

Kirkpatrick, Bill, Denison University. "Getting the Local Under Control: National-Local Tensions in U.S. Network Radio of the 1930s"

In U.S. broadcast history, it is commonplace to think of media corporations as relatively (though not entirely) unified entities, and to treat "national" and "local" media as relatively discrete cultural and economic systems. The reality is, of course, more complicated than that, as demonstrated by a study of network operations in the 1930s. NBC and CBS were primarily in the business of extending "national" radio throughout the country but continually found themselves challenged internally and externally by the "local": local economies, local cultures, local politics, and local desires. The result was that national broadcasters simultaneously participated in and sought to suppress local structures and discourses—a dialectic that resulted not in separate things called "national" and "local" radio, but rather a decade-long effort to "get the local under control," that is, to structurally and culturally integrate the local into a profitable, efficient, and corporatized national system.

Drawing predominantly on the NBC papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society, this paper explores that process of network management. Specifically, I argue that the networks' task of getting the local under control consisted of several distinct sub-projects, including optimizing contracts with affiliates in order to reconfigure the economic and political incentives that favored local over national programming; confronting administrative challenges to running efficient and centralized national operations, a task complicated by the fact that the networks themselves—through their O&Os—were also in the business of local radio; and the larger problem of defending and extending the idea and reality of commercial national radio itself, which meant both containing objections and suppressing alternatives to this system. Together, such strategies helped the networks negotiate local-national tensions within both their own industry and the country at large.

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