauded as a means of cultural uplift, it was also vilified as the medium became advertiser-supported and commercial interests assumed the lead in developing broadcasting. An editorial in a 1924 issue of the New Republic strongly criticized that radio “is mainly under control of men unfitted by training and personality for posts of such importance.” Businessmen, it continued, could not understand the “proper use” of the medium and were indifferent to that proper use anyway.19 As Susan Douglas notes in Inventing American Broadcasting, radio had to turn a profit if it was

17 Vaillant, “Your Voice Came in Last Night…But I Thought it Sounded a Little Scared,” 73.
18 Patnode, “What These People Need is Radio,” 300.
corporate controlled, and the way had been paved for corporate control almost since the beginning when in 1912 the preferred assignments on the wireless spectrum were given to commercial wireless companies and the military while non-corporate individuals were assigned the less desirable wavelengths. In the 1920s, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover dealt with the “chaos in the ether” by creating three classes of broadcast radio stations, high, medium, and low. High powered stations got the most desirable and least congested wavelengths. Not coincidentally, AT&T-, General Electric-, and Westinghouse-owned radio stations were high powered, and the stations of universities, churches, and labor unions were low powered. KVQ, the *Sacramento Bee* station jointly owned with local entrepreneur J. C. Hobrecht, was assigned a wavelength in the low power category at 360 meters and allowed to broadcast on a limited schedule and at only five watts initially.

According to historian Clifford J. Doerksen, the unanimous public hostility toward broadcasting emphasized by some historians was really hostility projected by the “better-off and better-educated” towards popular programs that they deemed vulgar or distasteful as implied by the editors of the *New Republic* and their castigation of the men in control of radio. Historians such as Susan Smulyan, in her highly recognized *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting*, stress the power struggle between those commercial interests that pushed for advertising-supported broadcasting and those who strongly opposed advertising of any type on the radio as a “David and

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Goliath” struggle in which powerful corporate interests overrode the desires of a powerless public. Doerksen argues that “commercialism triumphed in the American airwaves because most Americans did not object to it.” In *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age*, Doerksen examines independent radio stations in the East and Midwest and what they meant to their listeners. For these stations, he argues, attitudes toward broadcast advertising were “strongly conditioned by socioeconomic standing.” In some quarters, there was a general feeling that broadcast advertising could not succeed because people would simply tune to a station that did not allow advertising rather than be subjected to “advertising chatter.” Some advertising professionals professed a belief that ads on the radio would hurt the advertising profession by angering listeners, but this sentiment was not shared across the board.

While arguments over broadcast advertising are at the core of many radio histories, it is the cultural aspects of how radio broadcasting developed that provide the compelling picture of who Americans were, how they viewed themselves, and how they responded to both the program content and the advertising on radio. Communications professor Michele Hilmes has examined this aspect of broadcasting from a number of angles. In *Radio Voices* she focuses on the “who,” “what,” and “how” of radio—Who was allowed to have a voice? What was said? How were women, minorities, and immigrant groups portrayed? Her answers to these questions reveal an America in the inter-war years that promoted an image of white Americans as culturally and

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intellectually superior and of men and women adhering to appropriate spheres. Hilmes argues that radio “built on and confirmed a certain set of cultural norms and values” with far-reaching implications.\(^{24}\) Her most compelling example of this assertion of cultural authority is in the description of the radio program *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. Hilmes’s examination of how the aural medium of radio created “blackness” in the characters of *Amos ‘n’ Andy* shows the pervasive influence minstrel shows retained in American culture well into the twentieth century. Although the characters were portrayed by white actors, characterization, language, and situations were used to “black up” the actors in the same manner minstrel show performers used burnt cork make-up. Both characters in the show—Amos, the “Jim Crow” character and Andy, the minstrel show staple “Zip Coon” character—were culturally incompetent, politically naive, and semi-literate. And they were, as Hilmes notes, the “not us”—America’s permanent immigrants who are “always arriving, never arrived.”\(^{25}\) Hilmes’s radio research in a number of books focuses on various aspects of radio as a social practice and as a shared cultural experience, and she treats radio as a powerful new social phenomenon that makes its appearance in “an atmosphere of expanding democracy and social instability.”\(^{26}\)

Paul Starr views that social phenomenon not as something new, but as a continuation of the “distinctive developmental path in communications” the United States


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 88-91.

followed from the time of the American Revolution. 27 In his *Creation of the Media*, Starr poses that America’s founding as a liberal republic created a path of responses to the challenges of nation-building that differed from Europeans. The United States, he contends, led the world in communications because of the constitutive, political positions that took the country and the media on a different path. Where Starr takes a divergent path from other radio historians is in his analysis of the rise of advertising on the air. Starr acknowledges the universal agreement reached at the first radio conference in 1922 that radio advertising was generally opposed, but he also points out that Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover who convened the conference made no effort to place restrictions on advertising and instead left that up to the business interests involved in the industry. Hoover’s external regulation favored private industry setting its own course. For Starr, radio as an advertising-supported medium rather than a taxed state-supported one as in Great Britain was the result of the uniquely American constitutive choices made up to that period in time.

The historian Daniel J. Czitrom’s oft-cited *Media and the American Mind* examines how media and communication have altered the American environment. Czitrom uses three ground breaking new media—the telegraph, motion pictures, and radio—to explore the relationship between new social ideas and changing communications, and how popular responses may have played a role in the development of each new medium. One of his key subtexts is the boundary between culture and communication. In the case of Czitrom, “culture” is popular culture, which he argues did

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not exist in its current sense until the advent of motion pictures. *Media and the American Mind*, similar to Susan Douglas’s *Inventing American Broadcasting*, is one of the key monographs detailing the technology behind radio’s rise and the regulation that came out of its business functions.

As with Doerksen’s work, my research is focused on the small broadcaster. Unlike other historians of radio, however, my emphasis is on California generally and the early development of radio in Sacramento specifically. The early years of radio’s development in the West have been largely ignored by media historians. Understandably, much of the examination of radio’s beginnings and early growth have focused on public policy, the development of national networks, and the advertising campaigns that supported nationally broadcast radio programs. But this is only part of the story. Media historians often repeat the claim that Westinghouse station KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania broadcast the first radio program in 1920, and WEAF in New York aired the first radio commercial in 1922. And yet there is evidence that a San Jose, California man, Charles “Doc” Herrold, was broadcasting music and advertising using an arc transmitter powered by an illegal hookup to the streetcar lines as early as 1914.28 Why has this California development been largely ignored by historians of radio?

This is not, however, intended to be a history of radio. Using archival material, newspapers, government documents, and business and radio industry periodicals of broadcasting’s early decades, I have examined the business history of one West Coast

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28 Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting*, 293. “Doc” Herrold is mentioned in three oral histories about radio history and radio pioneers in the Columbia Oral History Library, yet his involvement and California’s early work in broadcasting seem to be ignored by all but Susan J. Douglas. Perhaps early broadcasters like Herrold are ignored because they have been placed in the general class of “amateur.”
company’s early entry into, and development of, local and regional radio in California from the beginning of the 1920s through the 1940s. The McClatchy Company, and by extension the McClatchy family who were the essence of the company from the late nineteenth through most of the twentieth century, illustrates how different radio development was for a regional business located far from the national networks, the industry lobbies, and the point of legislative and governmental control. While many historians have looked at several angles of radio’s development, from the technical to the regulatory to the cultural to debates over advertising and radio’s financial business model, their work has been primarily focused on those regions of the United States where radio had its initial corporate launch, where the national networks developed, and where legislation governing the new medium was debated, passed, and amended. My work looks at broadcast radio’s early development away from the epicenters of broadcasting, the northeast and Midwest, and away from the center of regulation, Washington, D. C., to see how national broadcast trends and the implementation of federal regulation effected broadcasting for low powered radio stations serving regional audiences.

The Radio Act of 1927 codified a vague standard by which to judge broadcasting, the “public interest, convenience, and necessity,” and placed it in the hands of the newly formed Federal Radio Commission (FRC), a regulatory body no more skilled in the technology they regulated than the legislators who wrote the law and created the Commission. When the FRC was replaced by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) following the passage of the Communications Act of 1934, the public interest standard was still undefined, but continued to be used as a tool by which to judge
broadcasters. The networks were not bound by the standard, only the stations, large and small, with whom they affiliated. The Communications Act of 1934 also dealt the final blow to non-profit broadcasters such as labor unions, educators, and religious groups. The primacy of commercial, advertising-supported radio was set. Public interest was defined by general audience appeal, not by any form of public service or community need.

McClatchy Newspapers, and later McClatchy Broadcasting Company, built a West Coast radio business—and eventually a California-wide radio network—by working intelligently and effectively within the changing web of broadcast regulation. It is my contention that the reason the McClatchy’s were successful, even as they were relegated to the low powered spectrum and broadcast at only 100 watts until 1935, is because they worked within their own definition of what constituted the public interest. That definition was based on what they understood to be serving the public from their long history as newspaper editors and publishers. For them, public interest was all about the local constituency. Just as “all politics is local” so too, they believed all business is local. Even with a chain of radio stations throughout California’s Central Valley, the McClatchy business model focused on the community around each individual station. This viewpoint was carried even further as Eleanor McClatchy, who assumed leadership of the company in 1936, attempted to place the McClatchy radio stations on a basis that combined some advertising support with commercial-free programs she felt were of most interest and help to the local listener.
In 1931, *Sacramento Bee* business manager G. C. Hamilton responded to an inquiry from the *Bridgeport Herald* in Connecticut about the newspaper’s experience in owning radio stations. “Both the Sacramento and the Fresno stations are profitable, and while we do not know that it has increased newspaper linage, we do feel that they are builders of prestige and as such are a great help in maintaining and holding circulation.” While acknowledging that the *Sacramento Bee* and the *Fresno Bee* are in the newspaper business and focus on building newspaper advertising “to the exclusion of everything else,” he also stated an unusual point of view for a newspaper. His recognition that there are “some accounts for which radio is more desirable than newspapers” and that he would not hesitate to sell a client only radio if that is what the client wished, showed an understanding that radio was more than an adjunct to the newspapers. Radio was a separate medium and served a separate constituency, admittedly with some cross-over with the newspaper’s readership. “We do not believe in high-powered radio stations” Hamilton told Danenberg.29 The audience was local, and as such had local needs that must be addressed, something national network programming could only partially accomplish.

This thesis begins with an examination of the *Sacramento Bee*’s start in broadcast radio and the company’s response to new broadcast regulations following the passage of the Radio Act of 1927, the subsequent Davis amendment to that Act, and the immediate impact felt by local entrepreneurs as new federal regulations were enacted. In Chapter

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Two local broadcast radio is analyzed from both a business and cultural perspective. The Communications Act of 1934 changed the regulatory landscape again, solidifying the hold of commercial interests on broadcasting. In this same period, the news became even more commodified as it was placed at ground zero in the “war” between the press and broadcasting. McClatchy Newspapers, following the deaths of both Carlos and C. K. McClatchy, formed the McClatchy Broadcasting Company as company president Eleanor McClatchy continued her late brother’s goal of developing a multi-media company. It is during this period that McClatchy Broadcasting formed the California Radio System in conjunction with William Randolph Hearst’s Hearst Radio, Inc. Chapter Three examines how the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” came to be defined in the aftermath of the FCC investigation into broadcasting chains and the forced breakup of NBC, and how the continued commodification of news and entertainment may have shaped the consumers of Sacramento.

Radio was different on the West Coast. In broadcasting’s early decades the Rocky Mountains seemed to form something of a “barrier” between the centers of network broadcasting in the East and the population of the Western states. When the Press-Radio Bureau was formed as an attempt by newspapers to control the supply of news to radio, for example, stations on the West Coast found the bureau simply did not cover the Pacific region. At the end of the 1930s, NBC may have had a broadcasting “lock” on two-thirds of the country’s population by virtue of its affiliate stations, but those stations were predominantly located north of the Mason Dixon Line and stretched from New England to Omaha. The population of the West was considerably less dense.
than that of other parts of the country—why would NBC or CBS put their primary focus on California?

As broadcast pioneers, the McClatchy’s did not “make their own rules” but they did act swiftly and decisively to use radio to their best business advantage while at the same time understanding that without concern for the local constituency—their core definition of the public interest—their broadcast venture would not succeed.
Chapter 1

“SACRAMENTO BEE CALLING. HELLO. HELLO.” 1922-1930

Between the end of World War I and the passage of the Radio Act of 1927, the business of radio broadcasting in the United States developed rapidly. Historical studies of radio have been dominated by the development of national broadcasting networks based in the East and reflect conflict between those who saw radio’s potential for education and cultural uplift, and those who tapped radio’s entertainment and profit possibilities. This chapter examines broadcasting from the perspective of small radio stations in the West during the early stages of the medium’s development. The first radio station in Sacramento, California during the 1920s was a small, low-powered station, and it was owned in partnership with a local electrical appliance store by the city’s dominant newspaper. The move on the part of editor Charles Kenny (C.K.) McClatchy and the Sacramento Bee to enter this new world of broadcasting sets Sacramento apart as the first West Coast city to establish a new form of multi-media company—print and broadcast under single ownership. The preeminent daily newspaper in California’s capital city also owned the only radio station in Sacramento, creating McClatchy family control of a majority of Sacramento’s entertainment and information during a period of little or no media regulation.

When Congress passed the Radio Act of 1927 as a means of regulating broadcasting, it did so without an understanding of either the realities of the new medium or its potential. The “ether” was in a state of chaos with more stations operating than could be accommodated by the limited wavelengths in the broadcast spectrum. Legal
challenges to the power given to the Secretary of Commerce to assign wave lengths as well as issue licenses resulted in many stations broadcasting on whatever channels they chose, resulting in signal interference and a great deal of frustration among the listening public. The Radio Act of 1927 was the result of legislation introduced in both houses of Congress with the intent of settling the means by which broadcast licenses and signals were allocated. Use of the airwaves was not an absolute right, but a conditional one, and a right to be accorded to a broadcaster only if the licensed station served the public interest, convenience, and necessity. The phrase “public interest, convenience, and necessity” in Section Eleven of the Radio Act was borrowed from public utility legislation, and was never clearly defined in regard to broadcasting. The Radio Act created the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) and vested the commission with broad regulatory powers driven primarily by this public interest standard. This chapter asks and answers the following questions. How did the FRC use the public interest concept in an attempt to regulate broadcasting in Sacramento? How did the Radio Act of 1927, its amendments, and the differing ideas of what constitutes the public interest impact the McClatchy family and their pursuit of broadcast primacy in the greater Sacramento region? For independent, local radio stations like the Sacramento Bee’s KFBK, the rapidly changing regulatory landscape of broadcast radio at the hands of Congress and the FRC had an immediate impact on station operations not felt by larger stations and networks with the clout and contacts to influence regulatory policy. Without a definition

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of “public interest” it is unclear whose interests held prominence in the eyes of the FRC as regulation developed and small stations like KFBK in Sacramento flexed to adapt to, and eventually thrive under, ill-defined standards.

The new medium of broadcast radio developed at a time when consumer spending rose and postwar prosperity provided a new mass market for advertisers. The American consumer society flourished as wages increased, more women began working, population growth in urban areas outpaced population numbers in rural areas, and many of the basic necessities were no longer made at home. Newly affluent Americans sought brand-name products and the status and identity that came with them.² This was a time of rapid cultural and social change as America moved from being a predominantly rural society to a mostly urban one with a growing taste for consumer goods.³

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² Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998), 53, 142. Both consumer culture and mass culture were experienced differently by various groups, and not all American wage earners fit into the “newly affluent” category or were eagerly embracing brand names and big ticket items like automobiles purchased on credit. As Lizabeth Cohen points out in *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (1990; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), laborers in the early 1920s were not economically secure enough to “keep up with the Joneses” (102). Moreover, cities like Chicago with large populations of ethnic groups indicated these members of the working class traded with their local, small, ethnic grocery store carrying familiar items, not with grocers who served the middle class and stocked brand merchandise. Where Cohen regards radio and the community character of radio stations in the early 1920s as enhancing the Chicago labor community with the broadcast of “familiar distractions” like ethnic programming, labor news, and vaudeville-type performances by local talent (134-135), Randall Patnode sees radio as a means of “othering.” In “‘What These People Need is Radio:’ New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America” (*Technology and Culture* 44, no. 2, April 2003), Patnode examines how those outside the cities experienced radio and exposure to consumer culture. Farmers in rural areas, Patnode argues, were regarded by advertisers as a homogenous market and farms as antimodern (287). As Patnode states, “othering” farmers or any other consumer group, particularly in the press, made the embrace of technologies like radio (and, it can be assumed, the consumption that went along with it) as more “natural and inevitable (288).”

³ Derek Vaillant, “‘Your Voice Came in Last Night…But I Thought it Sounded a Little Scared’: Rural Radio Listening and ‘Talking Back’ During the Progressive Era in Wisconsin,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 65. One of the key features of this growing taste for consumer goods, according to William Leach
Sacramento was integrated into the growing American culture of consumerism that also dominated the urban areas in the East and Midwest. Already economically viable, thanks in large part to its role as the Western origin hub of the transcontinental railroad and its proximity to the rich agriculture of California’s Central Valley, Sacramento was the site of a significant amount of produce processing, packaging, and movement to market. Packaged, brand-name produce canned in Sacramento made its way to grocery store shelves across the country, putting Sacramento residents on both sides of the consumables equation as producers and consumers. And as consumers, they were certainly in the spirit of spending. In a 1925 *Sacramento Bee* column editor C.K. McClatchy wrote, “Life never was fuller of more varied instruments for the use not of the select few, but of the greatest multitude. An American workingman has at his command

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4 Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento: Indomitable City* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 8; and Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 121; and Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento and the Catholic Church: Shaping a Capital City* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 160-161. Avella notes the significance agriculture played in the economy of Sacramento. As Starr points out in *Endangered Dreams*, California in general was not heavily industrialized and so it took longer for the effects of the Great Depression to be felt here. Avella, in his history of the dynamic between the Catholic Church and the city of Sacramento, agrees that the economic effects of the Depression came upon Sacramento gradually. Not surprisingly, when that impact struck Sacramento, it hit hard, it hit fast, and it hit produce canning first, leaving employees of the California Cooperative Producers Canning Company suddenly jobless at the “height of the canning season.”
that [which] a Croesus once could not purchase. In our country at least there is a level of
general comfort which never has been attained before.”^5

C.K. McClatchy was a Progressive with a fiercely independent nature and friends
in high places. Taking over the reins of the *Evening Bee* in partnership with his brother
Valentine upon the death of their father James in 1883, C.K. oversaw the publication and
grew the circulation from 7,000 subscribers to 30,000 by 1919.^6 Closely allied with his
political confidant and personal friend, the Progressive California Governor and later
Senator Hiram Johnson, C.K. and the *Bee* supported Johnson in his fight for reforms that
included initiative, referendum, and recall power for voters, the direct primary, and
women’s suffrage.^7 By the early 1920s the *Bee* was the dominant daily newspaper,
surpassing morning paper the *Sacramento Union*. In 1924 the independent McClatchy
Company acquired the Scripps-owned *Sacramento Star*.^8 As a well-established,
powerful, and growing newspaper well versed in the business of media as it existed in the
early 1920s, the *Sacramento Bee*, in hindsight, was perfectly poised to enter the new

^5 Steven M. Avella, *The Good Life: Sacramento’s Consumer Culture* (Charleston: Arcadia
Publishing, 2008), x.

^6 “1884-1907: Taking on All Comers,” *Sacramento Bee*, February 4, 2007; and “1908-1932: A

Johnson, forward to *Private Thinks by C.K. and Other Writings of Charles K. McClatchy*, by C. K.
wrote in an August 10, 1911 edition of the *Bee*, “The *San Francisco Call* is self-laureling itself daily
because it has come out for woman suffrage. The *Bee* has been for woman suffrage during all the years of
its history. There is absolutely no reason in reason why woman should not have the ballot equally as well
as man. There can be no argument upon the bald, naked, inherent injustice of denying the ballot to women
while freely granting it to men. It is rank and indefensible discrimination.” See C. K. McClatchy, *Private
Thinks* by C. K., 230.

^8 Avella, *Sacramento: Indomitable City*, 94.
medium of broadcast radio. But in 1922 when Sacramento’s first station went on the air, broadcast radio was a largely untested medium from a business standpoint. Radio had undetermined potential, an undeveloped audience, and unknown cost of operation.

*Regulating the Ether*

For much of its early development, wireless, the precursor to broadcast radio, was unregulated in the United States. Although European nations agreed in 1903 and 1906 to establish international treaties regarding wireless communication, the United States did not follow suit. Wireless regulation was simply not a priority at a time when Congress was debating issues such as child labor and antitrust legislation.9 But growing concerns over safety at sea in the wake of increasing interference from public and private wireless users eventually led Congress to approve the Radio Act of 1910.10 The Act mandated that any oceangoing vessel leaving a United States port and carrying fifty or more people must be outfitted with radio equipment, but the developing problem of interference from competing signals sent over the airwaves by military, commercial, and amateur radio operators went unaddressed.11 In 1912 the sinking of the Titanic gave new importance to the need for regulation. Reports that a nearby ship had not responded to rescue calls because the wireless operator was off duty that night, and media accounts of amateur

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10 “Eighteen Years of Radio,” *The Congressional Digest* 7, no. 10 (October 1928), 255.

radio operators transmitting false reports of the *Titanic* being safely towed to port, precipitated passage in Congress of the Radio Act of 1912.\(^{12}\)

The Radio Act of 1912 brought new requirements for ships, and amateur operators were limited to the shortwave bands of the wireless spectrum.\(^{13}\) The 1912 act also placed the power to assign wavelengths and set time limits for daily station operation in the hands of the Secretary of Commerce, but it did not give him the power to refuse to grant a license.\(^{14}\) Congress did not feel it necessary to reject license applications because it presumed the wireless spectrum was large enough to accommodate all who wanted a license to operate a radio station.\(^{15}\) While the act did not specifically mention broadcasting, it provided the regulatory guidelines that governed broadcasting until the passage of the Radio Act of 1927.\(^{16}\) When America entered World War I, the U.S. government took control of all wireless stations and issued guarantees to competing manufacturers assuring them they would be protected from any patent infringement lawsuits.\(^{17}\) The goal of the federal government was to create an atmosphere conducive to innovative research and production, and to protect wireless use for military purposes.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 219.


