Ir Kenen Heren Mikh?: The Dawn of Yiddish Radio in New York City

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Ir Kenen Heren Mikh?: The Dawn of Yiddish Radio in New York City

By:
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors from the Department of History at the University of Colorado Boulder.

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Yiddish Radio is often overlooked by Jewish historians because of its obscurity. The availability of primary and secondary sources that examine this phenomenon is incredibly limited, making it difficult to fully understand its overall importance. Radio was one of the cornerstones of American identity formation in the 1930s because of its ability to transcend the boundaries previously set by other forms of mass media. With the passing of the 1927 Radio Act, radio transformed into a commercial enterprise with unlimited possibilities. This thesis examines WEVD, one of the most prominent Yiddish radio stations in New York City during this period. The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not the 1927 Radio Act was successful in its original mission of promoting public interest and welfare through radio by using WEVD as a case study. While it is difficult to judge the success of such a significant piece of legislation on such a small community, the Jews in New York were something of a special case because of their unique ethnic character. The original intention behind the 1927 Radio Act was to create a standard to which radio should be held, and it accomplished this goal, while simultaneously reinforcing the tradition of multiculturalism within the United States of America.
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INTRODUCTION

In the years following the First World War, the United States underwent a massive transformation. Not only was the nation trying to cope in the wake of the biggest conflict in recent history, but it was also met with a new commercial enterprise: radio. Radio was the new frontier of commercial media. It represented endless possibilities for both the listener and the broadcasters. Turning on the radio set in the home allowed one to, as it was put colloquially in a 1924 magazine article, “catch a glimpse of broadcasting’s social destiny. A single personality is converted into an electrical sun; its vocal radiance penetrates mountains and walls as light passes through glass. You look at the cold stars overhead, at the infinite void around you. It is almost incredible that all this emptiness is vibrant with human thought and emotion.” Listeners could be transported to new places, guided by this new technology that was seemingly limitless. Thus began what is known as the radio boom.

The golden age of radio was from 1922 to 1953. During this period, radio existed at the forefront of American mass media. Many Americans saw the potential of radio as a useful source for information dissemination, and took advantage of the lower prices of these technologies in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash. The 1930 census reported that forty-six percent of American families had a radio in their homes. Advertisements for the newest and most tech savvy radio sets were advertised in nearly every daily newspaper and by 1935, the number of sets owned by American families had grown to sixty-seven percent. For the first time, Americans could experience what was happening in the world from their living rooms in real time, a mode of mass communication that had not previously been experienced by mainstream

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Americans.

Radio in the United States was different than in countries such as Canada or Russia because the state did not control the radio industry. While there were still strict federal regulations placed on the growth of the medium, individual broadcasters were allowed to express a certain level of innovation with their programming. The most important piece of radio-related legislation in this era was the 1927 Radio Act. This act was written by Progressives, who somehow limited the rights of the broadcasters while simultaneously guaranteeing them freedom of speech. This Act achieved two things: it established the Federal Radio Commission as the body in charge of radio and the standards by which radio would be monitored and regulated. However, radio legislation like the Radio Act wasn’t necessarily about the broadcaster. In fact, radio regulation “reinforced the idea of the sovereign listener and inadvertently lent some measure of protection to audiences that wanted to listen outside the mainstream.” Consumers had a newfound agency with which they were unfamiliar. They were now able to experience their media in an unprecedented fashion, an idea that sparked both excitement and anxiety within communities.

Many radio broadcasters saw themselves as more than just business enterprises; they saw themselves as proponents of the Americanizing mission of the Federal government and the idea

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4 Kelman, Station, 20, 7.
7 It is also important to note that there were a series of amendments to the Radio Act, most notably the Davis Amendment in 1928. This amendment required that different radio zones allocate their licenses and wavelengths equally amongst the stations in the region. This was particularly problematic in the more congested zones, as it sometimes led to the rejection of station applications in fear of going over the wavelength quota. Ari Y. Kelman speaks more about this in his book Station Identification: A Cultural History in the United States (California: University of California, 2009).
8 Kelman, Station, 60.
of “radio citizenship.” Radio was seen as a “magic fluid that finds its way into every crevice of human life,” […] It could unite the poor family ‘wintering in the dreary North River at Hoboken’ with those ‘lounging in the luxury of a Fifth Avenue mansion’ and the ‘lonely trapper of the silent Yukon.’ This was exciting for many, as radio had the potential to bring about a new level of community building that previously could not have been achieved by any form of mass media.

In addition, many saw radio as an enterprise that could only serve to strengthen the American people. Broadcasting could liberate Americans from ignorance and curate public opinion, thus allowing the republic to “prosper, for ‘the strength of our government depends more than that of any other government upon the intelligent interest of the voters in the affairs of the nation.’” Some, including the Jews at the forefront of radio stations like WEVD, were primarily concerned with making sure that their audiences had a certain opinion about the news. This caused some problems, however, as conflicting ideas often were in competition with each other for more airplay.

