

Melnick, Ross, University of California-Los Angeles. “Dropped Call: AT&T and WEAF’s Ill-Advised Censorship of “Roxy and His Gang””

WHS’ National Broadcasting Company Records include memoranda (and articles) that outline a crucial early battle over control of the public airwaves between Western Electric’s radio station, WEAF, and broadcaster Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel in 1925. Their contentious battle over free speech spawned a national debate and campaign against the station and its parent company, AT&T, and demonstrated the power radio stars already exerted within a commercial broadcasting system.

AT&T’s censorship, Michele Hilmes notes in *Radio Voices*, was due to Roxy’s growing popularity and the possibility that his on-air personality had begun to overwhelm WEAF. Documents in the NBC records and articles from newspapers nationwide corroborate this analysis and suggest an additional reason why AT&T forced Roxy to alter his style: an extreme culture clash between high brow executives and the folksy, Minnesota-raised, Jewish Roxy. His Sunday night broadcasts and secular benediction, “Good night, pleasant dreams, God bless you,” also upset some Catholics who publicly objected to his sign off and chatty banter.

Roxy was forced to conform to the stilted WEAF style, but he waged an on and off-air battle that led to protests by sympathetic Protestant clergy and by innumerable newspapers nationwide who perceived AT&T’s actions as an ominous sign for free speech. Roxy, the former marine and World War I propagandist, was also a favorite of Calvin Coolidge and other Washington politicians and Congress was reportedly set to investigate AT&T’s actions until the company reversed its policy after a deluge of angry letters and public admonishments.

“Dropped Call” examines the importance of the NBC collection in researching the Roxy phenomenon and this clash with AT&T. Rothafel left behind virtually no institutional archives or personal papers and the NBC Records therefore provide an invaluable resource for understanding this early contest between radio providers, public officials, and private listeners.

Ross Melnick is a lecturer at UCLA. His work has been published in *Film History* and *The Moving Image* and he is the co-author of *Cinema Treasures* (2004). His 2009 dissertation, *Roxy and His Gang: Silent Film Exhibition and the Birth of Media Convergence*, examines Roxy’s broadcasting and film exhibition career.