\(^{16}\) Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 68.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 69.
during war time. After the war, in an effort to promote U.S. influence in international communications, which at the time was dominated by Great Britain via British Marconi, the federal government facilitated a series of negotiations that ultimately resulted in the creation of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). This effort of private enterprise and government brought together General Electric (GE) and its new acquisition American Marconi, American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T), and AT&T’s subsidiary Western Electric. The creation of RCA allowed the companies involved to pool their patents and divide the business. GE manufactured receivers and parts to be marketed through RCA, and AT&T sold the transmitters and controlled all aspects of telephony service, whether by wire or wireless. The companies involved in RCA controlled multiple aspects of radio technology. Broadcasting was not the goal. Point-to-point communication, such as existed with the telephone, was the perceived area in which these companies thought profitable business development lay. At the time, the radio industry did not know how “broadcasting” could possibly make money. Who would be listening? More to the point, what could a broadcast radio listener possibly hope to hear?

Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company entered the radio industry from a different direction. One of its employees, Frank Conrad, had been using his own transmitter to air a music program from his home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As a

18 Czitrom, Media and the American Mind, 69.

19 Ibid., 70.

20 Ibid.

21 Czitrom, Media and the American Mind, 70; and Starr, The Creation of the Media, 327.
hobbyist, Conrad was interested in giving other amateur radio enthusiasts, or “hams,” something to hear. Westinghouse executives noticed an upsurge in the sales of radio receiving equipment when these broadcasts aired and, sensing an opportunity, moved Conrad’s transmitter to the roof of the Westinghouse building, applied for a federal license, and began broadcasting as KDKA in 1920.\textsuperscript{22} Credited with broadcasting the first radio program, KDKA’s transmission of the Harding-Cox presidential election returns was heard on fewer than 1,000 receivers.\textsuperscript{23} It is important to note, however, that there is evidence that San Jose, California amateur Charles “Doc” Herrold was broadcasting music and advertising to a local audience as early as 1914.\textsuperscript{24}

In 1920 the general radio audience consisted of thousands of amateur set builders, most interested simply in logging distances listened. At this time, AT&T began operating an experimental station in New York, WEAF, and in 1922 aired what, in spite of “Doc” Herrold’s earlier work, has been deemed the first commercial—a five-minute real estate advertisement for an apartment building named Hawthorne Court.\textsuperscript{25} A number of apartment units were sold simply on the strength of the broadcast.\textsuperscript{26} Within a year WEAF had twenty-five sponsors including Macy’s, Colgate, and Metropolitan Life Insurance. The station soon changed its call letters to WNBC when RCA purchased the


\textsuperscript{23} Sivulka, \textit{Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes}, 183.

\textsuperscript{24} Douglas, \textit{Inventing American Broadcasting}, 293.

\textsuperscript{25} Sivulka, \textit{Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes}, 183.

station from AT&T. The number of licensed radio stations leapt from thirty at the end of 1920, to 576 in early 1923. One of these new stations was Sacramento’s first—KVQ, licensed to electrical appliance store owner J.C. Hobrecht on December 9, 1921. The new station went on the air two months later.

At some point between issuance of the license and the inaugural broadcast of KVQ, Hobrecht and C.K.’s son Carlos McClatchy struck the business arrangement that moved the fledgling station’s broadcast equipment to the top of the Sacramento Bee building on Seventh Street between I and J Streets, and solidified the Bee’s pioneering role in West Coast broadcasting.

An amateur radio enthusiast himself, Hobrecht’s store began selling wireless components in 1913. His primary customers for these materials were local schoolboys who were able to assemble working transmitters and receivers from the cheap, simple parts Hobrecht carried. For J.C. Hobrecht, radio held possibilities that would enhance his electrical business. Hobrecht, who had already made a name for himself locally as the designer and patent holder of sections of Sacramento’s recently-installed street

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27 Fox, *The Mirror Makers*, 152.

28 Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 183.

29 Clair L. Stout, Esquire to John J. Hamlyn, November 9, 1948. McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 26, 2005/054/0846, Center for Sacramento History.

30 License for Land Radio Station issued to The Sacramento Bee (James McClatchy Company) for station KVQ located at 7th and I Streets in Sacramento, October 18, 1922. McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 26, 2005/054/0846, Center for Sacramento History.

lighting system, now saw an opportunity to sell more components by giving local radio amateurs something to listen to, something for which it would be worth building a receiver.  

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J.C. Hobrecht, Carlos McClatchy, and Sacramento’s First Radio Station

The station went on the air at 5:30 p.m. on February 2, 1922 with the words, “KVQ, KVQ, KVQ—Sacramento Bee calling. Hello. Hello.” Listeners heard musical numbers by the Victor Eight, “all stars of the Victor Record Company,” in town for a performance later that evening at the Clunie Theater. The inaugural broadcast concluded at 6:30 p.m., a mere one hour later, but in keeping with the regulations of KVQ’s license. The following day, the Bee carried detailed directions for making a wireless set. Promising the reader, “Study these directions and you will be able to construct an inexpensive receiving apparatus and hear the Bee’s concerts and news service,” there is little doubt the required materials were readily available from J.C. Hobrecht’s store. For the remainder of 1922, the Bee promoted KVQ in articles that described the role the station played in the community and how far the KVQ broadcasts carried. 

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32 “Local Electroliers Designed by Hobrecht,” Sacramento Bee, September 12, 1927.

33 “Success of Bee Radio Service is Immediate,” Sacramento Bee, February 3, 1922; and “Roseville Gets Thrill from Banjo Music,” Sacramento Bee, February 3, 1922.

34 “Here are Directions for Making Wireless Set,” Sacramento Bee, February 4, 1922.

35 “Radio Plays a Prominent Part at State Fair,” Sacramento Bee, September 9, 1922; and “Bee Radio is Heard in Canada, 1,300 Miles Away,” Sacramento Bee, September 2, 1922.
however, that interest in the station could neither be developed nor sustained. By December, the station was closed.36

The brief existence of KVQ was enough to solidify the Sacramento Bee’s position in West Coast broadcasting history as, reportedly, the first newspaper on the Pacific Coast to operate a radio station.37 On the surface, this seems an unlikely scenario. Bee editor C.K. McClatchy showed no interest in, or understanding of, the new medium of radio. As late as 1928 he wrote to his friend Senator Hiram Johnson and claimed, “I have no radio, for which I sometimes thank God.”38 It was Carlos who continued to pursue radio and eventually established a multi-station broadcasting company after KVQ’s demise.39 For Carlos McClatchy, radio broadcasting was not the threat to the “Fourth

36 “1908-1932: A Champion of Causes,” Sacramento Bee, February 4, 2007. Sacramento Bee columnist Steve Wiegand, who researched and chronicled the McClatchy Company, notes in Papers of Permanence: The First 150 Years of the McClatchy Company (Sacramento: The McClatchy Company, 2007) that the defunct KVQ license was taken up in a partnership between rival newspaper the Sacramento Union and local sporting goods business the Kimball-Upson Company. Wiegand states the Union struggled to stay in the newspaper business and so gave up an attempt at expanding into radio, putting KVQ off the air again in late 1923 (Wiegand, 151-152). This does not, however, mean that KVQ became KFBK. Responding to a letter from the McClatchy Broadcasting Company requesting information about the early history of KFBK’s license, attorney Clair L. Stout stated that an investigation of the files of the Federal Communications Commission did not show that KVQ became KFBK. “We were unable to determine from the Commission’s records whether KVQ was the antecedent of KFBK or not. We rather think that it was not inasmuch as KFBK was first licensed prior to the deletion of KVQ.” Stout also noted that a number of licenses (from the early 1920s) were missing from the Commission’s files. See Clair L. Stout to John J. Hamlyn, November 9, 1948, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 26, 2005/054/0846, Center for Sacramento History.

37 Everett Davies, “Radio Station KFBK: A Brief History of Radio Broadcasting in Sacramento,” undated manuscript, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 25, 2005/054/0846, Center for Sacramento History.

38 C.K. McClatchy to Hiram Johnson, September 20, 1928, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series VII, Box 33, 2005/054/1145, Center for Sacramento History.

Estate” other journalists and publishers came to regard it; Carlos saw radio as an additional means of rendering public service.\textsuperscript{40}

In 1922, the year the \textit{Bee} and Hobrecht went on the air as KVQ, newspapers and other publications were not the primary owners of broadcasting stations. Carlos McClatchy’s vision put the \textit{Bee} years ahead of its competitors. It would be another six years before William Randolph Hearst would be able to convince his newspaper publishers on the West Coast to buy local radio stations and actively use them to promote the Hearst publications.\textsuperscript{41} At this time, radio and “electric” manufacturers and dealers made up approximately forty-one percent of businesses engaged in broadcasting. As in the case of Westinghouse and Frank Conrad, these businesses saw broadcasting as a means to sell the components required for radio listening. Publications comprised about twelve percent, fifteen percent of the station owners were of “unknown” occupation, eleven percent were educational institutions, and the remaining twenty-one percent were in a variety of industries and organizations including churches, banks, auto dealers, department stores, railroads, hardware stores, and one radio station owned by a laundry.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} Bradley Riter, ca. 1952, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 25, 2005/054/0831, Center for Sacramento History.


\textsuperscript{42} “Who Will Ultimately Do the Broadcasting?” \textit{Radio Broadcast}, April 1923, 522-526. The stations comprising the twelve percent owned by newspapers and publications were located primarily in the Midwest and northeast. The statistics used in the report are from approximately six to eight months after the \textit{Bee} partnered with Hobrecht. At the end of 1922, during a large surge to establish radio stations across the country, California had nine radio stations owned by a newspaper or publication. Oregon and Washington each had two such radio stations. The growth during this period saw a nearly 50 percent increase across the country in licensed radio stations. It is possible that another West Coast newspaper secured a broadcasting license in near simultaneity with the McClatchy Company, but evidence to dispute the McClatchy claim of being the first on the Pacific Coast has not been found.
Many of these small, low-powered community stations disappeared when the expense of operating the station exceeded the perceived benefit derived from listener “good will,” or when the federal regulations enacted after 1927 took effect.

By 1924, some newspapers had already given up their broadcasting experiments. Others, however, maintained their radio stations as a means of generating “good will” for the newspapers. Newspaper owners no longer on the air maintained that the expense of broadcasting and station maintenance was not worth the money. Those newspapers continuing their stations felt they would “reap our reward in good will, by helping directly and indirectly to serve the public.”\(^{43}\) A radio enthusiast interviewed for a story in the magazine *Radio Broadcast* was asked if he thought radio broadcasting helped a newspaper. He responded, “I don’t see how radio can avoid doing that very thing. Where I formerly bought one paper, I now buy two and sometimes three, for I don’t want to miss any of the programs, near or far!”\(^{44}\) There was value in a newspaper maintaining a viable public presence, especially in the face of head-to-head competition with one or more competing dailies in the same city.\(^ {45}\) This form of public service, it was hoped, would enhance circulation as well as public image.

The *Sacramento Bee’s* initial foray into broadcasting may have ended with the demise of KVQ in December, 1922, but Carlos McClatchy’s interest in broadcasting


\(^{44}\) Ibid.

continued. In 1925 the Bee returned to broadcasting with KFBK, a station originated by the Kimball-Upson Company in 1922. One of the new components of McClatchy-operated KFBK was an overt interest in on-air advertising.

The Kimball-Upson Company, a Sacramento business specializing in sporting goods, automotive equipment, and supplies for Majestic radios, entered into an agreement with AT&T for radio telephone broadcasting on July 31, 1925.46 It appears, however, Kimball-Upson had difficulty properly maintaining the broadcasting arm of its business. Kimball-Upson was issued its first broadcast license in late 1922 with the call letters KFBK. Subsequent licenses show KFBK was at one point authorized to broadcast entertainment, weather forecasts, and bulletins, but in May, 1923 Kimball-Upson was not authorized to broadcast official government market and crop information or weather reports. A subsequent license changed the broadcasting parameters yet again.47

On September 1, 1925 the James McClatchy Company entered into an agreement with Kimball-Upson to jointly operate KFBK, referred to contractually as “The Bee—Kimball-Upson Station.” It is unclear who contacted whom first, or if the negotiations were conducted by or at the behest of Carlos McClatchy, but under the terms of the agreement the McClatchy Company would pay all operation and maintenance expenses for the station and assume the cost of enlarging the studio. For half-interest in the KFBK license, equipment, and good will, McClatchy placed on its books a $3,000 credit for

46 License agreement, form no. RB21 between American Telephone and Telegraph Company and Kimball-Upson Company, July 31, 1925, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0638, Center for Sacramento History.

47 Stout to Hamlyn, November 9, 1948, McClatchy Collection.
Kimball-Upson to use for its store advertising in the *Sacramento Bee* under a standard-rate twelve-month contract. In return, the McClatchy Company retained the right to sell advertising on KFBK at whatever rate McClatchy desired. Any net profit from the advertising venture was to be divided equally up to $6,000. McClatchy would retain eighty percent of the advertising net profit above $6,000.48

KFBK was not the only radio station owned by the McClatchy Company in 1925. Carlos, editor of the *Fresno Bee* since it began in 1922, had also negotiated to buy Fresno station KMJ.49 Both stations actively sold broadcast advertising.

*Selling Advertising and Building an Audience*

Some historians stand firmly by the assertion that Americans did not desire advertising over the radio. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover himself supposedly argued against the practice. Advertising on the radio existed almost since the beginning, however.50 Much of the history of American radio has focused on the development of the networks, and especially large radio stations in the northeast, their programming, and their policies. Radio was different for stations like KFBK, KMJ, and other small, local stations. Independent stations have been regarded in radio’s historiography as locally oriented, “candidly commercial,” and “unapologetically populist—‘lowbrow’—in their

48 Agreement—James McClatchy Co. and Kimball-Upson Co., September 1, 1925, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0638, Center for Sacramento History.


50 For arguments against the early acceptance of broadcast advertising see Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting* and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio*. 
cultural agenda.”

Hoover’s keynote address at the First National Radio Conference may have declared it “inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service to be drowned in advertising chatter,” but the Commerce Department did not forbid advertising on the radio and most Americans simply did not object to it.

Hoover’s inconsistencies toward broadcasting are not surprising given that he also spoke against monopolies and vested interests as well as excessive advertising, yet continued to acquiesce to dominant business groups in areas of commerce policy.

The McClatchy Company was certainly interested in selling advertising on-air, as evidenced not only by their ownership agreement with Kimball-Upson, but also by business correspondence as well. As a rule, newspapers that owned radio stations viewed the station not as a separate income-generating business, but as a means of promoting the newspaper. At the time, a newspaper had very little means of advertising itself. Without radio, billboards were the only alternative for newspaper promotion. The radio editor of the Chicago Daily News, William S. Hedges, regarded newspaper ownership of radio as important not because the station could be an additional source of revenue, but because of the good will for the newspaper. “The creation of good will, that intangible, yet


nevertheless invaluable asset for quasi-public institutions, such as newspapers, results from our broadcasting. Dollars may not directly follow from the pleasures experienced by listeners…but the feeling of friendliness is there, and the friendship of the masses makes strength for the newspaper.\(^{54}\)

Once the agreement was signed in 1925, the McClatchy Company began immediate investigation into the selling of advertising on KFBK. Since other newspaper publishing companies who owned radio stations were considering the same course of action, W. H. James, the Bee’s business director, sought the advice of the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) regarding rules and regulations governing the sale of time on the air.\(^{55}\) As the Bee began putting together its rate card for broadcast advertising sales, it was looking at KFBK in much the same way it regarded the newspaper, in terms of circulation as a determinant of advertising rates. In a memo to Carlos McClatchy about the rate card just received from the Oregonian, W.H. James stated, “I am astonished to note that they are selling time for courtesy concerts at $15 for day hours and from $25 to $40 an hour for evening hours. This, however, does not, I think, need to bother us particularly because I imagine that even though they have a much more powerful station, their available listeners-in for advertisers are far fewer in numbers than we will have under the guns of our station.”\(^{56}\) James anticipated Sacramento’s

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\(^{55}\) Omara & Ormsbee, Inc. to W.H. James, September 15, 1925, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0589, Center for Sacramento History.

\(^{56}\) W.H. James to Carlos McClatchy, September 17, 1925, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0589, Center for Sacramento History.
potential audience for station broadcasts would be larger than that of Portland, Oregon, and the Sacramento Bee intended to charge advertisers accordingly.

Choosing to sell advertising was a far different prospect than actually selling it. In an era when advertising agencies still did not know how to effectively write for the medium of radio, salesmen most certainly did not know how to sell for it. For the Sacramento Bee, building a sales department for KFBK took a concerted effort and considerable resources. Station KFI in Los Angeles had been over this ground already, and advised its Northern California broadcast neighbor to find someone with general sales experience and then educate them about radio. “We have gone through more or less grief in building [the advertising] department...It seems that the average newspaper solicitor just doesn’t seem to fit.”

Advertising sold on McClatchy stations at this time was of the “indirect” variety. A sponsor’s name was allowed, but no “sales pitch.” Airtime sold for “advertising or sales talks of any kind” was strictly forbidden until competition forced management’s hand. In 1928, KFBK program director R.K. Clark, writing to W.H. James, referenced the possibility of a competing station attempting to come into the Sacramento market. He suggested a preemptive plan of attack that included moving the transmitter and studios to a location more suitable for broadcasting, making a “reasonable reduction” in advertising rates to $65, $50, and $40 per hour depending on time of day aired, and changing the

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57 L.A. Tripp to W.H. James, April 17, 1926, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0590, Center for Sacramento History.

58 E.S. Riggins to W.H. James, January 15, 1929, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 19, 2005/054/0528, Center for Sacramento History.
present policy regarding direct advertising. Noting that many of the “old conservative broadcasters”—KFI in Los Angeles, KFRC in San Francisco, and KGO in Oakland—now accept direct advertising, there would be “no lost dignity for KFBK if we accept this type of advertising, when every other station in the country is doing it.”

A follow-up memo from Clark outlined the source of potential competition. George Turner, owner of KWG in Stockton, had been to Sacramento recently scouting locations for a remote control studio. Clark reported that Turner had approached a number of Sacramento advertisers and attempted to hire away KFBK’s station operator.

In a move that was, on the one hand, arrogantly self-confident and on the other, an admission of the importance of newspaper promotion of radio programming, Turner approached Clark and asked that KWG’s programs be listed in the *Sacramento Bee*. The request was politely but firmly denied. Sacramento would remain a city with only one radio station until 1937.

**Regulation and Frequency Reallocation**

Both the developing McClatchy media holdings and radio in general experienced a fair amount of upheaval as the still-young industry of radio broadcasting encountered legislative opposition. For the McClatchy Company, the assault by KWG came on the heels of a fight to control signal interference, unexpected signal reallocation, and new

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60 Memo to Mr. James and Mr. Langdon re: KWG, Stockton, ca. 1928, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 19, 2005/054/0528, Center for Sacramento History. A “remote control studio” would have been operated by means of telephone lines to broadcast points distant to the transmitting station. See Grover A. Whalen, “Radio Control,” *The Nation* 119, no. 3081 (July 23, 1924), 90.

61 Memo, James and Langdon, McClatchy Collection.
limits placed on the broadcast day. As the federal government began to more heavily
regulate broadcasting, KFBK had to defend itself and its existence using a new
standard—the public interest.

McClatchy concerns over impending broadcast regulations arose during the Sixty-
ninth Congress as the House passed a bill sponsored by Representative Wallace White,
Jr. of Maine giving the Secretary of Commerce authority to grant licenses, assign wave
lengths, and allot time to broadcasters. While the White Bill was before the House,
Senator C.C. Dill of Washington sponsored a bill in the Senate providing for an
independent commission of five members, appointed by the president, to have virtually
complete authority over broadcasting with only a minor role to be played by the Secretary
of Commerce. The Dill Bill passed the Senate, but the differences between the House
and Senate bills could not be resolved before adjournment of the first session.62

The McClatchys followed the proceedings closely through family friend Senator
Hiram Johnson. In a telegram to C.K. McClatchy’s brother Valentine (V.S.), Johnson
noted that the bill reported to the Senate by the Interstate Commerce Committee
contained Section Fifteen of the Dill Bill as it had already been seen by Valentine, and
that Dill was confident the bill would be passed by the Senate. Section Fifteen stated the
intent to uphold all United States laws relating to “unlawful restraints and monopolies.”63

Specifically, this section of the Radio Act, as well as section thirteen against monopolies

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62 “Eighteen Years of Radio,” The Congressional Digest, 257.