During this period, there were a few distinct divisions within the Jewish community. There were assimilationists, or Jews who wished to seem as American as possible by purchasing the consumer goods promoted through the media. The assimilationist Jews were the first to learn English, and were most likely the forces behind the use of English words in Yiddish radio broadcasts. There were the religious Jews, who strayed away from anything that would compromise their religious practice, thus maintaining that their Jewish identity was most

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10 Craig, *Fireside Politics*, 211.
11 Craig, *Fireside Politics*, 211.
12 For a more in depth discussion about assimilation in the Jewish community, Henry Feingold’s *A Time For Searching: Entering the Mainstream* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) is a good resource.
important. And there were the secular Jews, or Jews who identified as such on a cultural and
ethnic level, but had no interest in Judaism as a religious practice. The most prominent of these
secular Jews were members of either the Socialist Party or the Communist Party. These groups,
while sharing certain things about their identities, often found themselves in conflict with each
other over the proper way to be a Jew in America.

The disparity of ideas within the Jewish community manifested itself in many different
ways. For example, an article written by Phillip Rubin in 1927 in *The American Mercury*
describes conflicting views in printed media within the Jewish community. In this article, Phillip
Rubin explores the purpose of the *Vorworts*, which was the socialist newspaper in New York and
ultimately one of the recurring programs on WEVD, and its primary audience. According to him,
the *Vorworts* was used most “assiduously not only by the proletariat but also by that part of the
Yiddish intelligentsia which criticizes it most severely.”\(^\text{13}\) This is, in part, because the *Vorworts*
is meant for an audience of socialist Jews who want to work towards a future that holds the
promise of equality for all men. He strongly believes that the news promoted in the Vorwarts is
socialist propaganda meant to convert America’s Jews into members of the socialist party. Rubin
also explores the *Vorworts’* standpoint on religion, and comments that “today the Vorwarts takes
a more tolerant attitude toward religion. Cahan, regarding it from the romantic viewpoint of the
dim past, when he was a boy and went to shul, confesses a weakness for the music of the cantors
(Hazonim) and for the synagogue ritual in general.”\(^\text{14}\) Although socialists were ardently against
organized religion, it is interesting that even their robust leader feels a sort of nostalgia for his
participation in these rituals. This is demonstrative of the ability of one’s Jewish identity to
remain, regardless of one’s political affiliation.

\(^{13}\) Phillip Rubin, excerpt from an article from *The American Mercury*, March 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection, box 4.1a, folder 1, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
\(^{14}\) Phillip Rubin, excerpt from an article from *The American Mercury*, March 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection.
During the 1930s, many Jews were experiencing a feeling of apprehension. According to a *Fortune* article in 1936, this apprehension was based on a rising fear of anti-Semitism, thus leading to Jews questioning their security in America. In addition, “Depression-era adversity had particular meaning within the Jewish community, as Jews assessed their own fates amid the apparent collapse of American ideals” of liberty and equality. Judaism was not accepted by the mainstream, making one’s Jewishness almost a handicap to one’s ultimate success in America. In addition, Jews, like other Americans, were greatly affected by the Great Depression, which brought economic setbacks and general frustration. Jews had obtained a certain level of stability in the first quarter of the twentieth century and expected it to last. Jews in the Great Depression faced “unprecedented financial hardships, barriers to their children’s economic and educational progress, and a sudden increase in anti-Semitism,” which threatened their ability to exist in this new land of opportunity.

This thesis is a study of the context under which the 1927 Radio Act was passed and, by using Yiddish radio in New York City as a case study, will explore the tensions that existed between the federal government and the Jewish socialist broadcasters. There have been numerous studies the 1927 Radio Act and a few on Yiddish radio, but no sources use Yiddish radio as the standard to which one should judge the success of the Act. Yiddish radio was very much on the periphery, but its importance to the formation of a Jewish identity in America should not be overlooked. Radio only helped to strengthen Jews’ identity by allowing them to express their collective ideals and values in a way that made sense to them. The discourse

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17 That is not to say that Jews were as solidly middle class as they were in the years following the Second World War. Many Jews were just breaking into white-collar industries, but their upward mobility was halted by the Depression. Howard Sachar speaks about this further in his book *A History of Jews in America* (New York: Knopf, 1992).
surrounding the 1927 Radio Act helped to inform the way that radio was both governed and practiced. The emphasis that the Act placed on “‘public interest, convenience or necessity’” was crucial to the formation of both the radio landscape and aural communities because it gave broadcasters a standard to which they should hold themselves accountable. ¹⁹

Historiographically, this paper is situated between many different ways of viewing this issue. On the periphery, Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities serves as the framework for discussions about identity formation within communities. In his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson argues that there is no such thing as a physical nation, and that the nation itself is an imagined community built by its inhabitants. ²⁰ He writes that the nation “is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”²¹ Anderson tends to stay within the realm of nation building in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, this model is applicable to the assimilation of immigrants into American society in the mid-twentieth century because it leads to the creation of a new collective identity.