63 Hiram W. Johnson to V.S. McClatchy, May 6, 1926, Hiram Johnson papers part III, BANC
MSS C-B 581, Box 7, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and Radio Act of 1927,
Public Law No. 632, 69th Cong., 2d sess. (February 23, 1927).
and section seventeen against ownership of a combination of radio and wire systems, were directed at RCA and AT&T, which independent broadcasters and some members of Congress considered a joint monopoly. Combined, they held radio equipment patents, transmission lines, and ownership of eleven radio stations including the four largest in the country, WGY, KDKA, WJZ, and WEAF, which represented almost one-third of the broadcasting power allotted to all radio stations in the United States.

A follow-up letter to Valentine dated May 22 reported that the Dill Bill was on the Senate floor and Dill was having trouble getting a place from the steering committee for a hearing. “There is a sort of fight on over the measure by those who believe in control by Hoover, and those who believe that no one man should have the power. Just what the outcome will be, it is impossible to say. At any rate, I think that any measure passed by the senate will contain the amendment you desire.” The compromise White-Dill Radio Bill did contain Section Fifteen against monopolies. It also included Section Eleven, a vague “public interest, convenience, and necessity” standard to be used in granting and renewing licenses, created a five-member Federal Radio Commission (FRC), and divided the country into five broadcast zones: zone one, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey,

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65 “Are Large Broadcasting Stations Violating the Radio Law?” The Congressional Digest, 271.

Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Porto (sic) Rico, and the Virgin Islands; 
zone two, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, and Kentucky; zone 
three, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, 
Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma; zone four, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, 
Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri; and zone 
five, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, 
Washington, Oregon, California, the Territory of Hawaii, and Alaska.67 On February 23 
the compromise bill, the Radio Act of 1927, was passed by Congress and approved by 
President Coolidge. By June the FRC began making new assignments of wave lengths in 
accordance with its interpretation of the Radio Act and the new public interest standard. 

The idea behind the public interest standard was to regard broadcasters as “public 
trustees” given the “privilege” of using a scarce public resource.68 In its 1928 annual 
report the FRC specified the public interest standard applied to both broadcast content 
and technical concerns. The intent was to reserve some frequencies for stations of 
“distinctly local character.” While the Radio Act of 1927 (and the 1928 annual report) 
did not clearly define the public interest language, caveats like “distinctly local character” 
and restrictions on monopolistic practices and foreign ownership provided some basic 

67 “Eighteen Years of Radio,” The Congressional Digest, 257-258; and Radio Act of 1927, 69th 
Cong., 2d sess.; and “Radio Zones Established by Act of 1927,” The Congressional Digest 7, no. 10 
(October 1928), 261. 

guidelines. In practice, the new regulation favored commercial stations over the special interest stations the FRC termed “propaganda stations.” These included the small stations operated by labor unions and universities. The FRC, as one historian noted, “reduced the ‘public interest, convenience, and necessity’ phrase to mean the needs of commercial broadcasters.” Among those broadcasters directly impacted by the controls of the Radio Act was station WCFL, the station of the Chicago Federation of Labor. As all broadcasters had to reapply for their licenses following passage of the Radio Act of 1927, the bias shown toward large commercial stations was clear. In the signal reallocation by the FRC, of the twenty-four “clear channel signals” (those signals not shared with other stations) twenty-one were awarded to network affiliates of NBC or CBS. “Propaganda” stations such as WCFL and the many stations operated by religious groups, universities, and small operators like the McClatchys had to share frequencies and were therefore limited in their amount of broadcasting time.

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70 Czitrom, Media and the American Mind, 80-81.

71 Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (1990; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140-141. In “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s” (American Quarterly 41, no. 1, March 1989) Cohen points out that of the 571 radio stations operating nationwide in 1925, twenty-eight percent of them were owned by educational institutions and churches, and fewer than four percent were owned by commercial broadcasting companies. Small stations such as those in her study of Chicago often broadcast ethnic programming. She concludes that these early radio stations promoted “ethnic, religious, and working class affiliations,” (17-20) a far different outcome than that promoted by J. M. McKibbin, Jr. in his 1923 anti-immigrant article in the January 1923 issue of Radio Broadcast, “A New Way to Make Americans.” As an example of the limits placed on small broadcasters like the McClatchys, the broadcast schedule for KFBK published December 1, 1928 in the Sacramento Bee shows broadcast hours limited at 7:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.
Many broadcasters were business owners who had already poured considerable resources into the development of their broadcast radio operations. Now they were required to adhere to a new standard, one that applied to both programming content and technical matters such as frequency allocation and signal strength. In determining whom to license, the FRC based its decision not only on which applicants could provide what the FRC considered general programming in the public interest—classical and light music, entertainment, information, weather, and other offerings of a general appeal—but which licensees had the technical means to provide the best service. A letter to station owners and operators from the FRC in 1928 stated that, “Priority, continuous operation for a term of years, observance of the law in 1926, when government control broke down, etc., are becoming less important factors each day. Now Congress and the listeners are asking what service is the station rendering? Is it worth while? Is it appreciated in the locality which it serves? Is the station broad? Is it equipped to keep on its assigned frequency? Does it spread all over the dial to the exclusion of all other stations?”

Programming was the responsibility of the broadcaster and had to reflect the interests of the general audience, not the private interests of the licensee; frequency and signal strength were up to the FRC.

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72 Krasnow, “The ‘Public Interest’ Standard,” 5; and Federal Radio Commission to Station Owners and Operators,” March 16, 1928, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0632, Center for Sacramento History. In the FRC “definition” of the public interest quoted here, the “observance of the law in 1926” statement refers to the chaos that overtook the ether in the wake of a legal challenge to Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover’s authority to assign frequencies. When a federal appeals court did not uphold that right, many broadcasters began broadcasting on whatever signal they desired. The questions, “Is (the station) equipped to keep on its assigned frequency?” and “Does it spread all over the dial to the exclusion of all other stations?” are questions directly related to the technical criteria of serving the public interest.

73 Krasnow, 5.
KFBK’s 100-watt station reassignment to a frequency of 560 kilocycles resulted in “slight interference” from station KMTR in Hollywood, California, assigned to a frequency of 570 kilocycles and broadcasting with 500 watts of power. The Sacramento station tolerated the initial change, but when it received word that a station in Spokane, Washington, KGA, applied for a power increase to 20,000 watts and a frequency of 550 kilocycles, KFBK protested to the FRC by using the public interest standard. Stating that KFBK was built for the “sole purpose of serving the Sacramento Valley” and that it provided a “high type of radio entertainment and educational” programming, station partner Kimball-Upson Company noted KFBK’s “continuous operation under rigid regulations since the latter part of 1922” and that “this station has come to be recognized as one of the pioneer radio stations not only in the West, but of the country.” Specifying that KFBK’s operators have always taken a public service approach and not a mercenary one, the Kimball-Upson letter noted that the station always cooperated fully with regulations and suggestions of the FRC, and always respected the broadcast rights of others. Interference from a high-powered station to the north would “practically obliterate the effectiveness of this station and destroy the clientele which it has built up during…continuous operation.”


75 Ibid.

76 Kimball-Upson to FRC, McClatchy Collection.

77 Ibid.
The point was moot. The KGA reassignment to 550 kilocycles did not occur, nor did KFBK remain at 560 kilocycles. The FRC determined that the public interest would best be served by moving KFBK to 1090 kilocycles, a frequency it would share with KTBI in Los Angeles, keeping KFBK at 100 watts of power, and limiting its broadcast schedule to Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.\(^7\) W. H. James wasted no time in responding to the situation. His major concern was the frequency allocation; 1090 kilocycles was a mere ten kilocycles away from newly reassigned KEX of Portland, broadcasting with 2500 watts of power.\(^7\) Before this situation could be settled, however, the parameters for allocating broadcast frequencies changed yet again.

The nationwide signal reallocation and the ensuing complaints of broadcasters across the country reflected both disagreement with the FRC’s initial interpretation of the Radio Act of 1927 and the general lack of technical knowledge in Congress about radio broadcasting and how broadcast signals travel. Frustrated over perceived inequities of frequency distribution, House and Senate members from the four FRC zones outside of New York-dominated zone one pushed through the Davis Amendment to the Radio Act of 1927.\(^8\)

\(^7\) Harold Lafount, FRC, to Kimball-Upson Co., February 18, 1928, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0595, Center for Sacramento History.

\(^7\) W.H. James to C. B. Dodds, February 24, 1928, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0595, Center for Sacramento History.

\(^8\) “The Davis Amendment to the Radio Act,” *The Congressional Digest* 7, no. 10 (October 1928), 261; and “Will the Davis Amendment Bring Better Radio?” *The Congressional Digest* 7, no. 10 (October 1928), 268; and “Radio Politics,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1928.
Named for Tennessee Representative E.L. Davis, the amendment required the FRC to distribute wavelengths and broadcasting power equally among the five FRC zones based on population, ignoring geographical considerations such as terrain, physical distance from the signal transmission, and circular reach of a broadcast signal. The intent was to make the distribution of frequencies, hours of broadcast, and station power equitable among the five zones with particular attention paid to the southern states in which existing radio stations were lacking. The result was that Pacific region zone five stations like KFBK faced difficulty acquiring more power and staving off encroaching interference from stronger stations.

Carlos McClatchy’s attempt to bring KFBK up to 1,000 watts of power was contingent upon successful petition to take the frequency and power of another California station, thereby maintaining the “equitable” balance in zone five. The goal of such a petition was for the station making the request to prove it better served the “public interest” than the station whose frequency and wattage it targeted for takeover. In the case of KFBK, one of the stations it considered was KFSG in Los Angeles, the station of nationally-known evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. The exclusively religious programming could be considered a violation of the public interest standard because it did not appeal to a diverse audience. KFBK’s station log for a single week in October,

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81 “The Davis Amendment to the Radio Act,” The Congressional Digest, 261; and “Problems Raised by the Davis Amendment,” The Congressional Digest 7, no. 10 (October 1928), 262.

82 Carlos McClatchy to W.H. James, ca. 1928, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0583, Center for Sacramento History.

83 Carlos McClatchy to W.H. James, McClatchy Collection.
1929, however, shows a wide variety of local programming serving a broad range of listeners. Program offerings included dance recordings, a studio program of violinist, pianist, and blues singer, stock quotations, a baking school sponsored by Phillips Milling Company, and programs by local theaters and actors. The petition, however, was unsuccessful. The small station in Sacramento serving a general audience was unable to prove its “public interest” value against a powerful, high-profile station in Los Angeles owned by a media celebrity and serving only its congregants.

KFBK did not get a boost in broadcast power until 1935 when the station began broadcasting with 5,000 watts. By the end of 1928, KFBK, assigned to 1310 kilocycles, remained at 100 watts of power; a Sacramento Bee article pronounced the 1928 Davis Amendment-driven frequency reallocations “far from perfect,” but “excellent” in basic principle. The article also noted programming advances that year including the arrival of East Coast radio programs to Pacific Coast listeners courtesy of NBC, and the launching of the new Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). But Kimball-Upson apparently had had enough, and on November 9, 1928, sent a written

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84 Log of Radio Station KFBK submitted to Frank H. Lovette of the Federal Radio Commission, November 1, 1929, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 19, 2005/054/0538, Center for Sacramento History.

85 “Newspaperman Foresaw Radio as Public Service Medium,” Sacramento Bee, October 1, 1948.


declaration of intent to give up its interest in the station for a payment of $12,500 to W. H. James of the *Sacramento Bee*. 88

The McClatchy Company survived the unstable regulatory environment and entered what is known as the “Golden Age of Radio” in the 1930s as sole owners of KFBK. In addition to their flagship Sacramento property and the 1925 purchase of KMJ in Fresno, Carlos McClatchy continued to direct resources into expanding the broadcasting arm of the family’s holdings and enhancing the value of the existing broadcast properties. In 1930, the McClatchy Company purchased KWG in Stockton, the station whose previous owner had attempted to encroach into their broadcast territory just two years before. 89 The company also purchased KSMR in Santa Maria. The station license was moved to Bakersfield and the call letters changed to KERN. 90 Perhaps the most ambitious broadcasting expansion project engineered by Carlos McClatchy was the 1931 acquisition of Reno, Nevada station KOH following almost two years of negotiations and FRC hearings. 91

McClatchy companies now owned broadcast as well as print media in Sacramento and Fresno, a radio station in Stockton, the major newspaper in Modesto, a radio station in Bakersfield, and a radio station in Reno, Nevada. By 1931 McClatchy companies had

88 A.I. Maginnis to W.H. James, November 9, 1928, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 19, 2005/054/0583, Center for Sacramento History.

89 McClatchy Company timeline, ca. 1965, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 25, 2005/054/0830, Center for Sacramento History.

90 McClatchy Company timeline, McClatchy Collection.

control of primary media throughout California’s Central Valley from Sacramento in the north to Bakersfield in the south.

In addition to station acquisitions, the McClatchy Company undertook to enhance programming by becoming part of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) chain. A front page article in the Bee the day before the inaugural broadcast noted “this new tieup (sic) with the Columbia chain will bring to The Bee Radio listeners programs they cannot hear from any other station in this locality.” The programs originated from New York, Chicago, and other producing studios in the chain. 92

The Columbia hook-up was a key selling point for the advertising departments of Bee-owned stations KFBK, KWG, and KMJ. As far as was known by the Sacramento Bee’s business manager G.C. Hamilton, these three stations were the only 100-watt stations in the country on the CBS chain. 93 Hamilton, who noted that the stations were also affiliated with the coast chain Don Lee Broadcasting, estimated the listeners in and around the Sacramento city and suburban territory to be approximately 100,000. Advertising purchased on a combination of all three stations, he said, would provide coverage “of the interior valleys of the state from fifty miles north of Sacramento to fifty miles south of Fresno, a distance of two hundred and seventy-five miles in length, and approximately fifty miles in width.” 94 While arguments over broadcast advertising

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continued, becoming even more heated during the Depression, in the late 1920s and early
1930s, small commercial station owners and broadcasters like the McClatchy Company
and the Bee radio stations fully embraced the advertising and sponsorship aspect of
American broadcast radio and its potential impact on consumption in the local
marketplace.

The development of federal regulation for the new technology of broadcast radio
had a more immediate impact on the business operations of local entrepreneurs like the
McClatchy family than it did on established broadcast chains and networks. This raises
the question of how the “public” in “public interest” was defined and regarded, and
whose interests held primacy with the FRC. The FRC regarded for-profit broadcasters as
fitting the “general public service category” because it was felt the profit motive would
encourage stations to develop programming desired by the market. Non-profits,
however, such as labor, education, and religious stations were regarded as “propaganda”
stations because they presented only a single point of view. The McClatchy stations
were commercial stations, but they were also low-powered and served a local market
with programming that both targeted local interests and encouraged local performers.

The McClatchy family entered radio broadcasting at its inception and remained
through the commercial, legislative, and cultural twists and turns of radio’s
developmental decade, the 1920s. The FRC’s continually shifting signal reallocations
placed KFBK in the position of proving its value in terms of the ill-defined public interest

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95 Michele Hilmes, “NBC and the Network Idea: Defining the ‘American System’,” in NBC:
standard, even though at the time it was the only station consistently serving a broad audience in the Sacramento region. The McClatchy Company moved quickly and acted decisively in response to rapidly changing national standards, and eventually became a large multi-media business. Independent radio station owners lacked the clout to influence regulatory policy, but the McClatchy family in particular adapted to the regulatory climate and fought for a more powerful role in broadcast radio by focusing on establishing regional control, an aspect of the broadcasting business that apparently did not violate the concept of the public interest or constitute a monopoly. Further examination of the regulatory struggles and ultimate outcomes of local and regional radio broadcasters are needed to create a more detailed picture of how the ill-defined public interest standard was applied, and if it was applied equally in all cases.

The 1930s brought new challenges, not just for the McClatchys and their growing influence in regional radio on the Pacific Coast and in Nevada, but for the business operations, content, and structure of the broadcasting industry as well.
Chapter 2

LEGISLATIVE BATTLES, NEWS WARS, AND A “CALIFORNIA SYSTEM,”
1930-1939

By 1930 broadcast radio had assumed an important position in American popular culture. For many Americans the “local station” was a significant part of their daily lives. Voices broadcast from the studio entered the home and created a sort of intimate bond with listeners who did not completely understand the “magic” of radio, but who were drawn to it nonetheless. With the growth of broadcasting came further regulation and a limiting of the individual voices on the air. More and more, radio came to be about the shared, homogenized experience provided by national network programs, and less about the voices of individuals and small groups. And as radio grew in importance to people’s daily lives, the business of radio became more profitable for those, like the McClatchys, who were able to leverage their early entry into the medium and who successfully weathered the chaotic period of FRC signal reallocation.

This chapter analyzes local and regional radio from both a cultural and business perspective from the 1930s through the early 1940s. New regulation, the formation of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and growing concerns over monopolistic and restraint of trade practices in network radio changed the face of the medium yet again during this time. In addition, a battle between newspaper publishers and broadcasters over control and distribution of the news intensified. News, always a saleable product in print, became even more of a commodity as broadcasting matured in the 1930s and the public became more reliant on—and more trusting of—the information it received over the airwaves.
The “Public” in Public Interest

By 1930 an estimated 52,581,680 people made up the total U.S. radio audience, and forty-three percent of American families owned a radio. Among these people, the average length of listening time was three hours and seven minutes per day on the Pacific Coast and slightly less than three hours per day east of the Rocky Mountains. Radio had grown to such an important position in American mass culture that even “radio-phobic” C.K. McClatchy recognized its importance. Where he had not even owned a radio a few years previously, he now felt inclined to offer his friend Senator Hiram Johnson advice on Johnson’s radio delivery in an effort to make the Senator more appealing to the listeners. At this time, KFBK was on the air daily from 4:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. with an added morning broadcast schedule Friday from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. The McClatchy stations were affiliated with Don Lee Broadcasting, a Pacific Coast regional chain, and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). These affiliations meant national-quality programming for listeners even though the McClatchy stations remained at only 100 watts of power.

Broadcasting, as outlined in chapter one, was not point-to-point communication like the telephone. Listeners received the broadcasts, but could not comment on them in

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2 C.K. McClatchy to Hiram Johnson, December 22, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series VII, Box 33, 2005/054/1147, Center for Sacramento History.

3 G.C. Hamilton to M.A. Hollinshead, Campbell-Ewald Company, December 27, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0559, Center for Sacramento History.
real time. No actual “relationship” existed between the voice on the radio, entering the intimate domestic space, and the listener in the home, although some listeners attempted to fashion the listening experience into a more personal relationship. “Fan” mail and criticism, sometimes addressed to the radio station in general, sometimes to the station manager, and sometimes to no one in particular, represented for the listener, a way of “talking back” to the radio.4 The public could not take to the airwaves themselves, but they could, on a much smaller scale, be heard by those whose voices they heard in their homes.

“There is one thing every capitol city should have, and that is a radio station. Sacramento has it—a good one too. Clear as a bell, always. Another thing that is of credit to this station is the—what? The radio announcers. The silver voiced announcers—ah—they are fine—honest.”5 KFBK listener and Auburn, California resident Elmo Griffith was so enamored of the station, its programs, and its announcers that he practically insisted on station entry. “Next time I come down to Sacramento I would like to come into KFBK and take a look at one of those announcers…If you will not let me in you will have to hire me to sing. I must see those announcers.”6

Another “active” listener, Dora Hoernlein of Woodland, California, was much less “forceful” than Griffith, but no less ardent in her desire to visit the studio to see the

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5 Elmo Griffith to the Bee Radio Station, May 12, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0552, Center for Sacramento History.

6 Griffith, May 12, 1930, McClatchy Collection.
announcers whose voices entered her home. “We often motor to Sacramento and many times I have wanted to visit your studio, but could not force myself to do so,” she admitted somewhat shyly. For the vast majority of Americans, this was the sum total of their interaction with the public airwaves. They could listen and they could write in, but they would never be on the air.

For listeners during the Depression, what they heard regularly on the radio provided something of a sense of community as so much of their world was in a state of flux. The upheaval created by the economic crisis changed the most basic elements of their daily lives—work, housing, food, and what little security they might have had. A new sense of community developed for listeners who began to utilize radio to adapt to America’s new mass culture and redefine their changing world in more familiar ways. For some listeners, like Elmo Griffith and Dora Hoernlein, this meant creating new kinds of relationships with the people they heard on the air.

7 Dora Hoernlein, March 3, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0550, Center for Sacramento History.

8 Bruce Lenthall, *Radio’s America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 67; and Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (1990; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214-218, 330-333. While Lenthall focuses on how twentieth century mass society impacted Americans in the 1930s who had always felt more connected to their local communities than to a mass social group, Cohen examines one of those groups in particular, industrial workers in Chicago. Just as Lenthall notes that many Americans began to expand their idea of what communication meant—mass versus interpersonal—Cohen finds that workers in Chicago begin to sense that they may have common ground with not only other workers in Chicago, but with working people across the country (Lenthall, 7; Cohen, 330-331).


10 Ibid.
The Radio Act of 1927 established the vague “public interest” standard as a requisite for licensing. As discussed in the previous chapter, because the airwaves were considered a scarce public resource, station programming was expected to reflect the general interests of the audience and not serve as a vehicle for the station owner’s personal opinions. If the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” standard was undefined for broadcasters, then it was most certainly vague for the listening public. What listeners sometimes failed to understand was that this standard was something of a two-way street. Just as broadcasters could not use the airwaves to promote their own special interest, listeners and advertisers could not use the airwaves to make a direct attack on an individual or a competing company. When Lucy A. Bishop of the International Bible Students Association (IBSA) threatened to petition the FRC to revoke the license of the McClatchy station on the grounds that the station wished to “prevent people from hearing the truth,” the IBSA representative justified her cause with her own version of the public interest standard. “The Radio Commission know very well what Judge Rutherford is broadcasting…The people of the land are entitled to the truth…The law says that stations should broadcast that which is of public interest, convenience and necessity. These programs [of the IBSA] come clearly within this provision. It is a necessity for the people to have the truth. It is convenient for them to have the truth because it builds them up in the right way. It is of public interest because it shows the

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people the reason for the present depressed times and what is the remedy." McClatchy business manager G. C. Hamilton responded to Lucy Bishop with his own brief lesson in what constituted the public interest. Informing her that the news and advertising policy for KFBK mirrored that of the Sacramento Bee, he stated, “It has always been a matter of policy with us that no advertising would be permitted which was a direct attack upon somebody else and contentious in character. We only allow that advertising which is for the direct purpose of promoting the business of the client, and always forbid an attempt to tear down a competitor…We do not attempt to pass upon the merits of any proposition, and do not accept that which forces us into this position.”