The scholarship regarding Yiddish radio and its effect on Yiddish immigrants is limited to the work of historian Ari Y. Kelman, who frames his discussion of radio in terms of a general cultural history of American Jewry. Other authors engage with the idea of radio, but none frame their focus in the same way as Kelman. He writes about radio in terms of its influence on the facilitation of Jewish identity creation. This, in conjunction with scholarship about radio in general, helps to contextualize the ultimate effects of this form of mass media. One of the most

²¹ Anderson, *Communities*, 7.
important books that engages with the history of mass media is the series *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* by Erik Barnouw. The first volume in this collection, *A Tower in Babel* is often cited in works regarding radio because of the way that Barnouw contextualizes his discussion of the importance of radio. He writes about radio in terms of greater trends in American history in the 1920s and 1930s, making it invaluable to any discussion regarding radio. In addition, there are a number of books that were published by the Federal Radio Commission itself during this period. One example is entitled *The Federal Radio Commission: Its History, Activities and Organization*, which is a history of the Federal Radio Commission written by the organization in 1932. This book has provided a really interesting take on the history of the FRC because it was published only five years after its inception.

The majority of scholarship regarding Yiddish radio is limited to discussions of radio during the Second World War and in the years following the Holocaust. Historians tend to focus on this era because of the importance of these events to the collective ethos of the Jewish community. This tendency often leaves the preceding decades out of the equation, thus diminishing their importance to the ultimate trajectory of Jewish history. The 1930s were important because this decade laid the foundation for the ethnic identity of these immigrant populations. According to Howe, “Most [Jews] wanted to maintain a distinctive Yiddish cultural life while penetrating individually into American society and economy; […] most hoped for cultural and religious continuity while opting for a weak, even ramshackle community structure.”

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mainstream American society. Many of the individuals living in America in the 1930s were
second or third generation immigrants, therefore they were more willing than their parents or
grandparents to try and adopt a fully American mindset.

The primary sources regarding Yiddish radio are diverse, yet limited. The majority of the
research for this project was conducted at the YIVO Institute archive at the Center for Jewish
History in New York City and the Henry Sapoznik Collections at the Library of Congress. The
YIVO Archives contained mostly Yiddish-language sources, ranging in format from sound
recordings of radio programs to original copies of radio scripts in English. The Henry Sapoznik
Collection was not entirely ready for public use, but the materials that were accessible included
photocopies of newspaper clippings, magazines, and photocopies of original WEVD documents.
The issue with primary sources relating to Yiddish radio is that the majority of radio programs
themselves were not recorded, and those that were, were done so in the 1950s and beyond. This
made it difficult to truly gauge the way that these programs sounded during this period.

There is a very limited amount of scholarship on Jews in the 1930s specifically, most likely
because historians tend to focus on the decades following the 1930s in their work. Two books, At
Jews and the Great Depression by Beth S. Wegner, frame this discussion in terms of social and
cultural history. Wegner argues that “the evolution of Jewish life during the Depression years
reflected an ongoing process of Jewish acculturation,” and that they focused on “adapting but not
relinquishing ethnic identity[.] Depression-era Jews reconciled the maintenance of Jewish culture
with the pursuit of full participation in American society.” Wegner, like many of her
contemporaries, views Jewish participation in American society as having the ultimate goal of

23 Moore, At Home, 7.
blending in with citizens born in America. Moore further supports this notion of the maintenance of Jewish culture through evolution within the second generation, as these Jews redefined the meaning of Jewishness itself.\textsuperscript{26} The first generation of immigrants were very much a product of the lives that they left behind in Europe, but their children were the creators of this distinctly Jewish identity that became apparent in the 1930s and beyond.

According to Deborah Dash Moore, “Second generation Jews developed a relationship of intimacy with the [New York City]; many even conducted a clandestine love affair with it. They succeeded in wedding their experiences as New Yorkers to their experiences as Jews.”\textsuperscript{27} The second-generation immigrants had a more enthusiastic adoption of American ideas and values such as upward economic mobility and a commitment to the Democratic Party. The adoption of these values ultimately contributed to the proliferation of new forms of Jewish mass media and their lasting influence.\textsuperscript{28} For the first time, Jews in New York were living in a place where one’s religious beliefs were a matter of personal consciousness, so Jews had no need to express their secularism in an aggressive way. When Jews were living in Europe, they were automatically branded by their religion, regardless of whether or not they were practicing. But in America, organized religion was “dominated by the principles of voluntarism and pluralism,” making other expressions of one’s beliefs unnecessary.\textsuperscript{29} Jews could identify as ethnically or culturally Jewish, giving them more freedom to pursue new career paths and exercise their rights of citizenship.

Both of these books are important in that they represent the some of the scholarship that

\textsuperscript{26} Moore, \textit{At Home}, 4.
\textsuperscript{27} Moore, \textit{At Home}, 4.
\textsuperscript{28} When I say “American ideas and values,” I am usually referring to those that are cited in the founding documents of the United States, i.e. life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While it wasn’t explicitly stated in the primary sources that Jews were particularly motivated by these concepts, it is clear that their collective values were informed by these values, whether it was conscious or not.
\textsuperscript{29} Rosenberg, \textit{New Jewish Identity}, 73.
seeks to explain why certain trends in American Jewish life emerged during the Second World War and the decades following the conflict. However, neither of these cultural historians focus heavily on the affects of mass media on this identity formation. Media in the 1930s helped to ensure that this decade was some of the most the formative years in the creation of an American Jewish identity. This identity was based on a pluralistic vision for Jews’ existence in America that allowed them to exist both as Jews and Americans. The 1930s were important in that it represented a brief interruption in Jewish life, but the events that took place during this formative decade did not completely alter greater trends in American Jewish life.

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30 It should be noted that since the scholarship on American Jews in 1930s is incredibly limited, many books like Howard Sachar’s *A History of Jews in America* (New York: Knopf, 1992) and Henry Feingold’s *A Time For Searching: Entering the Mainstream* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), have short sections about this decade. But, neither spends a significant amount of time explaining the nuances of Jewish-American identity. They mostly focus on the formation of the American Zionist movement and the proliferation of Jewish organizations based on voluntarism.

CHAPTER ONE: CULTIVATING THE RADIO LANDSCAPE

THE 1927 RADIO ACT AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FRC

Before the establishment of the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) in 1927, a law passed in 1912 governed all radio commissions over state lines. This law mandated that “Every station must be licensed[,] Every operator must be licensed[,] The frequencies must be more than 500 kilocycles or less than 187.5 kilocycles[,] [and] Private stations (amateurs) not engaged in commercial business must not use a frequency of less than 500 kilocycles.”32 Radio stations needed to obtain a license from the Secretary of Commerce and Labor. Different types of stations received different licenses. Radio stations that were founded and operated by large corporations would get preferential treatment and higher frequencies because many saw radio as a force that could only be controlled by operators with more commercial experience.33 Under the radio law of 1912, the Secretary of Commerce “did not have the right to refuse a license, assign hours, or limit power. Even his right to specify wavelengths was limited.”34 Restricting the Department of Commerce from withholding licenses from anyone made it possible for virtually anyone to obtain a radio license. Holders of radio licenses were not bound by many restrictions, making it incredibly easy for stations of all sorts to procure radio licenses and broadcast programs of their choosing. This all changed, however, when the Federal Radio Commission was established in the 1927 Radio Act.

33 This way of thinking doesn’t completely make sense because at this point, radio had only been available for use by the military and companies that did business by boat or aircraft. Nobody really knew how to manage radio in a commercial capacity. For more information about the development of radio, Susan J. Douglas’ book *Inventing Radio Broadcasting* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1989) does a good job of explaining its trajectory from 1899 to 1912.
34 Barnouw, *Tower in Babel* 190.
The Federal Radio Commission was established in 1927 by the 69th Congress as an “independent establishment of the national government dealing with the licensing of radio stations of every character, the licensing including the assignment of frequencies, the fixing of power to be used in transmission, and the determination of hours of operation.” The powers specifically assigned to the FRC were as follows:

- To classify stations
- To prescribe the nature of service to be rendered
- To assign frequencies or wavelengths to stations or classes of stations, to determine power to be used and to allocate time of operation
- To determine the location of classes of stations or individual stations
- To regulate the apparatus to be used with reference to its external effects and the purity and sharpness of emissions
- To make regulations to prevent interference
- To establish zones to be served by any station
- To make special regulations applicable to chain broadcasting.

The FRC was established to take over where the Department of Commerce left off. Under the 1912 law, the Department of Commerce was not authorized to deny any station from obtaining a license, most likely because nobody quite understood the full potential that radio had as a medium of mass communication. The FRC was different in that it had more power over the stations, therefore it could curate the type of media that the American public heard.