Active radio listeners, those who comfortably and perhaps regularly wrote to their local radio station, participated in station write-in contests, and offered feedback on programs, were the grassroots level of the medium. They also provided radio’s saleable commodity—an audience. And the more that audience “talked back” the more they could be measured and sold to advertisers. If a local business could be shown, through accumulated letters and postcards, the geographic range of listeners to the local station, that local business would have a justification for advertising on the local station or sponsoring a local program. A 1930 survey asked radio listeners how they express their appreciation of programs presented by stations and companies. Thirty-seven percent of listeners polled on the Pacific Coast said they purchased the products mentioned. For the

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12 Lucy A. Bishop, International Bible Students Association, to Manager, The Bee Radio Station, January 26, 1931; and G.C. Hamilton to Lucy A. Bishop, January 28, 1931, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0565, Center for Sacramento History.

13 G. C. Hamilton to Lucy A. Bishop, January 28, 1931, McClatchy Collection.
country as a whole, twenty-six percent responded that they show their appreciation by purchasing the advertiser’s product.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{The Impact of Signal Reallocation}

By 1930 the extensive, and in some cases multiple, frequency reassignments endured by stations in the wake of the Radio Act of 1927 resulted in the shuttering of hundreds of small radio stations that had lost their licenses or gone out of business.\textsuperscript{15} KFBK and the other McClatchy radio stations successfully navigated the FRC’s multiple frequency reassignments. And although Carlos McClatchy’s 1928 request to boost KFBK’s power proved unsuccessful, the 100-watt station maintained its importance because of its Don Lee and CBS network affiliations and the audience it could offer to advertisers. While a number of newspapers across the country ceased their radio operations during the late 1920s citing the costliness of running a broadcast station, McClatchy Newspapers continued to expand their radio holdings. In the midst of the Depression both KFBK in Sacramento and KMJ in Fresno, the company’s two longest-established radio stations, were profitable.\textsuperscript{16} It is unknown if the operation of the radio stations increased the advertising space sold in either the Sacramento or the Fresno

\textsuperscript{14} “Report to Mr. William Randolph Hearst on Radio and its Relation to His Newspapers,” September 24, 1930, William Randolph Hearst papers. BANC MSS 77/121 c, carton 36, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.


newspapers, but the McClatchy company regarded the radio stations as “builders of prestige and…a great help in maintaining and holding circulation.”\textsuperscript{17}

For his part, William Randolph Hearst was just beginning to assert his presence in radio broadcasting. It had been an uphill fight as he spent years convincing reluctant publishers to invest in radio stations and radio as a promotional vehicle for the publications. “I would like to make a definite declaration that in my opinion every newspaper in our service ought to own at least a controlling interest in a radio station, either by purchase or by long lease. If this cannot be accomplished through the purchase of one of the best existing stations, it may be necessary for the paper to build a station of its own.”\textsuperscript{18}

By this time all of the McClatchy stations were part of the CBS chain and the Don Lee Broadcasting System. Although operating at only 100 watts of power, the Sacramento, Fresno, and Stockton stations were able to provide national programs to their local audiences. In what was a departure from the view many newspaper publishers took of radio, the Bee’s business manager, G.C. Hamilton, offered radio sales advice to a newspaper publisher in Connecticut that did not focus on the sale of newspaper linage. Hamilton said that although the Bee was in the newspaper business and aimed to build newspaper advertising to the exclusion of everything else, he recognized there are some

\textsuperscript{17} G.C. Hamilton, \textit{Sacramento Bee}, to Leigh Danenberg, \textit{Bridgeport Herald}, March 17, 1931, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0567, Center for Sacramento History.

\textsuperscript{18} William Randolph Hearst to Emile J. Gough, director of Hearst Radio Service, October 22, 1930, William Randolph Hearst papers. BANC MSS 77/121 c, carton 36, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
accounts more suited to radio and he had no problem selling airtime to a client who did not want newspaper advertising space. As the McClatchy newspaper and radio holdings grew to multiple newspapers and stations in separate local communities, the two media were being viewed more and more by the parent company as separate business operations. Newspaper owners who also owned radio stations tended to view their stations as a way to enhance the image of their papers and to build newspaper circulation and advertising linage sold. The McClatchy Company, however, saw its radio stations as serving an audience distinct from the newspaper readership, even if listeners were also readers.

**NBC and the Formation of the Don Lee Broadcasting System**

Network, or chain, broadcasting is the simultaneous broadcast of an identical program on two or more connected stations. The program was transmitted by wire, typically in the form of a leased telephone line, from the point of the program’s origin to each affiliate station on the chain for concurrent broadcasting. NBC, the first national network, was established in 1926; CBS was established the following year. Close on the heels of these national networks came regional chains, like the Don Lee Broadcasting System, that sought to link together radio stations to serve smaller regions rather than the entire country.

McClatchy Newspaper’s connection with the Don Lee Broadcasting System began early. The Don Lee chain, one of the earliest regional networks, was established in

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December, 1928 when Don Lee, Inc., a corporation whose primary business was selling automobiles, connected its San Francisco radio station, KFRC, and its Los Angeles station, KHJ, via telephone circuit. McClatchy’s three stations, KFBK in Sacramento, KMJ in Fresno, and KWG in Stockton, joined the Don Lee chain within its first month of operation, making them among the first to sign on to this relatively new concept, the regional network. NBC had only recently reached the West Coast with its programming when it established the Pacific Coast network with stations in San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, Portland, Spokane, and Seattle. At that, NBC was unsure if it would be able to link its stations in the East and the Midwest with the Pacific Coast network for the April 5, 1927 inaugural coast-to-coast broadcast.

The importance of Don Lee to McClatchy radio lay in the access to national programming provided by participation in a regional network. Through the Don Lee affiliation KFBK, KMJ, and KWG carried CBS network programming beginning in 1930, allowing the low-powered 100-watt McClatchy stations to carry network programs. Although CBS, under the leadership of William Paley, had made strides in developing as a national network, NBC was still dominant. It was only through the association with

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22 Ibid.


Don Lee’s chain that CBS was truly able to be national.\textsuperscript{25} At this time, greater Sacramento-area residents able to tune in KFBK could likely tune in KGO in Oakland, whose broadcast schedules the \textit{Bee} carried in its radio section, and listen to NBC network programs. The Don Lee hook-up and CBS affiliation gave Sacramento listeners a choice, and provided national programs to Fresno and Stockton listeners as well. On a single evening, Sacramento listeners would have the option of hearing, for example, \textit{Guy Lombardo's Orchestra} on KFBK, \textit{Amos 'n' Andy} on KGO, \textit{Cecil and Sally} on KPO, or \textit{Black and Blue} on KFRC.\textsuperscript{26}

According to NBC executives, however, network broadcasting was not a profitable enterprise in spite of the intense interest shown in linking the country coast-to-coast. In 1927, just eight months after NBC inaugurated its Pacific Coast network making it truly a “national” network, NBC president Merlin H. Aylesworth testified before the Federal Trade Commission as part of the Commission’s inquiry into the operation of RCA, the parent company of NBC.\textsuperscript{27} At the hearing in 1927 Aylesworth testified that NBC had lost money since its formation, and that the company had not “broken even” since its organization.\textsuperscript{28} According to Aylesworth, the three corporations that controlled NBC—RCA, General Electric, and Westinghouse Electric—were compensated “indirectly by reason of an increased public interest and the consequent

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} “Today’s Radio Events,” \textit{Sacramento Bee}, August 1931.


increased consumption of radio sets and accessories.”

In other words, although national broadcasting was not a profitable enterprise in and of itself, the resultant sales of radio sets, broadcasting equipment, and other components did result in profitable business.

NBC furnished two types of programs to affiliates on its chains, sponsored programs and sustaining programs. As the name implied, sponsored programs were sponsored by an advertiser; sustaining programs “consisted for the most part of a selection of artists to ‘fill out’ the program.”

Sustaining programs were unsponsored, educational, cultural, or of a special event nature, and were offered to affiliate stations at no additional charge, although the cost of producing such programs was built into the overall network pricing plan. At this time, NBC did not allow “direct” advertising, so sponsored programs could include mention of the advertiser’s name or product, but direct appeals to the public were not allowed. Ideally, Aylesworth testified, NBC would either break even or show a profit so that it could “put important public addresses on the air without the aid of an advertiser.”

If networks were not profitable, NBC was certainly investing a lot in them for very little return.

“I Do Not Know What in the Name of God to Do”

Credit for the McClatchy Company’s forward-thinking approach with regard to radio, the early link to a regional network, and the expansion of the newspaper enterprise

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30 Ibid.


rests squarely with Carlos, C.K.’s middle child and only son. Like his father, Carlos was
a strong personality, a respected journalist, and a man used to being in charge. In the
summer of 1920 at the age of twenty-nine, he ran the editorial side of the *Sacramento Bee*
while his parents, C.K. and Ella McClatchy, and sister Eleanor embarked on a twenty-
two month trip through North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Western Europe.  

Carlos ran things his way. He made the decision to publish a graphic image on
the front page of the December 10 edition of the *Sacramento Bee* showing the lynching
of three “gangsters” jailed for killing three police officers. The men had been dragged
from their Santa Rosa jail cell and hanged in the early morning hours of December 10.
The photo that ran in the *Bee* had been taken by flashlight and sent by airplane to
Sacramento’s Mather Field so the *Bee* would be able to run it on the front page of that
evening’s edition.  

In protest, *Sacramento Bee* advertiser Weinstock-Lubin Department Store ran an ad in the December 13 edition of the *Bee*, criticizing the paper for its
decision to print the photograph. Carlos accepted the ad for publication in the *Bee*,
allowing the open criticism, but in that same edition he ran an editorial that left no doubt
that advertisers do not control the editorial content of the *Bee*.  

In 1922 Carlos received the opportunity to strike out on his own. The same year
he convinced his father to involve the company in the new medium of radio, Carlos

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34 “1908-1932: A Champion of Causes,” *Sacramento Bee*, February 4, 2007; and “Gangsters
Lynched at Santa Rosa,” *Sacramento Bee*, December 10, 1920.

35 “1908-1932: A Champion of Causes,” *Sacramento Bee*, February 4, 2007; and “Weinstock-
Lubin Offers to Conduct the Bee,” *Sacramento Bee*, December 13, 1920.
became editor of the newly-established *Fresno Bee*. Unfortunately, C.K. was as strong-willed as his son and he insisted on micromanaging Carlos’s operation and dictating the Fresno paper’s position on the issues from his Sacramento office. Family involvement began to chafe for Carlos. Not only was his father attempting to manage the editorial stance of the Fresno paper, but Carlos had been forced to accept one cousin as business manager and another cousin as circulation manager. Carlos had personally supervised all aspects of the *Fresno Bee’s* establishment from buying the equipment and hiring the staff to forging relationships with Fresno-area businesses and potential advertisers, and this arrangement angered him. When C.K. and his brother Valentine (V.S.) became bitterly divided and C.K. bought V.S. out of any control of the *Bee* publications, Carlos’s cousins—the sons of V.S.—also left the papers. But C.K. still attempted to oversee the Fresno operation.

Not only was he unable to wrest full control from his father, but he knew that under the present terms of C.K.’s will, Carlos would one day have to share control of the newspapers and radio stations with his sisters Charlotte and Eleanor, neither of whom had ever worked in the publishing or broadcasting business. “I haven’t the slightest interest in pledging my life-work so that larger and larger sums could be made by the *Bee* so two-

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38 Ibid.
thirds of its revenues would be spent in idle luxury. Life is too short, the work is too hard, the motive too futile.”

Fighting C.K. on the present arrangement, Carlos managed to succeed in reaching an agreement with C.K. by which Carlos alone would inherit the newspapers (and presumably, the broadcasting side of the business owned by the newspapers as well). His mother Ella would receive a guaranteed annual income from the Bee enterprises, and sisters Charlotte and Eleanor would be given very substantial trust funds. With the issue settled, Carlos began to work toward fulfilling his vision of building a media empire. Only thirty-three at this time, he set to work eliminating the competition of the Fresno paper, buying a Modesto, California newspaper, buying or creating radio stations throughout California’s Central Valley and Nevada’s Reno area, and he had plans in the offing to purchase or start newspapers in Bakersfield, San Jose, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Phoenix.

Carlos displayed tremendous vision and a drive and work ethic to rival that of his father. Unfortunately, like his father Carlos was also a hard drinker, and where heavy

39 “C.K.’s Son Helped Expand Empire but Undercut Himself,” Sacramento Bee, February 4, 2007. Sacramento Bee columnist and author Steve Wiegand notes that after his service in World War I, Carlos returned to the newspaper, but it was clear he would not be content to be under the direction of his father and his uncle V. S., who was still involved with the Bee at that time. In 1919 Carlos was made associate editor of the Bee, but he knew the family structure would mean sharing control when the next generation took over. “I would far rather, no matter how much money I sacrificed in the future, endeavor to get hold of a smaller paper somewhere which I could develop as my own, (than) be plunged into a disastrous family regime when those who know nothing of a paper undertook to run it.” See Steve Wiegand, Papers of Permanence: The First 150 Years of the McClatchy Company (Sacramento, CA: The McClatchy Company, 2007), 133-134.


41 Ibid.
drinking did not appear to have ill effects for C.K., for Carlos it was devastating. By 1932 Carlos’s drinking was of tremendous concern and his behavior began to cast doubt on his ability to one day assume control of the entire McClatchy operation. His drinking resulted in bizarre incidents of behavior that did not escape public notice, and C.K. was at a loss. “I do not know what in the name of God to do,” C.K. wrote to Hiram Johnson. “He is a wonderful newspaperman and he has done wonderful work on the papers. But he spoils it all by his periods of practical craziness which have become notorious here in Sacramento, in Fresno, and probably in San Francisco—periods in which he does the most outlandish things and says the wildest things and says them to anybody and everybody who will listen.” 42

According to C.K., Carlos was beginning to be “dictatorial” and obstinate. Expressing that he will leave the McClatchy papers and find work elsewhere “if things do not go his way,” it is unclear in this instance how much of the difficulty is related to his alcohol abuse and how much is related to frustration over C.K.’s inability to relinquish control of the editorial policies of the Fresno Bee. 43

It appears, though, that the drinking was in the back of the family’s mind as the situation progressed. Ella, Carlos’s mother, expressed concern to C.K. about the safety of the newspapers, Carlos’s safety, her safety, and the safety of the children (presumably her grandchildren, but possibly her daughters, who had a financial stake in the business operations as well). In his frustration C.K. explained to Hiram Johnson that Carlos had

43 Ibid.
taken a short “treatment” and there were hopes it would set him “on the right road,” but it seemed to have had no effect and C.K. doubted that Carlos could be convinced to undertake such treatment again.44

Business relationships were beginning to be impacted. While “not himself” and under the care of nurses for a three week period in his family’s Sacramento home while C.K. was in China, Carlos was “telephoning all the time to everybody telling all his business and the business of the Bee.” Carlos went so far as to tell someone to go buy votes for the Silver Creek Project water bond measure and that the Bee would reimburse him for his efforts, telling the man “there wasn’t a mean, low, dirty, nasty thing the Bee would not do in order to win the election. He denies all that, but every word of it is true because everybody in the house heard him roaring.”45

The situation worsened to the point that C.K. had apparently asked Hiram to intervene. In a conversation with Hiram about his drinking and subsequent behavior, Carlos expressed that he would quit drinking, but that he would “make no promise, sign no pledge, and that he expected to take a drink occasionally.”46 With C.K.’s advancing age, the family grew more and more concerned about the terms of succession should C.K. die, leaving the entire operation to Carlos as the present will stipulated.

44 C.K. McClatchy to Hiram Johnson, July 30, 1932, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series VII, Box 33, 2005/054/1149, Center for Sacramento History.

45 C.K. McClatchy to Hiram Johnson, August 2, 1932, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series VII, Box 33, 2005/054/1149, Center for Sacramento History.

46 C.K. McClatchy to Hiram Johnson, August 12, 1932, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series VII, Box 33, 2005/054/1149, Center for Sacramento History.
Carlos died suddenly on January 17, 1933 at the age of forty-one. The official cause of death was double influenza pneumonia, and he was said to have died at the home of friends in San Mateo. The illness, his obituary stated, developed rapidly and was “of the epidemic form that is prevalent in California.”

Tributes poured into the offices of the Bee, including one from William Randolph Hearst noting that Carlos’s death was “a loss to journalism,” and rival paper the Sacramento Union which referred to him as “a power in journalism in this part of the state” and noted he would be missed by “the press and public throughout the West.”

Attesting to the personal nature of the McClatchy Company, employees from both the Fresno and Sacramento papers held all-night vigils with the body.

While Hearst’s sons were never successful working in the Hearst publishing empire, Carlos had proven himself extremely capable, hard working and a man of vision where expanding the publications and entering radio broadcasting were concerned. Carlos had the McClatchy Company entrenched in radio long before Hearst could convince his newspapers to follow suit. One is left to wonder if Carlos could have eventually advanced to a level that rivaled Hearst himself.

With Carlos gone the issue of “succession” was again up in the air. C.K., aging, in poor health, and so devastated at the loss of Carlos that he could not get out of the car

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48 Ibid.


at the graveside service, had to reconsider his will and the future of the company.\(^51\) C.K.’s primary concern was that, upon his death, McClatchy Newspapers be overseen by a family member as president. A new agreement drawn up less than two months after Carlos died established Charles and Ella McClatchy as owners of all the common stock of McClatchy Newspapers with 50,000 shares each, and created a voting trust to secure future management of the corporation. The voting trust consisted of Charles and Ella McClatchy, Eleanor McClatchy, G.C. Hamilton, and J. Earl Langdon.\(^52\) An addendum to C.K.’s will and the 1933 voting trust agreement directed that the trustees and board of directors elect his daughter, Eleanor, to the position of president and director upon his death.\(^53\) While placing a woman in such a position of corporate power might appear to be forward-thinking in 1933, C.K.’s motives had nothing to do with a belief in Eleanor’s ability to run the family business and everything to do with the business retaining a McClatchy at its head. In a supplemental statement attached to the 1936 addendum, C.K. specified that “the trustees both under the trust agreement and under my will shall be composed, in majority, of men,” subject to a provision in his will regarding the appointment of his oldest daughter, Charlotte McClatchy Maloney.\(^54\) C.K. also requested that any of his grandsons who showed an interest in learning the newspaper business


\(^{52}\) Voting Trust agreement between Charles K. McClatchy and Ella K. McClatchy, parties of the first part, and Ella K. McClatchy, Eleanor McClatchy, G.C. Hamilton, and J. Earl Langdon, parties of the second part, February 27, 1933, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series I, Box 9, 2005/054/0155, Center for Sacramento History.

\(^{53}\) C.K. McClatchy to the Trustees, February 21, 1936, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series I, Box 9, 2005/054/0155, Center for Sacramento History.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
“including radio” be “given employment in whatever department of such newspaper or radio enterprises for which they show the most aptitude, and they should be advanced from time to time in unison with their abilities, capabilities and interest taken in their work.” Overseeing the advancement of the grandsons, he noted, should be in the hands of general business director G.C. Hamilton or editorial director Walter P. Jones.\textsuperscript{55}

Eleanor was not mentioned in this addendum letter, nor were specifics of managing the radio enterprises, although the business of broadcasting and its relationship to the public airwaves was continuing to change.

\textit{The Communications Act of 1934}

The Communications Act of 1934 was born out of the Radio Act of 1927, just as that act was the follow-on to the Radio Act of 1912. Each succeeding piece of legislation was required because something was left undone—or unsatisfactorily done—by the others. The FRC, created by the Radio Act of 1927, began applying the newly codified but not defined standard of the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” when granting and renewing licenses and assigning frequencies.

As part of the licensing process, the FRC established three categories of broadcast radio station, each with parameters for signal strength and service. These categories were clear channel (the high-powered stations that did not share their frequency assignment), regional, and local.\textsuperscript{56} The FRC’s General Order 40, announced in 1928, created categories for the various stations to be used in determining licensing across the five

\textsuperscript{55} C.K. McClatchy to the Trustees, February 21, 1936, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series I, Box 9, 2005/054/0155, Center for Sacramento History.