The purpose of the 1927 Radio Act was to "‘maintain the control of the United States over all channels’ and to provide for the use of channels, ‘but not the ownership thereof,’ by licenses for limits periods; ‘and no such license shall be construed to create ay right beyond the terms, conditions, and periods of the license.’” Any licenses or transfers that the FRC granted was done in the name of "‘public interest, convenience or necessity.’” In other words, decisions regarding all radio licensures were made on the basis of what the FRC deemed to be serving the

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37 Congressional Record, 69th Cong., 1st sess., 1926, quoted in Barnouw, Tower in Babel 196.
38 Congressional Record, 69th Cong., 1st sess., 1926, quoted in Barnouw, Tower in Babel 196.
public. This idea of public interest would permeate all of the discourse surrounding radio in the years following the passing of this Act because it is so vague. The idea of public interest is difficult to define, allowing the FRC to have a lot of power in determining the full details of this interest. The origins of the definition with which they ultimately went can be traced, in part, by looking at the context under which the 1927 Radio Act was passed.

Throughout the 1920s, many Americans were concerned with censorship and the prevention of monopolies, both of which are explained in the Act itself. In reference to censorship, the Act states:

Nothing in this act shall be understood or construed to give the licensing authority the power of censorship over the radio communications or signals transmitted by any radio station, and no regulation or condition shall be promulgated or fixed by the licensing authority which shall interfere with the right of free speech by means of radio communication.39

This statement is in response to concerns about censorship in the 1920s. The FRC was not allowed to compromise the rights of broadcasters, thus ensuring that individuals of all political affiliations and ethnic backgrounds could procure a license. However, the text of the 1927 Radio Act ensured that the FRC still possessed the abilities to curate the contents of radio broadcasts so that they reflected American ideals. The progressive nature of the 1927 Radio Act allowed the licensing authorities to regulate the contents of the radio while making sure that they were not limiting the free speech of broadcasters and radio station. This vague and confusing definition of the power of the FRC would eventually lead to tensions between the FRC and different communities in the years following the Act’s approval.

In reference to the issue of monopolies, it is made clear within the text of the Act that there would be zero tolerance policy for things that could be construed as monopolizing. The text of the Act reads:

the licensing authority was forbidden to license ‘any person, firm, company, or corporation, or any subsidiary thereof, which has been finally adjudged guilty by a Federal court of unlawfully monopolizing or attempting unlawfully to monopolize, after this Act takes effect, radio communication, directly or indirectly, through the control of the manufacture or sale of radio apparatus, through exclusive traffic arrangements, or by any other means or to have been using unfair methods of competition.’

This provision made it impossible for large corporations to corner the new markets created by radio, especially the markets that targeted populations like immigrants or people of color, that were previously avoided on such a large scale. Companies that had either been found guilty of monopolizing or were at some point suspected of monopolizing were at risk of losing their radio licenses. In addition, the wording in this Act is as such that it would require the FRC to look at issues on a case-by-case basis, since the Act does not offer specific descriptions of each of these ideals. As with the Act’s stance on censorship, the vague language and array of ways that one could interpret the text would cause some problems both with the operations of the FRC and American public opinion of the FRC.

Since the 1927 Radio Act did not offer a specific description of the FRC’s power, many thought of it as an organization without much power or significance. A 1930 Radio Broadcast article wrote: “all one must do, apparently, is gather unto himself a couple of Congressmen, visit the most weak-kneed commissioner available, make a few grand statements about service to the public, and some way, regardless of the general good of the listener, will be found to accommodate the pleading station.”

Eight years after the passage of the act, Pendleton E. Herring declared in an article for Harvard Business that it was “a result of a political deal and an attempt to prohibit one political appointee from exercising a potentially powerful

40 Congressional Record, 69th Cong., 1st sess., 1926, quoted in Barnouw, Tower in Babel, 198.
weapon.” Many Americans did not trust organizations like the FRC because of its tendency to limit one’s right of free speech. While the Act was sure to deny any attempts at limiting free speech, the fact that it was so vague made it difficult to really gauge its true potential. This, in combination with a general distrust of the government in the wake of the 1929 Stock Market Crash, manifests itself in the discourse surrounding the formation of the FRC. There was a general misunderstanding of radio’s potential as a form of mass media, which led many listeners to question radio’s longevity as a medium and its ability to connect with its audiences.

One of the ways that listeners and broadcasters could envision the potential of radio was through advertising and commercial enterprising. Prior to the advent of radio, the main way that advertisers could reach their targeted audiences was through printed advertisements. While radio advertisements were more fleeting than printed advertisements, they gave commercial businesses more freedom for marketing and branding. Companies could advertise their products to consumers on a whole new medium, thus opening up new doors of possibilities for their overall appeal to consumers. Immigrant populations were, in many ways, the targets of this new form of mass commercial media. Many immigrants were interested in assimilation, and would purchase products that were endorsed on the radio stations within their communities. This idea is discussed further in an article from a 1939 issue of the *Radio Annual*. This article portrays the foreign language market as the virgin market, implying that there is an immense amount of potential for advertisers to brand their goods. The article states: “there is little wonder that these broadcasts are so extremely effective and popular with these foreign speaking Americans, for they are carefully produced and directed to appeal to the natural tastes of these ‘foreign’ customers who spend billions of dollars each year on the products which are introduced to them

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The foreign language market could be incredibly lucrative for advertisers because of the nature of its listeners. Many English-speaking Americans assumed that immigrants would do anything that they could to seem more American. This included purchasing goods and services that reflected American ideas and values.