\textsuperscript{56} Hilmes, “NBC and the Network Idea,” 15-16.
newly-created zones. “General public interest” stations were commercial stations selling airtime to everyone and included not only the clear channel stations but most of the regional ones as well.\textsuperscript{57} To the FRC, for-profit broadcasters fit the “general public service category” because the profit motive would induce these stations to provide programming desired by the market.\textsuperscript{58} Stations classified as “propaganda” stations because they represented only one point of view, were operated on low power and often shared frequencies. Hundreds of these small, non-profit propaganda stations lost their licenses within three years of the passage of the Radio Act of 1927. This was due primarily to unfavorable time and frequency assignments mandated to them by the FRC; very few license renewal applications were turned down by the FRC, yet by the Fall of 1929 there were 100 fewer stations on the air.\textsuperscript{59}

In the aftermath of the FRC’s General Order 40 and the station fallout from the order’s application, opposition emerged more strongly from non-profit broadcasters and individuals opposed to the increasing commercialization of broadcasting in the early 1930s, a commercially supported system that was referred to in the radio industry as the “American system of broadcasting.” This term was designed to distinguish the commercial nature of United States broadcasting from the state-supported model established in Great Britain. To be sure, labeling U.S. broadcasting the “American

\textsuperscript{57} Hilmes, “NBC and the Network Idea,” 15-16.


system” had public relations value. In an address before the Second National Conference on Educational Broadcasting, CBS president William Paley referred to the American system of broadcasting as a driving force for freedom, stating that “he who attacks the fundamentals of the American system attacks democracy itself.”60

CBS and NBC had a tremendous stake in this American system. Within four years of the passage of the 1927 legislation, the two networks combined accounted for thirty percent of all U.S. radio stations, and all but three of the forty clear channel stations were owned by one of the two networks or their affiliates.61 This type of commercial influence is what concerned radio reformers the most. Non-profit broadcasters, especially those affiliated with higher education, felt the FRC did nothing to protect them or to halt what they perceived as an assault by commercial broadcasters. The Chicago Federation of Labor, which operated WCFL in Chicago, the only labor radio station in the country, and the Paulist Fathers religious order of New York operating the only Catholic radio station in the northeastern United States, WLWL, found little or no support from the FRC as for-profit commercial broadcasters tried to take over their shared channels. Only a structural change in broadcast station ownership, these groups felt, would stem the takeover of commercial interests in broadcasting.62


62 Ibid., 174-176.
Three themes were common to the interests critical to commercial broadcasting: the airwaves should be considered a public resource and broadcasting a public utility; network-dominated, advertising supported broadcasting would defend the status quo and ignore unpopular or radical opinions; and advertising-supported programming, in its attempt to appeal to a mass audience, lacked cultural, educational, and public affairs programming.  

The critics of broadcasting, not cohesive enough to be called by the name of a single, specific group, fought a difficult battle in the early 1930s. The nature of the medium had already become highly intertwined with the commercial methodology of broadcast radio. The broadcast reform movement posed three major plans to overhaul broadcasting in America. One plan advocated that the government set aside fifteen or twenty-five percent of the broadcast channels for use by non-profit broadcasters. The second plan was aimed at providing an entirely new system of broadcasting and would require an independent study authorized by Congress. The third plan, which was not offered until 1935 after the Communications Act of 1934 had entrenched the commercial system of broadcasting “beyond challenge,” was to supplement the existing commercial networks with a government-established group of local, regional, and national non-commercial stations subsidized through taxes and operated by a “congressionally approved board of directors of prominent citizens.”

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64 Ibid., 176.
But the radio industry had leverage the reformers did not—NBC, CBS, and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) in a sense controlled the airwaves that were becoming increasingly important to “publicity-conscious politicians.” In addition, these same broadcasters had the knowledge and the wherewithal to undertake their own public relations campaign to promote the “innateness” of the “American system of broadcasting.”

And while there was support for reform to be found in both houses of Congress, the leaders of relevant committees were almost unanimous in their support for the status quo where broadcasting was concerned.

For his part, newly-elected president Franklin Roosevelt chose not to take a position publicly on the broadcast debate, but in 1934 the president endorsed legislation to bring all communications regulation under a single administrative agency, an arrangement that pleased the commercial broadcasters. This legislation, which reinstated the Radio Act of 1927 and replaced the FRC with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), was introduced in both houses with the intent of rushing it through committee hearings and bringing it to the floors of both the House and the Senate for a vote as quickly as possible. One of the reform groups, however, submitted an amendment to the Dill communications bill while it was in committee hearings. The

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67 Ibid., 178.

68 Ibid.
Paulist Fathers, headed by Fr. John Harney, proposed the amendment that would require the reserving of twenty-five percent of the channels for non-profit broadcasters. The committee voted against this proposal, but Senators Robert Wagner of New York and Henry Hatfield of West Virginia agreed to introduce the amendment on the Senate floor.

The Wagner-Hatfield amendment was the impetus for a flurry of public relations activity on both sides of the issue. The Paulists, who received the support of Catholic organizations and parishioners, were joined in the fight by organized labor. In response, the NAB geared up their lobbying efforts and attacked the amendment as an attempt to destroy “the whole structure of broadcasting in America.”

The amendment was defeated in both Houses. The Senate approved the Dill communications bill by a voice vote and the House passed a similar bill with no discussion of reform whatsoever. Differences between the two bills were dealt with, and the resulting legislation was very favorable to the NAB lobby. The Communications Act of 1934, signed by Roosevelt on June 18, was a victory for the commercial broadcasting interests and included every major point the NAB had wanted.

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 McChesney, “The Debate Over Public Policy and the Emergence of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States, 1927-1935,” 177-179; and Susan Smulyan, Selling Radio, 126.

The Communications Act of 1934 replaced the FRC with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and vested the commission with authority to regulate all communications by wire and radio. It also reaffirmed the concept of the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” as a key, although largely undefined, component.\(^{74}\) It remained evident that public interest was not synonymous with public access.

Recognized as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, radio’s political potential did not go unrecognized by either Congress or the FCC, as evidenced by the favoring of commercial broadcasters over “propaganda” broadcasters at the outset of the medium’s regulation.\(^{75}\) The FCC, however, did not give commercial broadcasting a “free pass.”

Could efforts at broadcasting reform have gone the other way? Radio broadcasting in Canada began with an advertising-supported system like that in the...
United States, but in 1932 the Canadian government, concerned with the flood of American programs and advertising on Canadian air waves, decided to redesign its broadcasting system as a means of protecting its national culture and identity. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was launched in 1936 with the goal of building a broadcasting system that combined both public and private stations. Public stations, the CBC recognized, were the only way to provide adequate broadcasting services to its population scattered outside the larger urban centers. The combination of public and privately owned affiliate stations was financed by both advertising support and public funds from license fees. National programs were produced by the CBC, and local productions received CBC funding. The fact that the broadcasting systems on both sides of the U.S./Canadian border, both of which were broadcasting the same or similar programming and both of which were operating on an advertising-supported system, took such divergent paths at this critical juncture of radio’s development is worthy of future comparative historical analysis.

Radio in the United States was recognized as both a powerful engine for profitable commercial enterprise and an increasingly important media component in politics. The Communications Act of 1934 and the newly-created FCC upheld the status quo broadcasting system, resulting in a fizzling of broadcast reform movements. The act

did not include any protections for “propaganda” stations and instead reinforced commercial broadcasting. 

It also did not include specific mention of news, but as news reporting became an increasingly important commodity for radio as well as print, an on-going war for both advertising dollars and access to politicians and policy makers placed newspaper publishers and broadcasters in conflict. The conflict existed not only with radio stations, but also with other newspaper publishers like McClatchy and Hearst who had broadened their media holdings to include radio stations as well as newspapers.

*The Commodification of Information—The Press Radio War*

James C. Young, writing for *Radio Broadcast* in 1925, stated flatly, “The future of the press lies in the air.” The prospect that most excited Young about a “newspaper of the air” is precisely what most worried newspaper publishers. Radio, even in its infancy, was becoming part of the “press” with the possibility that every thirty minutes the most current news could be transmitted over radio rather than awaited in a daily edition of the local newspaper. As Young put it, “The man with a radio set may learn in

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77 Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 126; and McChesney, “The Debate Over Public Policy and the Emergency of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States, 1927-1935,” 179. Smulyan maintains that the Communications Act of 1934 placed alternative non-profit stations in “such a weak position that they could never challenge a system financed through the sale of time to advertisers.” (Smulyan, 126) McChesney notes that following the passage of the 1934 act, the commercial broadcasters “strove for ideological closure” in a campaign that “triumphantly located commercial broadcasting next to the newspaper industry as an icon of American Freedom and culture and removed it from critical contemplation.” (McChesney, 179) This is the concept of the “American system of broadcasting” publicly lauded by NBC’s David Sarnoff and CBS’s William Paley.

the evening of some great event that his particular newspaper will not convey to him until
the next morning.”

News over the radio seemed to be a natural fit, especially for those radio stations
owned by companies like McClatchy Newspapers. But most newspapers, especially
smaller local papers, did not own radio stations. The call letters for McClatchy stations
KFBK and KMJ were used on the air only when legally necessary, with McClatchy
preferring instead to refer as often as possible to the Sacramento Bee Station and the
Fresno Bee Station, both on the air and in print, as a means of promoting the newspapers
as their primary business.  

Although the Press Radio War has been largely viewed by media historians as the
period from 1933 to 1935 when newspaper publishers and print journalists actively
sought to control broadcasting’s access to the news, the conflict extended for a much
longer period of time and began with the earliest broadcasting of the news.  
Print journalists argued that radio news was a threat to society, due in part to the deviation of
broadcast messages from the conventions of established news gathering and
dissemination. Standards—moral, ethical, cultural—were violated in some way,
endangering the American public.  

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80 G.C. Hamilton, James McClatchy Company to Rogan Jones, West Coast Broadcasting
Company, November 2, 1929, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 19,
2005/054/0538, Center for Sacramento History.

81 Gwenyth Jackaway, “The Press Radio War, 1924-1937: A Battle to Defend the Professional,

the news, the ones with access to newsmakers in positions of power, and the ones who standardized the language and delivery of the message. Radio threatened to shift the balance of power in news gathering and distribution.

But this was not solely a case of protecting the interests of the public; economic issues were at the core of the dispute. The American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) complained that broadcasters simply helped themselves to news published in the newspapers and sold that “commodity” to advertisers. Once this practice became more widespread, newspapers sought to protect their property (the news they had gathered and written) from unauthorized broadcast by the radio stations.  

Radio stations had not yet developed the staff and facilities for the regular gathering and reporting of the news. A 1928 published program schedule for KFBK did not indicate a news program for the station at all, nor did a schedule for 1930, although special public affairs programs such as President Hoover’s speech before the American Bankers Association at Cleveland, Ohio were broadcast courtesy of KFBK’s CBS affiliation. There appeared to have been no “cross pollination” between the reporting and editorial staff of the Sacramento Bee and the station management and production staff of KFBK.

In the late 1920s, sponsors were not interested in news programming because they did not perceive it had the audience interest that entertainment programming carried. But for broadcasters, news programs had two advantages—news could help build the

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84 “The Sacramento Bee Kimball-Upson Radio Station Schedule,” Sacramento Bee, December 1928; and “The Bee Radio Station Schedule,” Sacramento Bee, October 1930.
station’s hours of programming that could be considered public service programming, and broadcasting the news was inexpensive from a production standpoint. In addition to those advantages, the FRC definition of “public interest, convenience, and necessity” included station programming that was of social value, and the news clearly fell into that category.  

The formation of NBC in 1926 and CBS in 1927 added to the animosity between the press and broadcasting as radio advertising began to increase and newspaper advertising began to decrease. By the time the Depression hit the battle lines were firmly drawn. National networks provided competition for advertisers, greater resources for investment in program production, and a national audience, but at the end of the 1920s what these networks did not have were formal news departments. Interestingly, in 1928 KFBK’s program schedule in the newspaper did not indicate a news program. The December 1, 1928 broadcast schedule, limited to the hours of 7:30 p.m. to 10 p.m., included the football scores, weather, and correct time from 8:00 to 8:02 p.m., but no news. A display ad from San Francisco station KFRC running on the same page invited Sacramento listeners to tune to that station at 10 p.m. when KFBK signed off for

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“Sacramento Night on KFRC,” a program about the city and its citizens, featuring music and other entertainments “in honor of Sacramento,” but no news.  

In 1928, the Associated Press (AP), United Press (UP), and International News Service (INS), as well as some local newspapers, agreed to provide the returns of the Smith-Hoover presidential election to radio stations as a public service. Their aim may have been an attempt to control the flow of information to radio stations by acting as gatekeeper of their news territory, but the result was a listening public that developed an interest in news as a regular feature on their radio programming. In December of that year KFAB in Lincoln, Nebraska introduced two daily news broadcasts and hired the city editor of the Lincoln Star to direct the programs. In 1930 KMPC of Beverly Hills, California began airing a schedule of three fifteen-minute news shows daily, and organized its own news gathering service, the Radio News Service of America, with ten reporters covering the same beats as the Los Angeles newspapers and correspondents under contract out-of-town for other news. A KFBK radio log for one week in September 1930 does not indicate any news programming whatsoever, nor does a published schedule for 1931. By 1932, however, KFBK was broadcasting a program called “Newspaper of the Air,” although it is unclear who supplied the content.

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88 “Tonight’s Radio Events” and “Sacramento Night on KFRC” advertisement, Sacramento Bee, December 1, 1928.

89 Charnley, News by Radio, 8-9.

90 Ibid.

91 One week program listing sent to J. E. Murley of Broadcast Advertising, September 11, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0556, Center for Sacramento History; and “The Bee Radio Station Schedule,” Sacramento Bee, August 1931; and “Tonight’s Radio Events,” Sacramento Bee, August 1932.
In 1932, when KFBK aired “Newspaper of the Air” CBS, with which the station was affiliated, began broadcasting a sponsored news program presented by Boake Carter, an unknown person who soon gained national prominence. At this time, the AP had adopted a policy that permitted radio stations to use news bulletins for stories considered to be of “transcendent importance,” the perception being that radio could not possibly provide the kind of in-depth news coverage the public desired and the public would turn to the newspapers for the complete story. All that changed on March 1, 1932 with the kidnapping of aviator/hero Charles Lindbergh’s twenty-month-old son.

The kidnapping of the “Lindbergh Baby” fit within the definition of transcendent importance, and the AP and other wire services worked with radio stations to appeal to the kidnappers for the “Little Eaglet’s” return. NBC, CBS, and some local stations, presumably those in the general region of the Lindbergh’s New Jersey home, sent their own reporters to cover the story. The result was the first national news story in which radio figured extensively, and this coverage by radio continued through the trial and conviction of Bruno Hauptmann. Broadcasters like Boake Carter began attracting large audiences for their broadcasts.

By 1933, the conflict between the press and radio had escalated. At their conventions, the AP and the ANPA’s radio committee recommended that press associations stop supplying news bulletins to radio stations in advance of newspaper

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publication, and that bulletins supplied for broadcasting be no more than thirty words in length and not be available for advertising sponsorship.  

In response, CBS organized the Columbia News Service. Utilizing foreign reports from Exchange Telegraph and Central News in England, other foreign news gathering agencies, and hired “stringer” reporters in various U.S. cities, CBS established a competing news service and signed on General Mills as national sponsor. In retaliation, newspapers in a number of cities pulled all listings of CBS programs from their papers.

The *Sacramento Bee*, however, did not. At this time, KFBK was associated with CBS and the Don Lee Broadcasting Service. Radio schedules published in the *Bee* note specifically both CBS programs and Columbia News Service airing on the station.

The move by CBS to aggressively pursue its own network news strategy was regarded as a very real threat by the ANPA. When CBS filed an application with the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. requesting that its reporters be admitted to the Congressional Press Galleries, the application was denied on the grounds that gallery admission was reserved only for those representing “daily newspapers or newspaper associations.” CBS challenged this ruling, taking the complaint to the Senate Rules

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Committee to seek an amendment to the existing gallery rules, but the strong opposition from print journalists and publishers resulted in a denial of the appeal.\textsuperscript{97}

By this time, CBS and NBC (which had established a news department on a much smaller scale) were amenable to some form of agreement with the ANPA. In December, 1933 representatives of NBC, CBS, AP, UP, INS, and NAB met with the executive committee of the ANPA’s Publishers’ National Radio Committee (PNRC) and drew up the ten-point “Biltmore Agreement.”\textsuperscript{98} The provisions of the agreement were announced to all newspaper publishers in a letter dated January 5, 1934. One of the main provisions of the agreement was the formation of the Press-Radio Bureau (PRB), a news agency that would supply reports to radio.\textsuperscript{99}

Assuring compliance proved to be impossible. Independent radio stations refused to conform to the agreement and instead formed their own radio services or used the services of newly-formed competing bureaus. For the West Coast, opposition to the Press-Radio Bureau included the added issue of a lack of West Coast coverage. In addition, the Western Union and Postal Telegraph wire transmission fees required to receive the reports were too high. In response, the PRB established a West Coast bureau in March of 1934.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{97} Jackaway, “The Press Radio War, 1924-1937.” 142-146.


\textsuperscript{100} Chester, “The Press-Radio War,” 257-259.
As the Press-Radio Bureau plan began to break down KFBK began making other news arrangements of its own. The *Sacramento Bee* inaugurated its first crossover of editorial staff to the radio station in 1935 with *Bee* sports editor Rudy Hickey, who began a program series called the “KFBK Sports Parade.” By 1936, the KFBK published schedule specified “the latest news reports furnished by the *Sacramento Bee*.”

With dissatisfaction among broadcasters, competition from “outlaw” bureaus like the Transradio Press, and a removal of themselves from the Biltmore Agreement on the part of UP and the Hearst-owned INS so they could compete head-to-head with Transradio, the PRB lost any level of effectiveness. It limped along until December 1938 when a final withdrawal of financial support from CBS and NBC killed it.

*California Radio System—The McClatchy/Hearst Regional Network*

On June 18, 1935, as the Press Radio War was nearing its end, the FCC granted permission for KFBK to increase power from 100 watts, where it had been since the beginning, to 5,000 watts. The station was also granted permission to operate on a twenty-four hour broadcast schedule if desired. Still the only radio station in Sacramento at this time, the increase in both power and length of broadcast day positioned KFBK for even further expansion as a regional multi-media company.

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103 Bradley Riter, ca. 1952, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 25, 2005/054/0831, Center for Sacramento History.
In addition to the power boost, KFBK also changed network affiliation. Now affiliated with NBC, Sacramentans received program offerings from both the NBC Red and NBC Blue networks. On January 11, 1936, KFBK began broadcasting from new studios utilizing a new transmitter station. C.K. died in April, and C.K.’s daughter Eleanor took over as president. Almost immediately she showed her commitment to continuing her late brother’s goal of making the McClatchy Company a large, far-reaching, multi-media firm.

On November 21, 1936, McClatchy Broadcasting Company, the new entity formed on March 14 of that year as a wholly-owned subsidiary of McClatchy Newspapers, entered into a partnership with Hearst Radio, Inc. and the Evening Herald Publishing Company belonging to William Randolph Hearst to form the California Radio System (CRS). The initial structure of the network involved six stations, each station able to sustain its national network affiliation, but also receiving local, regional, and state-specific programming as part of the CRS. The original stations were KEHE in Los Angeles, owned by the Evening Herald Publishing Company, KYA in San Francisco, owned by Hearst Radio, Inc., and KFBK in Sacramento, KERN in Bakersfield, KMJ in Fresno, and KWG in Stockton, all owned by the McClatchy Broadcasting Company.

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104 Riter, ca. 1952, McClatchy Collection; and “History of Radio Station KFBK,” ca. 1975, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 25, 2005/054/0832, Center for Sacramento History.


107 Federal Communications Commission, Report on Chain Broadcasting, 103; and Riter, notes on company history, ca. 1951, McClatchy Collection.
In November 1937 the Hearst interests withdrew from the partnership. At this time Hearst’s interests were being divested by a trustee in a virtual bankruptcy.\(^{108}\) When Hearst withdrew, McClatchy Broadcasting Company retained sole control of the network, operating it as one of its departments through 1943. Hearst station KYA remained with the network under a contract of affiliation. The other Hearst station, KEHE, was replaced by KFWB in Hollywood, the Warner Brothers station, which also supplied a new series of programs featuring “the finest talent of the world’s motion picture capital” for broadcast on the CRS. The network also added McClatchy station KOH in Reno, and stations KFOX in Long Beach and KTMS in Santa Barbara.\(^{109}\)

The announcement of the changeover to complete McClatchy control and the addition of the Warner Brothers station was a sudden one. Hearst Radio’s relinquishing of all interest in the statewide network was announced in the *Bee* on Saturday, November 6, 1937 with McClatchy assuming complete control on Monday, November 8.\(^{110}\) Offices would be maintained in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, but the operation’s headquarters was established in Sacramento. All McClatchy stations, it was noted in the


\(^{109}\) Federal Communications Commission, *Report on Chain Broadcasting*, 308-309; and “McClatchy Radio Assumes Control of State System,” *Sacramento Bee*, November 6, 1937. Mention of the California Radio System has been singularly missing from histories of radio, biographies of William Randolph Hearst, and histories of the McClatchys and their business operations in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The only radio history in which I have found mention of the CRS is in Jim Cox, *American Radio Networks: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 102-103, and at that he simply reiterates the data from the FCC’s 1941 *Report on Chain Broadcasting*. Cox states the CRS was disbanded in 1939, but a McClatchy Broadcasting Company “Statement of Profit and Loss and Surplus” (Center for Sacramento History, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, 2005/054/0654) for the years 1936 to 1945, shows the California Radio System as a revenue line item all the way through 1943.

\(^{110}\) “McClatchy Radio Assumes Control of State System,” *Sacramento Bee*, November 6, 1937.
announcement, were part of both the CRS and NBC. The enterprise proved to be a profitable one, garnering almost $110,000 net profit after agency commissions in 1938.

In the same newspaper article, McClatchy also announced the FCC had granted another authorization to increase signal strength. McClatchy Broadcasting Company, which referred to itself as a pioneer in Western radio, was scheduled to boost power for KFBK from 5,000 watts to 10,000 watts on December 15, 1937, giving it the most broadcasting power in the CRS chain. KFWB in Hollywood and KYA in San Francisco remained at 5,000 watts, KMJ in Fresno at 1,000 watts, and KWG in Stockton and KERN in Bakersfield were still broadcasting at only 100 watts of power. In addition to this power surge, the McClatchy Broadcasting Company, was about to lead the nation in the pioneering use of a new technology to reach the public—radio facsimile.

The regulatory changes and broadcast signal reassignments of the late 1920s created a business environment in which McClatchy Company executives had to be flexible and forward-thinking. Many small radio stations across the United States did not survive the enforcement of General Order 40 and the FRC’s definition of the “public interest” as it applied to signal reallocation and programming requirements. But the McClatchy Company did not limit its focus to mere survival, and instead aggressively sought growth through opportunities for expansion and associations with other forward-

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111 “McClatchy Radio Assumes Control of State System,” Sacramento Bee, November 6, 1937.

112 Federal Communications Commission, Report on Chain Broadcasting, 103; and Riter, notes on company history, ca. 1951, McClatchy Collection.

113 “McClatchy Radio Assumes Control of State System, Sacramento Bee, November 6, 1937.
thinking West Coast companies like the Don Lee regional network. McClatchy’s aggressive positioning as a newspaper publisher deeply entrenched in local, and then regional, radio put the company in a position to launch itself, through association with Hearst Radio, Inc., into its own statewide radio network.

During the 1930s radio assumed importance in the lives of many Americans as a primary means of entertainment and information, programming brought to them by sponsorship and advertising dollars. Control of national broadcasting by NBC and CBS translated to big advertising profits and even bigger questions regarding restraint of trade, as would-be competitors failed to successfully rival the two national networks. Just prior to the U.S. entry into World War II, the FCC undertook an investigation of chain broadcasting that shook up the networks and brought new programs and sponsors into the homes of American consumers.
Chapter 3

MEDIA GROWTH, MARKET EXPANSION, AND SERVING THE PUBLIC INTEREST, 1939-1950

By 1939, Sacramento residents supported two radio stations. Local car dealer Royal Miller received a license from the FCC in 1937 to broadcast with 100 watts of power. The McClatchy Broadcasting Company, begun in 1936 and maintaining an extensive engineering department to support its own stations, lent the services of its engineers to build Miller’s newly-licensed KROY (the ROY chosen as short for “Royal”), helping to usher in the small station that initially broadcast from the Sacramento Hotel at Eleventh and K Streets.1 While this move to aid a direct competitor seems unusual, it was neither the first nor the last time a McClatchy enterprise would engage in this sort of local business development. Another Sacramento radio station, KCRA, licensed in 1945, would also benefit from the expertise of the McClatchy Broadcasting Company Engineering Department. A similar move to ensure competition was made by C.K. McClatchy in 1929 when he loaned William Dodge, a newspaperman from Southern California, $350,000 to buy rival Sacramento daily the Union and keep that morning paper alive.2

The McClatchy Company long seemed to be more than the sum of its parts, and under the leadership of Eleanor McClatchy, the company continued to expand.

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Eleanor, who had planned to be a playwright and not the head of a large company, left New York in February of 1936 at her father’s request and returned to Sacramento to learn “the family business.” C. K. died a mere two months later. Although Eleanor had no “on the ground” experience in running the multi-media enterprise, she had grown up around the business, understood her father’s business philosophy, and had the valuable resources of an excellent staff in place upon which to draw.3

Eleanor proved innovative in her leadership and she shared Carlos’s vision of the McClatchy Company as a multi-media business. It was also during this period, from the mid-1930s into the post-World War II era, when information—the news—became as much a commodity as the entertainment aired on radio. And entertainment, in the form of broadcast radio programs, was increasingly and more openly identified with and sponsored by advertisers, both national and local. The McClatchy Broadcasting Company, Sacramento’s largest media company and the West Coast’s first multi-media business, continued to pursue a reach that exceeded its grasp during this time, and in the process brought greater media innovation and entertainment offerings to the people of the Sacramento Region, many presented commercial free.

Did the McClatchy Company’s actions in aiding new media development in Sacramento serve the public interest? In this chapter I will explore how “public interest, convenience, and necessity,” the phrase used in public utility legislation and incorporated into the Radio Act of 1927, came to be defined in the aftermath of the FCC’s 1941 investigation into chain broadcasting, the breakup of NBC, how these developments

impacted regional broadcasting chains, and how Eleanor McClatchy’s vision of what constituted the public interest shaped media in California’s capital region.

Radio Facsimile and the Newspaper of the Air

In October 1937, the McClatchy Broadcasting Company applied to the FCC for a special experimental license that allowed the Sacramento-based media firm to use a new technology, radio facsimile, to broadcast a newspaper directly into homes in Sacramento and Fresno. As with radio, the Sacramento company was the first on the Pacific Coast to incorporate the new technology into its media business.4 The newspaper, called the Radio Bee, was written and transmitted in the KFBK studios, with Fresno affiliate KMJ receiving the transmission by wire from Sacramento. The initial distribution reached a mere one hundred participants due to a lack of available receiving equipment at the time. McClatchy Newspapers reportedly invested between $30,000 and $50,000 in an RCA transmitter and 100 receivers, which were placed in fifty homes each in Sacramento and Fresno, to be rotated every three weeks to new area residents selected by an impartial committee.5 The Radio Bee was in a two-column format, eight pages in length (size eight-and-a-half by eleven), contained news stories, photos, and comics, and was transmitted into homes with receiving sets in the early morning hours.6 The RCA

4 “The McClatchy Broadcasting Company Presents Facsimile: The Newspaper of the Air,” brochure for the 1939 Convention of the Pacific Coast Division of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA), October 26, 1939, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 25, 2005/054/0843, Center for Sacramento History; and “McClatchy Radio Newspaper of Air is Approved,” Sacramento Bee, November 9, 1937.


receivers installed in the 100 test homes operated by means of a radio signal that activated a printer bar operating at high speed. The bar pressed down on a spiral steel wire rotating at a rate of 75 revolutions per second. Printing paper and carbon paper were passed around a cylinder where the printer bar impulses from the radio signal caused the spiral wire to press the carbon and printing paper together to form each segment of the words and images. As each line in the transmission registered on the paper, the cylinder moved into position for the next line.\(^7\)

Appropriately, considering the \textit{Bee}'s forward-looking stance concerning the medium of radio, the first \textit{Radio Bee} was transmitted on February 2, 1939, the seventeenth anniversary of the \textit{Bee}'s inaugural radio broadcast on KVQ.\(^8\) The \textit{Bee} was the first newspaper west of the Rocky Mountains to engage this technology, and only the fourth newspaper in the country to do so.\(^9\)

The object, of course, was expansion as it is with any business enterprise. Innovation potentially means new customers, new markets, and, ideally, new sources of revenue. It is likely no accident that one of the first demonstrations of the technology was at the 1939 Pacific Coast Division convention of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. Once the technology became viable on a much larger scale,


\(^9\) “1933-1957: Hard Times, Boom Times,” \textit{Sacramento Bee}, February 4, 2007; and “Network Daily Paper: Californians receive morning facsimile broadcast from two stations,” \textit{Business Week}, February 25, 1939, 35; and “McClatchy Radio Newspaper of Air is Approved,” \textit{Sacramento Bee}, November 9, 1937. The \textit{Sacramento Bee} article noted, “Only three other American radio stations, all of them in the East, have been authorized so far to engage in the revolutionary form of radio service.” \textit{Business Week} reported the Sacramento inaugural broadcast to be, “the first instance of network facsimile broadcasting.”
penetration into a new market, such as subscribers receiving the *Bee* newspapers by radio facsimile, would have opened up a new avenue for advertising revenue and advertising agency involvement. Today, many radio stations package their advertising proposals to both advertising agencies and individual local customers as combined media buys that include an on-air advertising component for the radio and an on-line component on the radio station’s web site. Potentially, McClatchy Broadcasting Company could have structured an advertising rate card that would have included varying combinations of advertising on one or more of the McClatchy-owned radio stations with one or more of the newspapers, plus advertising (maybe even a special facsimile-only coupon) on the “newspaper of the air,” plus additional radio advertising that would have covered most of California through the McClatchy-owned California Radio System. In 1939, it would have been possible to undertake a statewide, multi-media campaign through contact with a single business operation located in Sacramento.

For some industry watchers, this technology was seen as another potential intrusion into the territory of newspapers. “One of the most obvious uses of facsimile is to supply news, news pictures, and illustrative material. The availability of frequency modulation [FM] for transmitting facsimile opens a new field of development, free from practical limitations on the number of frequencies available, and with the added advantage of combination with sound frequency modulation broadcasting.”

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them the services of a metropolitan newspaper “on a par with their urban friends.” A newspaper printed in their home while they slept would be an alternative to day-old news arriving in the form of the printed newspaper under traditional methods of transport.\textsuperscript{11}

Unfortunately, as often happens with technology on the forefront, the return on investment did not exceed the state of the art at that time. The experiment into radio facsimile proved to be both expensive and too slow. McClatchy Broadcasting Company dropped the project in 1940.\textsuperscript{12} The McClatchy Company continued to focus on expansion, innovation, and new markets, however.

Even in the midst of the Depression, radio was profitable, thanks to advertising. Advertising-supported programs brought a great deal of popular entertainment into people’s homes courtesy of NBC and CBS. But control of the sources of advertising revenue, especially on a national scale, attracted the attention of the recently-created FCC which expressed concerns about monopolistic practices.

\textit{Broadcasting Chains and the FCC}

In December of 1938, the \textit{Congressional Digest} published its “Pro & Con Monthly” under the topic “Is There a Monopoly in American Radio?” The issue included a recounting of how broadcast radio operates, the origin of American radio laws, and an explanation of the investigation by the FCC of the radio industry. Of primary concern was the threat of monopoly. At the core of the investigation was the charge that an

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\textsuperscript{11} “The McClatchy Broadcasting Company Presents Facsimile: The Newspaper of the Air,” brochure for the 1939 Convention of the Pacific Coast Division of the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA), October 26, 1939, McClatchy Collection.

independent had no chance to enter into competition with the established chains. Representatives of the chains asserted there was no monopoly, as evidenced by the competition among NBC, CBS, and Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS) to produce and broadcast the best programming, allowing the listening public to decide where they wanted to tune their radio dials. Contributors on both sides of the “debate” included David Sarnoff of RCA and NBC, William Paley of CBS, members of Congress, an FCC Commissioner, a member of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), and others.

The Communications Act of 1934, which created the FCC, also upheld the commercial broadcasting status quo over special interest stations and the concerns of broadcast reformers. What, then, precipitated the investigation into those very interests the Act upheld, by the agency the Act created?

To understand what led to the investigation one must understand the business and operational structure of the chains. What were then called “chains” later became known as “networks,” the term that persists in common usage today. I use the terms “chain” and “network” interchangeably here. Chains began as an experimental process in the years just prior to the formation of NBC in 1926 and the formation of CBS in 1927, making these two entities the broadcasting chains on the “ground floor” of this new business enterprise. The purpose of the chain was to link together stations so those stations could simultaneously share identical programming.

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13 “The Pro & Con Monthly,” The Congressional Digest 17, no. 12 (December 1938).

Concerns about the business practices of chains arose in the late 1930s as it became apparent that entering the network business was virtually impossible for an outsider. The outsider in question was a consortium of four powerful radio stations, WGN of Chicago, Cincinnati’s WLW, Detroit’s WXYZ, and WOR in Newark. For these four stations the move to form a chain made sense. Much of the quality programming they offered listeners was produced in their own studios, and they realized if they worked together they could reduce costs for each of them.\textsuperscript{15} Mutual Broadcasting System began with a 1934 stock issue and consisted of those four stations and no affiliates. The founding four had been at one time affiliated with either CBS or NBC, but left due to compensation issues. Rather than follow the established network model of owning affiliate stations, MBS was owned by its founding stations and functioned more as a “program exchange and syndication service.”\textsuperscript{16} MBS began with the four owner stations, but others soon joined, attracted by the better compensation scale. MBS paid stations the full station rate card fee for broadcast time less a five percent commission and expenses. The compensation structure was better than that of the established networks, and the programming was some of the best locally produced programming in the country.\textsuperscript{17}

The other thing MBS did was make statements to the FCC and other government agencies about the near impossibility of a new competitor getting established in


\textsuperscript{17} Socolow, “Always in Friendly Competition,” 36.
commercial radio. The reason for the difficulty was the affiliate structure of the other networks. Stations that were in large, desirable markets or had a license that allowed high-powered transmission were already bound by contractual agreement as affiliates to either NBC or CBS.18 In 1936, NBC’s contract with affiliates bound the station to the network for five years, although NBC had the option to terminate a contract after one year if the network desired. CBS had a similar contractual agreement in place.19 The result was a system in which the two major networks controlled most of the advertising revenue. From 1935 to 1937 NBC, which had two networks known as the Red and the Blue, garnered 29 percent of the broadcast advertising volume, CBS had 20 percent, and MBS had less than 2 percent. Local and regional advertising made up the remainder.20

Concerns over monopolistic practices went beyond the chains themselves, however. In addition to the contractual lock-up of the most desirable affiliates, NBC and CBS also had an arrangement with AT&T whereby the two networks paid less for the use of the lines. When AT&T ultimately reduced its land-line rates, the company that saw the greatest direct benefit was MBS.21

Although the official FCC inquiry began in 1938, the impetus for it may well have come from one Senate and three House resolutions in 1937 which called on the Commission to investigate network monopolistic patterns. This occurred in concert with

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19 Ibid.


another FCC investigation of newspaper ownership of radio stations. The move was prompted, some historians believe, by White House concerns about the political positions held by conservative newspaper editors and a fear that those positions would achieve considerably further reach if broadcast media were under their control.22

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first president to make extensive use of radio as a means of communicating to the public, and the “fan mail” received at the White House was a great indicator of how radio listeners achieved a sense of personal connection with their president because he was able to speak directly to them.23 FDR needed the cooperation of the networks for this direct contact with the American people, but as the New Deal progressed his appointees to the FCC also had to address the bitter struggle between non-profit and commercial broadcast interests. The result was a more “interventionist approach on the part of the FCC,” examining internal operations, as with the chain investigation, rather than engaging in outright censorship of programs or a restructuring of the broadcast system to include the demands of non-profit broadcasters.24

The Democratic administration’s recognition of its need for cooperation from the
networks, owing to its perception that the Republican opposition controlled the lion’s share of the press, resulted in FCC restrictions on the more “egregious violations of the public interest and open-market principles.” But the FCC also protected the current state of broadcasting and saw to it that new technologies like FM developed without disruption to established business interests and that “federal intervention in the commercial, privatized development of television” was never seriously considered.\(^\text{25}\)

The newspaper/radio inquiry could have had significant impact on business concerns like McClatchy Broadcasting, Hearst Radio, and the California Radio System. The “duopoly” rule forbidding newspaper ownership of a radio station in the same “market” did not come into being until 1975, however, and at that, existing cross-ownership, as in the case of McClatchy Broadcasting, was allowed.\(^\text{26}\)

The FCC’s inquiry into the business practices of chain broadcasting began in 1938. The FCC’s “General Order 37” announced the Commission’s intent to “undertake an immediate investigation to determine what special regulations applicable to radio stations engaged in chain or other broadcasting are required in the public interest.

\(^{25}\) Hilmes, \emph{Only Connect}, 65-73; and Starr, \emph{Creation of the Media}, 374-375. According to Starr, Roosevelt estimated the Republicans controlled 85 percent of the country’s newspapers. In reality, the 1936 election saw 57 percent of the press endorse Republican candidate Alf Landon and 36 percent endorse FDR. Hilmes, in her discussion of the struggle between non-profit and commercial interests, argues that with the shifting of the administration into the activism of the New Deal, non-profit concerns likely would have stood a much greater chance at achieving a restructuring of broadcasting had the debate occurred just one year later. The Depression, Hilmes states, was deepening just as the regulatory debate was heating up, making the thought of diverting government funds away from direct economic relief seem “frivolous.”

convenience, or necessity.” 27 When the hearings got underway, the first to speak before the Commission was RCA president and NBC chairman of the board David Sarnoff.

When it came to radio broadcasting, the concern over unfair business practices went beyond the question of public interest to include access to affiliates and advertising revenue, and whether or not there was real competition for those advertising dollars. In his remarks before the FCC, Sarnoff declared:

“The American people have a free radio because they have a broadcasting industry that pays its own way. Those who object to commercial announcements on the air are apt to forget that it is the revenue from these announcements which makes it possible for them to hear regularly a symphony orchestra conducted by Toscanini, the broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera, America’s Town Meeting of the Air, the National Farm and Home Hour, the Damrosch Music Appreciation Hour, and many other costly sustaining features of the networks.” 28

In Sarnoff’s description, competition in network broadcasting was a competition for both the listener’s attention and the advertising dollar. Ownership of any particular network, he noted, did not determine competition. “If there are no listeners there are no advertising dollars, and if there is no service there are no listeners.” If there are two networks and no variety, listeners, he maintained, would seek options elsewhere. 29 In other words, audience preference would ensure competition and a place for competing networks.


29 Ibid., 21-22.
In his FCC testimony, Sarnoff offered assurances of natural competition because of audience preferences; but in front of other groups he sounded an alarm over potential government censorship.

In response to the FCC investigation, Sarnoff gave a speech before the Town Hall Luncheon at the Hotel Astor in New York City. His topic was “The American System of Broadcasting and its Function in the Preservation of Democracy.” Sarnoff reminded his audience that the Communications Act of 1934 specified the FCC did not have the power to censor programs. He nonetheless continued that though direct censorship was forbidden by law, the terms of government licensing raised the possibility of indirect censorship.\(^\text{30}\) One form of censorship, he noted, had to do with the attitude maintained by some in government toward the profits earned by broadcasters. Telling his audience that in other areas of communication such as the two-way telephone or the telegraph, the control of rates is an important, and therefore relevant, function of the FCC, Sarnoff added, “But broadcasting is a one-way, not a two-way, medium. It is not a common carrier which the public hires to perform a fixed service. It is a medium of artistic and intellectual expression, free to the listening public. Its financial structure does not impinge upon the public interest, convenience or necessity.”\(^\text{31}\)

The FCC held hearings open to any person or organization that wished to present evidence in the investigation. The investigating committee requested the national and regional networks, station licensees, and radio program transcription and recording


\(^{31}\) Ibid.
companies to present evidence. Licensees of stations and stockholders of licensee corporations were sent questionnaires soliciting information. In addition, people and organizations who requested the opportunity to present evidence material to the investigation were given that opportunity. Over approximately seventy-three days the commission heard ninety-six witnesses, accrued 707 exhibits, and produced 8,713 pages of transcripts.\(^{32}\)

Not surprisingly, the FCC’s understanding of what did and did not impinge upon the public interest differed from Sarnoff’s censorship warnings before the Town Hall luncheon. The FCC’s *Report on Chain Broadcasting* released in 1941 acknowledged the value and quality of the programs produced by the networks, and that those program offerings to the American people were made possible in large part by advertising revenue brought to the radio industry through the “network method of broadcasting to Nationwide audiences.” Simply stated, the bigger audiences brought in advertisers and revenue that paid for quality programs. Chain broadcasting, they acknowledged, “Plays an essential part in the development of the broadcast industry. But the fact that the chain broadcasting method brings benefits and advantages to both the listening public and to broadcast station licensees does not mean that the prevailing practices and policies of the networks and their outlets are sound in all respects, or that they should not be altered.”\(^{33}\)

This set the tone of the report. The FCC acknowledged the role advertising played in providing free programs of quality to a national audience—the “public” whose

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interest, convenience, and necessity is codified in radio legislation—but made it clear that network policy, where business structures and practices were concerned, could be separated from other segments of chain broadcasting and restructured if necessary. By the FCC’s own admission they were not solving “all questions of public interest with respect to the network system of program distribution.”34 The FCC concluded their goal was to ensure the maintenance of a competitive market:

Radio broadcasting is a competitive industry. The Congress has so declared it in the Communications Act of 1934, and has required the fullest measure of competition possible within physical limitations. If the industry cannot go forward on a competitive basis, if the substantial restraints upon competition which we seek to eliminate are indispensable to the industry, then we must frankly concede that broadcasting is not properly a competitive industry. If this be the case, we recommend that the Congress should amend the Communications Act to authorize and direct regulations appropriate to a noncompetitive industry with adequate safeguards to protect listeners, advertisers, and consumers. We believe, however, that competition, given a fair test, will best protect the public interest. That is the American system.35

Sarnoff and NBC had a great deal about which to be concerned. At the time, NBC’s two networks, the Red and the Blue, had licensed or affiliated stations located in a swath from New England to Omaha and north of the Mason Dixon Line covering only one-third of the United States by area, but with a broadcasting “lock” on two-thirds of the country by population.36 One of the primary concerns that came out in the FCC report was the means by which NBC and CBS exerted control over the broadcast operations of their affiliates. As the FCC pointed out, “it is the station, not the network, which is

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35 Ibid., 88-89.
licensed to serve the public interest.” The licensee was responsible for determining which programs aired over the station. An affiliate station could not be bound by network contract into accepting all network programs. “The licensee is obliged to reserve to himself the final decision as to what programs will best serve the public interest.”