Part of what made radio so successful was its inclusion of Americans that were usually left out of mass media culture. No longer were immigrant communities like Yiddish-speaking Jews or African Americans isolated to specific corners of their respective cities. Radio allowed individuals of all backgrounds to have a voice, and they could now make this voice heard to the entirety of their community, regardless of whether or not they could read. This led to the creation of a mass media culture that the FRC was most likely did not anticipate. The way that the original text of the 1927 Radio Act was written very much favored a specific type of broadcaster—one that was white, born in America, and spoke English as their first language.

English had certain significance for Americans, as it represented one of the cornerstones of their collective identity. The same thing could be said about foreign language programming. An immigrant’s native language was often one of the cornerstones of his or her identity, just as English was for Americans. A general lack of understanding of this concept within the American population further indicates the level of xenophobia that existed within the rhetoric of American politics. Regardless of whether or not native-born Americans approved, radio quickly became one of the primary modes of communication within immigrant communities because of the feeling of intimacy that it could create.

EARLY ISSUES AND REVISIONS

Although the 1927 Radio Act was written in order to alleviate some of the issues that already existed within the scope of the 1912 Act, it was, in many ways, already obsolete when it passed.45 This is because the Act did not prepare the FRC to deal with the sheer multitude of stations within its jurisdiction. In addition, many individuals involved in the Federal Government were distrustful of peripheral government organizations like the FRC. For example, Secretary Hoover stated in reference to the text that preceded the 1927 Radio Act: “‘the tendency to create in the government independent agencies whose administrative functions are outside the control of the President is, I believe, thoroughly bad.’”46 What President Coolidge thought, however, is not entirely known. However many speculate that he was also in opposition to the FRC’s creation. The fact that both the President and the Secretary of Commerce were unsure about radio is an indication that the initial text of the Act was slightly problematic. Statements like Secretary Hoover’s distaste of the FRC reflect a way of thinking that is in direct conflict with the initial intentions behind the 1927 Radio Act itself. The Act was put in place in order to alleviate some of the pressures placed on the Department of Commerce and also further define the role of the organization in charge of radio broadcasts. The exact details of these definitions, however, would only be achieved by compromise within Congress and the other branches of the Federal government.

The first piece of this compromise, much to the dismay of supporters of the Radio Act, came in the form of a filibuster at the end of the 69th Congress’ session. This filibuster prevented the appointment of the Commission members, leaving this task to the Department of

45 Barnouw, Tower in Babel, 199.
46 Barnouw, Tower in Babel, 199.
Commerce. The Department of Commerce appointed men of various backgrounds in the hope that it would create a Commission that would cater to the interests of the Federal Government, the broadcasters, and ultimately, the listeners themselves. Once the FRC was officially established, its members wasted no time trying to streamline the process of radio licensures and other laws pertaining to mass communications. The first thing that they did was to extend all radio licenses with the provision that all 732 stations under its jurisdiction fill out a series of questionnaires about their organization, purposes, and goals. These questionnaires were written with the intent of ensuring that the radio stations were broadcasting material that fell in line with the original goals of the Radio Act, most notably the provisions regarding public interest and welfare. These surveys were written in such a way that allowed the Commission to make decisions about what was worthy of radio broadcast in a way that did not come off as censorship. This proved more difficult than any member of the Commission could have thought, and led to a series of debates within Congress about changing the text of the original Act.

The first major amendment to the Act came in 1928. It was proposed by Erwin Davis, one of the most prominent members of the Act’s original opposition. This amendment reiterated the idea that the 1927 Radio Act was meant to promote equality, but created more specific limitations on the power of the FRC to determine this equality:

> the equality of radio broadcasting service, both of transmission and of reception, and in order to provide said equality the licensing authority shall as nearly as possibly make and maintain an equal allocation of broadcasting licenses, of bands of frequency or wavelengths, of periods of time for operation, and of station power.

In theory, this amendment would help alleviate some of the concerns that an over-cautious 1920s

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America would have with censorship on the radio. The amendment is worded in such a way that it assured broadcasters that the integrity of their radio enterprises would not be compromised in the wake of new legislation. This amendment was, in part, a response to some of the issues that radio stations in the 1920s were having with interference. One of the quirks of AM radio is its ability to travel over great distances with the change of air pressure, allowing for the broadcasts from various radio stations to reach thousands of miles outside of their usual range. The Davis Amendment was written in order to ensure that all holders of radio licenses were receiving the power for which they applied, and would not affect the broadcasts of other radio stations in their area. While this Amendment was meant to relieve some of the issues that the FRC was facing, it in many ways complicated them further.

One such complication was that the Davis Amendment made it so that many radio stations that had been operating for years without any question were suddenly under scrutiny by the Federal government. The amendment is written in such a way that it seemingly promoted equality under the law. The text of the amendment is clear to state that it would require the FRC to make equitable “allocations to each region—in number of licenses, wave lengths, time, and power.”51 However, the language used is vague, and does not give a clear description of the specifics of this equity. Furthermore, it leaves a lot to the jurisdiction Federal Government, instead of taking into account the input of local authorities. This could be why there was so much distrust of the FRC by the general population in the early years of its existence. Federal Governmental regulations of local operations seemingly take away the agency and rights of free speech of the general public, which, in the 1920s and especially during the 1930s, was a concern of many Americans.

The 1927 Radio Act and the establishment of the Federal Radio Commission represented something much bigger than a new level of governmental control. It gave way to a wave of new opportunities for individuals to express their personal identities through a new form of mass media. No longer were consumers limited to receiving their news through printed media; rather they were now able to experience their media in a way with which they could truly connect. Listeners were able to hear the culture of their communities broadcast through speakers in their own homes, allowing them more freedom and a greater understanding of their surroundings. These audio communities represented new opportunities for listeners and broadcasters alike, thus leading to a further boom in radio programming.
CHAPTER TWO: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AURAL COMMUNITIES

SETTING THE STAGE

Radio was a particularly successful mode of communication because it had the ability to reach audiences in a way that was previously impossible. According to Waldemar Kaempffert, the author of a 1924 article entitled “The Social Destiny of Radio,” this form of mass media was able to cultivate a sense of nationhood that was previously impossible with print media. Radio, according to Kaempffert, could accomplish “the task of making us feel together, think together, live together” by bringing “little towns and villages so remote from one another, so nationally related and yet physically so unrelated […] into direct contact with one another! This is exactly what radio is bringing about.”  

For many Americans, radio represented a new level of communication that was previously impossible with other forms of media. Radio could create a sense of community within isolated populations, which existed, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each” communal context. These communities extended past the English-speaking citizens of America and deep into the pockets of immigrant communities like the Yiddish speaking Jews in New York City.

Radio served a few functions within the Yiddish-speaking community, most importantly that it provided a safe space for Yiddish-speaking immigrants. This allowed them to express their identity in a way that connected them to their shared histories and, ultimately, to each other. Immigrant populations like the Yiddish-speaking Jews used this medium as a way to have conversations with themselves; they broadcast news and radio programs in their native languages that were relevant to their shared cultural identity. For Jews, “Yiddish radio provided a powerful

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53 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 7.
venue for an internal conversation among millions of Yiddish speaking Jewish immigrants about how to create Jewish lives in America.”54 Jewish immigrants heard the sounds of their communities on the radio, and used it as a way to connect with the lives they left behind in Europe while they were simultaneously trying to settle in America.55 Yiddish radio was important because it existed in a paradox. It allowed Jews to hear the sounds of their communities in the public sphere, but they could enjoy it from the privacy of one’s home. Radio was an aural medium that “did not demand all of one’s facilities. People could listen as they did housework or as they relaxed after work. It presented domesticated sound, tailor-made for listening at home, for a generation struggling to make themselves at home in America.”56 Unlike newspapers and other forms of print media, radio did not require consumers to put their full attention into it. Listeners were able to engage with radio in a different way, one that allowed them to be active members of their community while simultaneously focusing on their families in their homes.

As Stanley Frost, a contemporary historian, put it, "With radio we, the listeners, will have an advantage we have never had before. We do not even have to get up and leave the place. All we have to do is press a button, and the speaker is silenced.”57 Radio allowed the listener a specific type of freedom that was previously unattainable. The luxury of being able to control what sort of media one was subjected with the touch of a button was a new and exciting prospect.


55 In the Yiddish Radio Project, Henry Sapoznik’s mother recalled that the first thing that she and her family did when they moved to American from Poland in 1949 was buy a radio. She heard that they spoke Yiddish on the radio and exclaimed, “that was my life!” further indicating the importance of this medium as a source of nostalgia for recent immigrants to the United States. The “Yiddish Radio Project: Stories from the Golden Age of Yiddish Radio,” All Things Considered, NPR. Minnesota: High Bridge Audio, 2002 is a really interesting resource because it was originally created as a radio program. It features segments on various radio personalities including Nahum Stutchkoff and Victor Packer as well as examples of radio advertisements.

56 Kelman, Station, 19.

for 1930s audiences. For Jews and other immigrant populations, they were finally able to create their own safe spaces in the United States. Radio was the perfect medium because it was representative of who they truly were in a way that they could not express themselves before. Yiddish radio allowed Jews to express their Jewish identity privately, as it was in a language that only they could understand. It acted as an anchor for Jews who wanted to Americanize, but also wanted to maintain their Jewishness.