In an appendix to the Report on Chain Broadcasting the FCC included a list of regulations, numbered 3.101 through 3.108, targeting the responsibilities of the licensee and limiting the network’s power over its affiliates. The regulations included FCC refusal to grant a license to a standard broadcast station having a network arrangement that did not allow the station to broadcast programs from other networks or that had a network contractual agreement of longer than one year. The license refusal also disallowed network control of affiliate broadcast airtime or station rates. Taking direct aim at NBC, licensees were not allowed to affiliate with a network organization that maintained more than one network.

When the FCC findings were published the McClatchy Broadcasting Company contacted the NBC Blue network, with which it had affiliated KFBK in 1939, and immediately made changes to the existing network contract pursuant to FCC regulations 3.101 through 3.108. As part of the modifications to the existing contract, NBC Blue would, at its own expense, extend program transmission lines to the control board of the

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main studios of KFBK and offer the McClatchy station the “first call in the community in which those studios are located upon all Blue Network programs scheduled to be broadcast by a station in that community.” The FCC concluded that network practices limited the licensee’s freedom to choose the programs best suited to the public interest of the community, yet only the licensee had that responsibility. Neither the network nor the advertising agency determining the content of the programs could take that function from the licensee.

Mutual Broadcasting System wasted no time in putting forth its assessment of the Commission’s findings. In his first white paper released after the 1941 report, MBS general manager Fred Weber responded to what he called the alarms sounded by NBC, CBS, and the NAB in the wake of the May 3, 1941 release of the report. This report did not, he assured his readers, abolish network broadcasting, did not do away with the American system of broadcasting, will not bring chaos, will not “paralyze the freedom of the air,” did not threaten the continuation of network programming service, and will not lead to government ownership of radio. Pulling no punches, MBS reiterated key facts brought out in the report: NBC and CBS operated three national networks “controlling eighty-five percent of the nation’s nighttime power,” the net income from the operations of these two companies regularly “equaled about one-half that of the entire broadcasting

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39 Draft of a letter to the Blue Network Company, Inc., ca. 1941, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0610, Center for Sacramento History.


industry,” and the other half was “thinly spread” among the almost 800 independently-owned stations, many of which operated at a loss. By operating two networks, MBS pointed out, NBC had been able to block competition by making rate concessions to advertisers that were not available to a single-network company.  

Mutual released a second white paper that October in which it analyzed the FCC revisions. The white paper stated the Commission’s order and amendments had “inaugurated an era of fair and equal competition so that in the future the success of a network will depend not on artificial restraints and unreasonable control over station independence but on its ability to furnish superior service to its affiliate stations, to the public, and to the advertiser.”

The FCC’s findings published in the Report on Chain Broadcasting resulted in the divestiture of one of NBC’s networks. In 1943 the Blue Network was sold to Edward Noble, owner of New York station WMCA, and in 1945 it became the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). The FCC regulations regarding chain broadcasting did not, however, impact the regional chains like California networks CRS and Don Lee.

With newspaper ownership of radio, as well as the structure of regional networks, untouched by the FCC findings, McClatchy Broadcasting continued its integration of print and broadcast media. Shortly before C.K.’s death in 1936, the broadcast operations


in California had grown large enough that it was deemed financially more beneficial to organize them into a subsidiary of the McClatchy Company. This new subsidiary, the McClatchy Broadcasting Company, held an estimated combined worth of $400,000 for the California radio stations, approximately five times their original purchase price. This growth in station value translated to increased listenership as the number of households with radios continued to grow, making the medium still more attractive to advertisers.45 Key for McClatchy was what had always been its most saleable commodity—the news. Just as the Sacramento Bee had long been a source of local, regional, and national news, McClatchy Broadcasting would offer the same level of advertising-supported news service to the public.

In 1939, largely in response to the Roosevelt administration’s close attention to any conservative political leanings by sponsored news commentators on the major networks, both NBC and CBS issued guidelines for news reporting. The guidelines stated reporting was to be based in fairness, fact, and without the personal opinions of the radio broadcaster, additional commentary, or “microphone manner designed to cast doubt, suspicion, sarcasm, ridicule, or anything of that sort” on the news as it is presented.46

The McClatchy Broadcasting Company published its own in-house set of rules and procedures to be followed in preparing and airing a radio news broadcast. The

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45 Steve Wiegand, Papers of Permanence: The First 150 Years of the McClatchy Company (Sacramento: The McClatchy Company, 2007), 182-183.

46 Michael J. Socolow, “‘News is a Weapon’: Domestic Radio Propaganda and Broadcast Journalism in America, 1939-1944,” American Journalism 24, no. 3 (Summer 2007), 121.
There has been too much tendency by radio to ignore local news and report only the national, foreign and regional news as carried by the wire services. Newspapers—and particularly the McClatchy newspapers—do a thorough job of local and regional news coverage. If people are interested in reading this news, they certainly are interested in hearing it. KFBK and KMJ occupy enviable radio positions in regard to local and regional news coverage by having available the output of the Bees. The stations and papers should cooperate as closely as possible in all news respects, with the stations plugging the papers on all possible occasions, and the papers calling attention to the station special events and featured newscasts.47

McClatchy Broadcasting Company instructed their radio station news departments that commercial announcements must not total more than three minutes of a fifteen-minute news show aired during the day, and not more than two and one half minutes of a fifteen-minute news program aired at night. The news broadcast would have no opening commercial with the exception of sponsor identification and perhaps a slogan or short product description. Long commercials at the start of the news, it was noted, would drive listeners to other stations. The news programming was to always air at the same time during the broadcast day, “day in and day out, year in and year out, so listeners

will know automatically when to turn to them.”48 From a marketing standpoint, this sort of consistency and reliability builds listener loyalty. Listener loyalty creates a regular audience, and a consistent audience is what is sold to advertisers.

*Mass Consumption, Consumer Products, and Advertising*

I like to broadcast for OLD GOLDS. You see those OLD GOLD folks don’t ask me to tell you that OLD GOLD is the *only* good cigarette. They concede that there are other good smokes. So the net of my radio talk is this: Try a pack of OLD GOLDS and “Let Your Taste Decide!”49

Popular CBS radio announcer David Ross appeared in an Old Gold cigarette newspaper advertisement in the *Sacramento Bee* on the page that also listed the radio programming schedule. A final tag-line in the ad reminded *Bee* readers to “TUNE IN on Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians every Wednesday night—Columbia Chain,” the show on which Ross appeared.50 The Columbia Chain, CBS, was the network with which KFBK was affiliated at that time, and Fred Waring was a nationally popular musician and bandleader. This sort of cross-marketing tie is indicative of just how profitable McClatchy’s newspaper-owned radio business model could be. Because KFBK was a CBS affiliate, the station received compensation for the broadcast hours in which network programs like the Old Gold-sponsored “Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians” aired. Old Gold, capitalizing on its sponsorship of the national program, used the radio show’s popularity to promote its cigarettes in the newspapers in markets

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49 “As Smooth as an Old Gold” advertisement, *Sacramento Bee*, March 9, 1933.

50 Ibid.
where the readership had the opportunity of tuning into the radio program. The *Sacramento Bee* received ad revenue from Old Gold for the newspaper ad as well as compensation from CBS for the Old Gold show’s airtime. Placement of the ad on the radio page of the Bee served also to call the reader’s attention to the fact that KFBK was the CBS affiliate, and this was where listeners should tune their radios to hear the David Ross/Fred Waring program. Although KFBK was the only broadcast radio station in Sacramento at this time, listeners in the greater Sacramento area could also tune in to San Francisco area stations like KGO and KFRC rather than listen to their local station.

The Old Gold newspaper advertisement and corresponding radio program were similar to marketing plans followed successfully by other companies. Using radio advertising to make the listener conscious of, in this case, a cigarette’s brand identity—and by extension, its desirability—increased sales. Other methods were also employed. Station contests that encouraged listeners to submit entries were used as a means of gauging audience numbers and the regions from which the radio station drew. By engaging the listener, this method also served to ingrain brand identity.51

In 1928 the American Tobacco Company undertook a marketing experiment that illustrated the success of radio, branding, and the impact of both on a consumer’s need to buy a particular product. Helen Woodward, a former advertising copywriter and account

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51 A 1930 coffee word contest aired by J. A. Folger & Co. over KFBK netted a report of 491 contest responses and showed the station, as well as advertisers, that the listening audience came from a much larger territory than previously thought. Although the KFBK business manager did not feel he could claim the entire territory as receiving consistent radio reception, he reported contest entries from Chico ninety miles away, Oroville seventy-five miles away, and Stockton, Yuba City, Marysville, and Placerville, all fifty miles away. G. C. Hamilton to J. E. Hurley, Broadcast Advertising, Inc., September 18, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0556, Center for Sacramento History.
executive, wrote, “The most desperate copywriters in the advertising business are those who have to write about cigarettes. What can they say? Tests have shown that hardly anyone can distinguish one brand of cigarette from another.” And yet a decade before Woodward wrote her article for *The Nation*, George Washington Hill of American Tobacco proved there did not have to be a difference in order to get the consumer to select a particular brand. American Tobacco sponsored the “Lucky Strike Dance Orchestra,” a program Hill created. The show debuted on thirty-nine NBC stations in September 1928. To test the effectiveness of radio as an advertising medium, Hill pulled all other Lucky Strike advertising for a period of time, and in November and December Lucky Strike sales increased by 47 percent. Radio alone had driven consumer’s brand selection. Hill’s success was soon emulated by Camel cigarettes and other product advertisers.

By the early 1930s when the Old Gold ad appeared in the *Bee*, advertising on the radio was firmly in place. In 1931 the Associated Broadcasters of America (ABA) undertook a national survey to determine the “public viewpoint in different sections of the country about radio advertising.” A letter to broadcasters noted, “…there is a constant yell about too much advertising on the radio. We do not believe the people who are yelling loudest know anything about it.” In an effort to determine the public mood in various parts of the country, the ABA requested that radio stations broadcast an

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announcement about the advertising survey as a means of gathering public opinion data. Results would be based on listener letters to each participating station.54

In general the Depression decade reversed advertising from the spending level of the 1920s as the overall volume of advertising dropped. Yet the number of radio stations expanded and the listener base grew. Radio was thriving.55 An article in a 1932 issue of Business Week pointed out that as other industries suffered, radio was profiting:

It is like going into a different world when you leave the depression-ridden streets for the office of a big broadcasting company. Men going past are fat and cheerful. Cigars point ceilingward, heels click on tiles, the merry quip and the untroubled laugh ring high and clear. In a corner office a vice-president broke down and confessed: “Sure, we’re making money. Has it got to the point where that is a crime?”56

The Depression-era vision of abundance promoted by President Roosevelt placed a new emphasis on spending and consumption. Advertising became both an economic force for price regulation and a vision of how the American culture worked, with product, advertisement, and medium blended together into a representation of the culture itself.57

KFBK attempted this combination of product and advertisement to create a cultural representation of Sacramento when the station manager proposed creating an

54 Thomas Stevenson, Associated Broadcasters of America, to Radio Station KFBK, April 15, 1931, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0573, Center for Sacramento History.


original radio program for Sacramento real estate agency and land developer Wright & Kimbrough. The proposed program was to be based on actual stories of real estate transfers in the Sacramento region. A series of planned programs began with the first Spanish land grant in the area, continued through the days of General Vallejo, the establishment of Sacramento landmark Sutter’s Fort, and on through the present day, Sacramento in 1930.58

Associating stories of historic events with a well-established, well-known Sacramento business while tying the business functions of the company to the content of the fact-based stories, integrated the business entity into the culture of Sacramento. Indeed, this program was intended to identify Wright & Kimbrough with the growth of the city and its surroundings. Charles Wright and Howard Kimbrough were the developers behind well-known Sacramento areas such as the East Sacramento residential region bounded by Fortieth to Forty-Seventh Streets and J Street and Folsom Boulevard, still known locally as the “Fabulous Forties” for its expanse of beautiful homes.59 The KFBK program was designed to link the present-day builder with the city’s romanticized, pioneer past.60

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58 “Proposal and Sample Program for Wright & Kimbrough Series, November, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0563, Center for Sacramento History.


60 This tendency is similar to what historian Lawrence Levine equated with Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition” in which a minority in terms of region, gender, ethnicity, or other factors confuses its history with the history of the whole people of a nation or, in this case, a city. See Lawrence W. Levine, “The Unpredictable Past: Reflections on Recent American Historiography,” *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (June 1989): 671-679.
The half-hour program would begin with “theme music” to set the time period for the listener. An announcer would open the program with credit given to Wright & Kimbrough, then an overview of that night’s program. The opening announcement for the sample script showed just how tightly the sponsor was integrated into the program:

Ladies and gentlemen, the next half hour brings to you a dramatic presentation of an historical event in the annals of the City of Sacramento. Wright & Kimbrough who present this program to you are a pioneer Sacramento real estate firm. The ordinary transfer of real estate is regarded by many as a very prosaic everyday occurrence which does not excite much comment. Actually, the history of any country, state, or community, can be written in such land transfers. With this thought in mind Wright & Kimbrough are collecting stories about such transfers, which will be dramatized and presented to you each ______ night at this time. Tonight we will tell you the story of the transfer of property which involved practically all of the City of Sacramento from General Sutter to his son.\footnote{“Proposal and Sample Program for Wright & Kimbrough Series, November, 1930, McClatchy Collection.}

Use of the word “pioneer” by the announcer established Wright & Kimbrough as a long-standing, Sacramento-oriented company, one whose history was intimately linked with that of the city itself. The announcer also told the audience that Wright & Kimbrough itself is gathering the stories of Sacramento’s land transfer history, making the company not only part of Sacramento history, but the gatherers, keepers, and disseminators of that historical knowledge as well.

KFBK’s proposal was based on the use of local talent from the Plaza Theatre Players and the Community Players. The Bee Radio artist bureau was chosen as the source of instrumental talent. Three local writers were suggested, either with one under contract or all three used at varying points based on the desired treatment of the material.
The program proposal also included a contest component: cash prizes for listeners writing in with an interesting property transfer experience, selected for dramatization on the air.62

The cost for the locally-produced program was estimated at $4,500 for one year, a fee that included everything associated with the production—research and writing of the “playlets,” station time, actors, music, sound effects, production costs—except the cash prizes for the contest. Station estimates indicate KFBK would net approximately $1,500 on the project. Sacramento Bee business manager G. C. Hamilton posed the idea to Wright & Kimbrough as a winner, with “neighborhood interest, a good program produced by competent persons, and a tie-up with a sponsor’s business which cannot be equaled.”63 It does not appear that the program ever went into production. One month prior to the presentation of the proposal to Wright and Kimbrough, McClatchy Company executive S. A. Melnicoe expressed his doubts about the program’s proposed local production. While he liked the program’s concept, Melnicoe balked at the idea of using local musicians and actors. “Local instrumentalists, the amateur type, are shunted off by us daily. The backbone of a radio program, the talent, would in this case be a very uncertain quantity. The Bee Radio Station spent several thousand dollars last year proving this very point. We paid for our talent, using so-called professional entertainers and still could not get, with few exceptions, a really good local program.”64

62 Proposal and Sample Program for Wright & Kimbrough Series, November, 1930, McClatchy Collection.

63 Ibid.

64 S. A. Melnicoe to G. C. Hamilton, November 11, 1930, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 20, 2005/054/0558, Center for Sacramento History.
Other Depression-era advertisers on KFBK included local car dealer Capitol Chevrolet, Safeway Stores, Sears Roebuck & Co., and Dean Witter & Co. *Sacramento Bee* radio listings included the programs on Bay Area stations KGO, KPO, KSFO, and KFRC so *Bee* readers would have a full radio schedule, but only KFBK’s program sponsors were listed in the newspaper alongside the programs they sponsored.⁶⁵ A KFBK advertiser, whether local, regional, or national, received additional market exposure in the pages of the *Bee*.

What impact did advertising on KFBK have on local patterns of consumption during the 1930s and 1940s? It is difficult to tell. Factors such as the “media mix” of an advertising campaign, that is, a combination of media such as newspaper combined with radio combined with billboards, make any one medium’s effectiveness difficult to track. Radio was, however, becoming an increasingly important part of people’s daily lives. In 1936 more than 3,000,000 Americans were enjoying the experience of “motor tours” accompanied by a car radio; in fact, manufacturers were anticipating a huge market for automobile radios in 1937. As one industry watcher noted, “The radio seems destined to be the most popular item of extra equipment on the models for next year. They are coming fully prepared for the installation of sets.”⁶⁶ The audience for radio continued to grow, and now it was mobile. Advertising increased with the growth of the audience numbers.

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⁶⁶ “More Auto Radios are Predicted for Industry,” *Sacramento Bee*, November 25, 1936.
By the end of the 1940s, Sacramento’s advertisers and consumers supported four radio stations: KFBK 1530 broadcasting at 50,000 watts, KROY 1240 at 250 watts, 1000-watt KCRA 1320, and KXOA 1470 at 1000 watts. Like KROY, KCRA was built by the McClatchy Broadcasting Company engineering department.\(^{67}\)

There was new competition in Sacramento’s media marketplace, and a new look for both McClatchy Broadcasting Company and McClatchy Newspapers. In 1943, Eleanor McClatchy approached Walt Disney with the proposal that he create two caricature representations—twin bees. The famous illustrator, who had created popular culture icons Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, agreed to the proposition as long as his earnings for the project were donated, in some way, to the war effort. Scoopy, the newspaper-wielding bee, is still in use today. Gaby, the bee at the microphone, was the symbol for McClatchy radio for the remainder of its existence. (A third bee character, Teevy, created by a Disney staff artist, would be added later for the company’s television stations.) The entire project cost $1500, all of which was sent to the Army Relief Fund per Disney’s instructions.\(^{68}\)

Under Eleanor’s direction, the McClatchy Companies supported the war effort in a variety of ways, some extravagant and public, others very private (almost anonymous, as Eleanor herself preferred to be). The newspapers endorsed scrap metal and rubber drives, collecting books for servicemen, the planting of Victory gardens, and other supportive activities on the home front. The *Fresno Bee* staff swung into action in a

\(^{67}\) Riter, ca. 1952, McClatchy Collection.

\(^{68}\) “Two Busy Bees, Straight from the Pen of Walt Disney, Make Appearance,” *Sacramento Bee*, September 4, 1943.
more direct way. They collected photographs of Fresno-area babies born after their fathers had shipped out, packaged the photos along with weekly summaries of community news, and mailed them to “local boys” overseas. Eleanor, who maintained her interest in the theater, organized a theatrical troupe that toured Northern California military bases. The troupe performed a show called, “Naughty Naught” and raised about $5,500 from shows for civilian audiences. The money was donated to finance entertainment facilities on military posts. As a more personal gesture, Eleanor—Miss McClatchy as she was known in the offices of the Bee for the remainder of her life—sent cartons of cigarettes as holiday gifts to Bee employees stationed overseas.69

Radio station programming also reflected a commitment to the war effort. Special broadcasts over KFBK included features such as the dedication of the new Camp Kohler Signal Corps Training Center near Sacramento, and a report by a representative “Navy Mother,” Mrs. Irene Schafer of Glendale, recently returned from the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. The Navy mother reported on the health and happiness of all Navy mothers’ sons during the “Meet Your Navy” program.70 Programs like “At Your Service” acquainted Sacramentans with war work being done in their community, special broadcasts of programs like “What’s Doin’ Ladies?” were turned over to War Bond drives, and all of the 1945 home and road games of Pacific Coast League baseball team, the Sacramento Solons, were broadcast locally without commercial sponsorship, and then rebroadcast at 3 a.m. for the benefit of troops in the Pacific. Servicemen stationed with

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69 Wiegand, Papers of Permanence, 188-189.

70 “On the Bee Radio,” Sacramento Bee, December 2, 1942; and “Navy Mother is to Give Report Tonight,” Sacramento Bee, November 1942.
the army of occupation in Japan reported hearing the broadcasts of the games quite clearly.71

Postwar Economic Boom, New Markets, and New Consumer Goods

In the 1940s, Charles Hull Wolfe of Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, Inc, later known as advertising giant BBDO, conducted a survey on the impact of radio as measured by consumer recall of advertised products. His survey focused on nationally advertised packaged products: coffee, dry cereal, gelatin dessert, and household soap products. Two hundred middle-income housewives in New York City were asked where they had seen or heard ads for various products. Radio ads received the highest results for all products except coffee: 84.3 percent for household soap products, 75 percent for gelatin dessert, and 88.6 percent for dry cereal.72

Another study, undertaken by H. D. Wolfe of Kent University’s Bureau of Business Research, looked at the factors influencing the buying habits of housewives. Interviews were conducted with 1,256 middle-income homemakers in urban and rural areas of Ohio. It was found that radio influenced more purchases of specific items than any other medium—10 to 35 percent of product sales were attributed to radio.73 An additional survey by Wolfe of 205 druggists and grocers in New York City showed that 92.1 percent of druggists found radio best for selling their products, and 89.8 percent

[71] Station file notes for “The Story of KFBK,” ca. 1950, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 26, 2005/054/0846, Center for Sacramento History.


[73] Ibid., 48.
cited radio as the type of national advertising their customers talked about when buying branded items. Of grocers, 87.3 percent felt radio was best for selling their products, and 88.9 percent of their customers named radio in relation to brand items.  

Local stations were also reaping the benefits of the effectiveness of advertising on radio. A study that focused on local and regional businesses advertising on radio consistently throughout 1942 showed that of 794 local firms interviewed for the study, only six indicated that radio advertising was unsuccessful. This local advertising was mostly “spot” advertising rather than sponsorship of an advertiser-produced show as was common with national advertisers. By 1936 spot radio achieved new growth as national advertisers sought to buy non-network radio time on local and regional stations. While the network sales grew by 10 percent, spot radio sales grew by 64 percent.

McClatchy Broadcasting prospered during this time in each of their local markets. The preliminary “Analysis of Station Broadcast Revenues” report submitted to the FCC for 1945 indicated that after paying all agency commissions, KFBK revenues for selling station airtime to a network, national and regional sponsors, or local advertisers was $285,845. KMJ in Fresno cleared $351,560, KERN in Bakersfield earned $96,229, KWG in Stockton was at $82,790, and KOH in Reno netted $100,468.  


77 “Analysis of Station Broadcast Revenues, Preliminary Report” for Federal Communications Commission, December 31, 1945, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series III, Box 21, 2005/054/0633, Center for Sacramento History. Figures listed in the preliminary report are unaudited.
entered the postwar era, McClatchy’s profits were set to grow as consumption was encouraged nationally as the means to economically convert from a wartime to a peacetime economy, and personal wants (no longer needs) could be fulfilled while one engaged in the “civic duty” of consuming. But Eleanor McClatchy’s vision of radio had taken a distinct turn from the commercial model that had brought the stations to the 1936 value level reported in the McClatchy Broadcasting application to incorporate.

The postwar era was an economic boom for the Sacramento region. Between 1945 and 1950, Sacramento County grew at a rate faster than the state of California. In the early years of the postwar era Sacramento County’s population growth increased 62.7 percent compared with the state’s overall increase of 53.3 percent. Much of the growth during the war years was tied to the expansion of civilian employment at military establishments and the railroads in the region. In addition to this labor force and their families, the county also saw an influx of the families of military servicemen. The Sacramento region continued to grow after the war thanks to what was perceived as strong prospects for continued economic expansion. The bulk of this population growth was due to a large volume of migration from other states. The attraction was straight-forward: California residents had higher than average per capita incomes and buying power, the climate was mild, and the existing growth encouraged still more


growth. “...Growth begets growth, and fast-growing California has always looked like a land of opportunity to the young and hopeful east of the Rockies.”

Sacramento was the location of three military installations, all of which assumed continued importance during the Cold War years. By 1955, McClellan and Mather Air Force Bases, and the Army Signal Depot were the largest employers in the area, and their employees had significant buying power in the region. Buying power translated into consumption, and as real estate developers moved housing options further away from the central city, shopping changed as well. One of Sacramento’s earliest shopping centers, Town & Country Village, opened in 1946, and other suburban shopping centers and the region’s first mall followed in short order.

Broadcaster Enid Day, the producer and presenter of a successful radio program for a Florida retailer, put her knowledge of the power of radio as key to the success of the shopping venue into print in 1947. Radio Broadcasting for Retailers reminded retailers that the point of a radio program was to catch the attention of the listener. “If you are able to catch and hold the ear of your radio audience the law of averages will turn some of them into customers.” This, essentially, is how all sponsored radio programs worked. A loyal listener, one who enjoys a program enough that they will tune in with

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83 Avella, The Good Life, 135-137.

regularity, is very likely at some point to be converted from a sales prospect to a customer.

Converting prospects into customers on a mass scale was made even easier with the growth of consumer credit and borrowing. Nationally, total consumer credit grew more than ten times between 1945 and 1960, and installment credit, fueled primarily by car purchases, increased nineteen times during the period.85 The growth of credit cards in the postwar era contributed a great deal to increased consumption. Cold War-era propaganda equating the mass consumption of goods and the creation of prosperity as the “American way of life” (versus an image of a Soviet system in which the free choices of consumers do not exist), bolstered the new American ethic of consumption and the immediate fulfillment of desires through new products.86

It is unclear exactly when Sacramentans began using credit cards, but area consumers had been accustomed to buying on the installment plan since the 1920s when credit terms were used as a means to encourage automobile purchases.87 Sacramentans, just like their counterparts in the rest of the country, were able to begin amassing greater levels of consumer debt.88 As KFBK celebrated its increase to 50,000 watts of power in 1948 with a special section in the *Sacramento Bee*, the interconnectedness of the newspaper, the radio station, consumer spending, and the local businesses that used both

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86 Ibid., 124-129.


media to reach their customers became obvious. One of the largest advertisements in the newspaper section was for Maleville Bros. Electrical Appliances, located in the recently-opened Town & Country Village shopping center at the corner of Fulton and Marconi Avenues. The ad prominently featured the logo of the shopping center as well as the logo of the business. The primary focus of the ad was a General Electric Radio-Phonograph Cabinet priced at $315 and available on credit terms. A photograph of the “appliance” shows it to be a beautiful, large mahogany cabinet “designed by master craftsmen” that featured both AM and the newer FM bands (McClatchy Broadcasting had launched KFBK-FM in 1947), storage space for 120 records, and the “amazing GE electronic reproducer.”

This created something of a consumer feedback loop. The newspaper section featured an ad for a business promoting its shopping center location, selling a high-end version of a common product on credit terms, giving the consumer a lovely piece of furniture for their new suburban home, and encouraging the family to listen to the radio station featured in the newspaper section.

But the celebratory KFBK special section revealed something more than the radio station as a vehicle to advertisers. In addition to touting KFBK’s technical pioneering in radio facsimile and paying homage to the Sacramento Bee’s own radio pioneer Carlos McClatchy, the multi-page newspaper section provided other information that indicated the McClatchy Broadcasting Company’s awareness of its role in serving the public interest. Special programs included a neighborhood preview of the transmitter for

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89 Maleville Bros. advertisement, Sacramento Bee, October 1, 1948, Dave Henry Collection, 2000/165/057, Center for Sacramento History.
residents of Pleasant Grove, the community where the new transmitter was located, station visits to seven communities in the Sacramento County region, and the Sacramento origination of an ABC network audience participation show, “Surprise Package,” featuring national emcee Jay Stewart. Most significantly, though, was the article concerning KFBK’s schedule of farm programming. Noting that “Daily activities on thousands of farms in the Sacramento Valley are geared to the news and information received through agricultural programs over KFBK,” the article went on to describe two daily farm broadcasts at 6:45 a.m. and 12:45 p.m., broadcast times selected based on the farm work schedule, the weekly “McClatchy Farm Review” broadcast Saturdays from 6:30 to 7:00 a.m. on the six stations of the McClatchy Broadcasting Company, and the expertise of a special radio station news department that included a full-time farm editor and an agricultural staff. “This agricultural service program is presented in the public interest. With a finger on the agricultural pulse of the nation, the farm editor gives a concise interpretation of the top farm news of the day, from the nation’s capital, the state capital, the fairs, and farm centers, the University of California, the College of Agriculture in Davis, Yolo County,…the 4-H clubs, the Future Farmer Chapters and all the way points on the main line of agriculture.” This type of extensive public service programming could only come from a radio station with a predominantly local and regional focus. National broadcasting and entertainment-oriented regional chains would

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90 “Times to Remember” and “KFBK Will Originate Web Program Here Next Week,” Sacramento Bee, October 1, 1948, Dave Henry Collection, 2000/165/057, Center for Sacramento History.

91 “Station Has Well Rounded Farm Schedule,” Sacramento Bee, October 1, 1948, Dave Henry Collection, 2000/165/057, Center for Sacramento History.
not find a positive return on investment for this type of programming. According to one chronicler of the McClatchy business holdings, the programming was not profitable for the McClatchy stations either, but Eleanor insisted that agricultural and 4-H programs continue in a strictly public service capacity. Under her edict, farm programming was to contain no advertising whatsoever.  

From the beginning, Eleanor McClatchy believed radio should be more of a public service than a commercial enterprise. For her, public service equated with public interest. One of her most unique public service radio projects was “La Escuela Espanola del Aire de KFBK,” a 1941 program consisting of fifty-four lessons in Spanish. The course was broadcast each morning, then again in the afternoon for those who wished to review the material. It was designed to teach beginners Spanish by hearing and repeating. The program, according to one source, was the first of its kind in the country, and listener/pupils not only from California, but Montana, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington took advantage of the radio language lessons. Letters received at KFBK told of listening classes that had formed to take advantage of the lessons in a group setting. The program was discontinued at the outbreak of the war.

In 1944 she established the country’s first “little theater of radio” on KFBK, eventually expanding it to other McClatchy Broadcasting stations. The goal of the program was to develop local volunteer talent for the production of radio plays. In speaking to a group

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92 Wiegand, Papers of Permanence, 182-183.

93 Station file notes for “The Story of KFBK,” ca. 1950, McClatchy Collection; and Wiegand, Papers of Permanence, 182-183.

94 Station file notes for “The Story of KFBK,” ca. 1950, McClatchy Collection.
of McClatchy Broadcasting employees in 1969, decades after her vision of commercial-free public service programs had begun airing, she reiterated her view that, “The air waves belong to the people, not to private business.”

Nationally, radio broadcasting and its advertising revenues were going through a significant change. By 1949 advertisers were cutting their radio advertising budgets and commitments in order to make the shift to television, this in spite of the fact that the cost per thousand (CPM) viewers reached by television was considerably higher to advertisers than the CPM for radio. The expense of television production, combined with the fact that there were far fewer televisions in homes than radios at this time, made television advertising a less effective and more costly advertising approach than radio. Nationally, radio listening was at 98.2 percent versus 1.8 percent for television, and radio “sets-in-use” continued to increase between 1947 and 1948.

As radio was changing nationally, locally-owned media in Sacramento was changing regionally. KFBK-FM made its first broadcast on February 22, 1947—almost twenty-five years to the day that KVQ’s inaugural broadcast made McClatchy Newspapers a multi-media pioneer. Between 1948 and 1956, Eleanor McClatchy added six FM stations in Reno and the Central Valley including KERN-FM in Bakersfield and KBEE in Modesto. At Eleanor’s insistence, and in keeping with her view of public

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97 “She gave up desired career to fulfill her family duty” in “1933-1957: Hard Times, Boom Times,” *Sacramento Bee*, February 4, 2007; and Riter, ca. 1952, McClatchy Collection.
service programs serving the public interest, the FM stations emphasized commercial-free agricultural news, educational programs, classical music, and cultural offerings. While this appealed to Eleanor’s theatrical side and her desire to “bring culture to the masses,” it also proved to be unprofitable.⁹⁸

The assertion in 1931 by Sacramento Bee business manager G. C. Hamilton that McClatchy Newspapers did not believe in “high-powered stations” continued through the 1940s in principle, if not in fact.⁹⁹ While McClatchy Broadcasting Company’s 1948 celebration of KFBK’s increase to 50,000 watts put the pioneering local station in the high-powered category, the attitude of the station regarding its local and regional mission, thanks in large part to Eleanor’s vision of what radio should be, remained on the “small station” level. The emphasis was on treating the definition of “public interest” as though it referred to a local constituency, not a generalized national standard. The fact that KFBK retained a full time farm editor and the McClatchy Broadcasting Company had an agricultural staff, operating as though the radio station served the public in the same manner as a newspaper, was indicative of local radio attempting to meet what was felt to be the needs of its local public—the listening audience. In an area which boasted three of the West’s largest fruit and vegetable processing plants, a national soup manufacturer

⁹⁸ “She gave up desired career to fulfill her family duty” in “1933-1957: Hard Times, Boom Times,” Sacramento Bee, February 4, 2007; and Wiegand, Papers of Permanence, 194.

⁹⁹ G. C. Hamilton to Leigh Danenberg, The Bridgeport Herald, March 17, 1931, McClatchy Collection. A succinct definition of “high-powered stations” was offered by Senator C. C. Dill, one of the key figures in crafting the Radio Act of 1927. In a December 1928 newspaper article carried in the Sacramento Bee, he referred to high-powered stations as those broadcasting with 50,000 watts of power and whose signal dominated radio receiving sets within a radius of 150 or 200 miles. Dill was a proponent of limiting radio broadcasting stations to 10,000 watts of power except for experimental purposes.
(Campbell’s), and the largest almond processing plant and rice mill in the United States, providing agricultural service programs in addition to entertainment did serve the public interest, as did the language program, performance opportunities, commercial-free broadcasts of the local baseball team, and baby pictures sent to servicemen overseas.¹⁰⁰

For McClatchy Broadcasting, programming innovation that came from Eleanor McClatchy’s vision of the public interest standard meant providing educational, cultural, and public service programs of interest to the surrounding community. This business decision allied McClatchy Broadcasting, at least philosophically, more with the interests of the reform groups fighting for a voice for non-profit broadcasters in the language of the Communications Act of 1934. While the McClatchy stations were not entirely commercial free, they did air commercial-free programs that could have brought in significant sponsor revenue, such as the agriculture programs and the Pacific Coast League baseball games.

Although Eleanor’s goal of adding television to the broadcasting arm of the company would be realized in 1964, eventually the McClatchy Company would divest itself of all broadcasting and return strictly to the business of newspapers. Perhaps it can be said the foray into broadcasting by the McClatchy Company proved that radio broadcasting could not serve the public—or the public interest, however it might be defined—without, as the reformers wanted, an entirely new system of broadcasting. As with Eleanor McClatchy’s vision, reform would have required a financial means of supporting programming that serves the public rather than sells to it.

CONCLUSION

United States Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart once famously declared that he may not be able to define pornography, but “I know it when I see it.”¹ The concept of the public interest as applied to broadcasting likely first came from Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover in a speech before the Fourth Annual Radio Conference in 1925. His statement, “The ether is a public medium and its use must be for a public benefit” did not define the concept, but the attendees at the conference endorsed it in principle and recommended it be incorporated into legislation they all agreed was needed to tame the chaos of the ether.² As can be seen through the Radio Act of 1927, the Communications Act of 1934, and the influence of networks and for-profit commercial broadcasters on how American radio was structured and who was allowed to have a voice on the air, unlike pornography, Congress, the FRC, and the FCC did not know the public interest when they saw it. 

Congressman Wallace H. White, Jr., one of the key figures in drafting the legislation that became the Radio Act of 1927, acknowledged that a definition of “public interest” could not be agreed upon by the conference delegates, but that there had to be some criteria for limiting the number of broadcasting stations. Operating for the benefit of the public became a key way to exercise the necessary control. “If enacted into law,”


White said of the need for legislation agreed upon at the conference, “the broadcasting
privilege will not be a right of selfishness. It will rest upon an assurance of public
interest to be served.”3

The undefined concept of the “public interest, convenience, and necessity,”
originally borrowed from public utility legislation, provided room for new regulations
and standards as the technology—and the broadcasting industry—changed. It also
allowed Congress to prevent those it did not want heard on the airwaves from easily
having a voice: socialists, labor groups, and others.4 In the signal reorganization that
followed the Radio Act of 1927 and the Davis Amendment to that act, scores of small
broadcasters lost their licenses or went out of business. The small broadcasters that
survived, including various university radio stations, the Chicago Federation of Labor’s
radio station WCFL, and the Paulist Fathers Catholic radio station in New York, WLWL,
found themselves in the midst of an uphill battle to preserve non-profit broadcasting as
Congress moved to pass the Communications Act of 1934.

Defining for-profit broadcasters and the networks as “general public service”
stations and non-profit broadcasters, labor unions, religious groups, and schools as
“propaganda” stations set the tone for legislation that came out quite clearly in favor of
the commercial broadcasters.5 The radio industry had worked hard to sell Congress and


August 14, 2008), 9.

5 Michele Hilmes, “NBC and the Network Idea: Defining the ‘American System,’” in NBC:
the general public on the concept that the “American system of broadcasting” which they had developed with commercially-sponsored programs and the networks, was innately a United States system. As CBS president William Paley put it, “He who attacks the fundamentals of the American system attacks democracy itself.”\(^6\) Confirming the concerns of the non-profit broadcasters, network-dominated, advertising-supported radio resulted in blocking the airing of unpopular or radical opinions, and, under the guise of appealing to a mass audience, was woefully lacking in cultural, educational, and public affairs programming.\(^7\)

The system of broadcasting that developed in Sacramento and other Central Valley communities as part of the McClatchy Company became something of a hybrid. Beginning with a short broadcast schedule of local programming of interest to its listeners and engaging local talent, the McClatchy stations began selling advertising in the late 1920s. But even as their media holdings grew, network affiliations were put in place, and a California-wide radio network was established, the McClatchy stations continued to focus on broadcasting programs that might appeal to the interests of their local audience. Had Carlos McClatchy not died in 1933, it is possible that what became the McClatchy Broadcasting Company would have developed along decidedly commercial lines.


Eleanor McClatchy took control of McClatchy Newspapers and McClatchy Broadcasting soon after the passage of the Communications Act of 1934. She continued Carlos’s goal of expanding the company’s holdings and becoming a large multi-media firm, but her vision was decidedly different. Eleanor insisted throughout her forty-two years as the McClatchy Company’s president that radio must be operated as a public service. Her views were more in keeping with the non-profit broadcasting advocates of the 1920s and 1930s and eventually came at a heavy financial cost for the company. Specifically, Eleanor’s insistence that agricultural programs, which required separate news departments of their own, local baseball games, and educational programs be aired commercial-free led to diminished revenue in the long run.

In his study of the McClatchy Company, Sacramento Bee columnist Steve Wiegand notes that Eleanor’s “broadcast altruism” resulted in McClatchy radio stations finishing a fiscal year in the black only once between 1936 and 1941. An examination of a multiyear McClatchy Broadcasting Company profit, loss, and surplus statement for the years 1936 through 1945 compiled by Burrows, Parker & Company Certified Public Accountants shows a different story. Broadcasting, including the California Radio System which Wiegand never mentions, operated at a profit every year. The accompanying letter from J. W. Burrows also notes that McClatchy Broadcasting entered the excess profits tax brackets in 1943.

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8 Steve Wiegand, Papers of Permanence: The First 150 Years of the McClatchy Company (Sacramento: The McClatchy Company, 2007), 182-183.

Eleanor’s goal was always to operate the business in a manner similar to her father. But her adherence to C. K.’s philosophy of how a newspaper should run and the service a newspaper offered to the public were at odds with her vision of the public service function of radio broadcasting in a country that solidly placed itself on the side of commercial, for-profit broadcasting. The mix of public and private ownership with tax and advertising support that developed in Canada with the creation of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the 1930s seemed more like a national version of what Eleanor was trying to do in California. The difference for McClatchy Broadcasting was the lack of government funding to support the education, sports, agricultural, and music programs that McClatchy aired in the “public interest.”

Examining Eleanor’s use of radio in the public interest, what she would have called public service, gives some sense of what radio throughout the United States might have been if commercial, for-profit broadcasters and networks had not won the “debate” in the 1930s when the Communications Act of 1934 solidified the for-profit position as the “American system.” With education as one of her priorities, as evidenced by the 1941 “La Escuela Espanola del Aire de KFBK,” Eleanor McClatchy put in place a system that from 1945 to 1973 broadcast education programs for in-school listening five days a week and included teacher’s manuals sent out to the school districts in the listening area. Called “KFBK (or KMJ, KOH, KBEE) Goes to School,” the programs grew out of the radio schools for teachers that had been developed by McClatchy’s first educational director, Frances Frater. The programs, in spite of offers of sponsorship,
remained entirely commercial free, as did all radio education programs produced by McClatchy Broadcasting.\textsuperscript{10}

Eleanor’s desire to build the broadcasting side of the business resulted in an increase in radio holdings that included not only KFBK, KMJ, KWG, KERN, and KOH, the stations developed by Carlos McClatchy, but KFBK-FM, KMJ-FM, KBEE-AM, KBEE-FM, television stations KMJ in Fresno and KOVR in Sacramento, and four cable television systems. In 1977, the McClatchy pursuit of broadcast primacy in the greater Sacramento region resulted in a $43 million anti-trust suit brought by the owner of rival newspaper the \textit{Sacramento Union}. The \textit{Union}’s owner alleged the McClatchy Company sought a “news monopoly” in California’s Central Valley. McClatchy filed a countersuit, and after two years of legal arguments, both suits were dropped.\textsuperscript{11}

Erwin Potts, who in 1989 became the first non-McClatchy Chief Executive Officer, first came to the \textit{Sacramento Bee} in 1975 as director of newspaper business operations. Upon his arrival he found a company at which there were no real budgets, no five-year plans, no savings provisions for equipment expansion, money was spent as it came in, and an eighty-year-old Eleanor still insisted on having the final approval of every move the company made.\textsuperscript{12} In 1978, Eleanor passed control of the McClatchy operations over to Carlos’s son, C. K. She died two years later in 1980. By 1986, the

\textsuperscript{10} “McClatchy: Long and Distinguished Service in the Public Interest,” ca. 1974, McClatchy Newspapers and Broadcasting Collection, Series V, Box 25, 2005/054/0842, Center for Sacramento History.


\textsuperscript{12} Wiegand, \textit{Papers of Permanence}, 237.
McClatchy Company had completely divested itself of all radio and television broadcast holdings, choosing instead to redirect the company back to a newspaper-only focus, and in 1988 McClatchy stock went on sale with a two-tier structure in place that allowed family control to be maintained. The purchase of the Knight Ridder newspaper chain in 2006 made McClatchy the country’s second largest newspaper chain in terms of circulation. Selling its *Minneapolis Star Tribune* newspaper to help pay the Knight Ridder debt dropped the McClatchy Company back to the third largest U. S. newspaper chain, the position it holds at present.\(^{13}\)

Although the McClatchy Company owned a number of radio stations in the 1920s and early 1930s that served the needs of the regional audience around each station, they lacked influence in the debates over broadcast regulation. The McClatchy’s were successful in developing their broadcast holdings in spite of the multiple changes in broadcast regulation and enforcement in the early decades. They worked within their own definition of what constituted the public interest and based that definition on their understanding of serving the public, just as they did with the newspaper holdings. The vision was always about the local constituency.

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