With the advent of radio, this mission of assimilation within immigrant populations became something of a contentious issue. It was clear that the original intentions behind the 1927 Radio Act were to create a very distinct and almost uniform sound for radio that would promote equality and fight against censorship and monopolies. However, this was not always the end goal within immigrant communities. Radio became a way for the Jewish community to speak to itself, without worrying about the way that the community was perceived from the outside. By broadcasting in Yiddish, Jews were able to maintain the integrity of their community without seeming subversive to the United States government.

But at the same time, the particular type of Yiddish that these broadcasts were written in in a distinct style that included English words transliterated into Yiddish characters. This could be for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, it could also have been written in Yiddish characters because the individuals who were performing on the radio were most comfortable reading over the air. However, it is also possible that the scripts were written in “Yinglish” in order to teach the Yiddish speaking audiences how to speak English. It would have been easy for immigrant

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58 This is demonstrated in the radio scripts found in the YIVO Archive at the Center for Jewish History in New York City. The scripts found in the Zvee Scooler Collection are particularly good examples of this, because the majority of the script consists of English words written in Yiddish characters, presumably so that it was easier for broadcasters to pronounce words with which they were unfamiliar.
audiences to learn English this way, as they could glean the meaning of different English words by using context clues.

Yiddish Radio advertisers also utilized “Yinglish” as a way of getting a message across to their listeners and potential customers. An example of this can be found in an advertisement for Milady Frozen Fruit Products. The advertisement features a mixture of Yiddish and English, with enough of both languages to not only invoke a feeling of nostalgia within the consumer, but also to make it easy for the consumer to find the product in the supermarket. In the closing lines of this advertisement, the announcer declares: “Milady hot geshmack appeal,” which translates to “Milady has a tasty appeal.” Here, the advertisement utilizes both Yiddish and English to accomplish something that could appeal to both individuals who were trying to maintain their distinctly Jewish identity and those who were trying to assimilate. By using the word geshmack, it is clear to the audience that the products in question are incredibly tasty and good for the whole family. But, pairing with English words makes it more accessible for an audience that is trying to adjust in an unfamiliar country.

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, many Jews were struggling to come to terms with their identities as both Jews and Americans. This struggle was rooted in a rising fear of anti-Semitism, thus leading Jews to question their security in America. Jews were hearing about the plight of their families in Europe, and were worried that it was only a matter of time before their place in America would be compromised because of similar issues. But at the same time, many Jews flocked to New York City because it was a place where they could live without fear. They were in the presence of nearly two million Jews, making it seem as though everyone

60 Wegner, Depression, 1.
New York presented Jews with “a life without a majority population—one without a single ethnic group dominating urban society. Now Jews could go about their business, much of it taking place within ethnic niches, as if they were the city’s predominant group.”

Radio gave Jews the illusion of acceptance, as it made it seem like they were the only population in New York. Jews’ feeling of comfort was only bolstered by their participation in radio culture, as radio gave them a sense of community regardless of their physical proximity to one another.

The radio programs that Jews both created and listened to promoted their own brand of public welfare which, despite the efforts of many of the original broadcasters, fell in line with the original intentions of the 1927 Radio Act itself. Jews, like other Americans, were greatly affected by the Great Depression, which brought economic setbacks and frustrated expectations. Jews had obtained a certain level of stability in the first quarter of the twentieth century and expected it to last. Jews in the Great Depression faced unprecedented financial hardships, barriers to their children’s economic and educational progress, and a sudden increase in anti-Semitism.

There were many different responses to the Depression, most of which resulted in Jews becoming more involved in American politics. One such figure was Eugene V. Debs, a prominent figure in politics and a major purveyor of Jewish socialism. It was also in his honor that WEVD, one of the most prominent radio stations in New York City, was established.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WEVD

The establishment of WDEBS (later WEVD) was announced in a newspaper article

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63 That is not to say that Jews were as solidly middle class as they were in the years following the Second World War. Many Jews were just breaking into white-collar industries, but their upward mobility was halted by the Depression. Howard Sachar speaks about this further in his book *A History of Jews in America* (New York: Knopf, 1992).
published on December 22, 1926 entitled “Socialists to Erect Debs Radio Station.” According to the article, WEVD would “be used, […] ‘primarily to champion the cause of liberty and social justice in the broad and liberal spirit of Eugene V. Debs.” The article was in response to a meeting by the Socialist Party’s National Executive Committee, which issued the following resolution regarding the establishment of WEVD:

the National Executive Committee open a public subscription for a Debs memorial to take the form of a powerful radio broadcasting station to be known as WDEBS and to be used primarily to champion the cause of liberty and social justice in the broad and liberal spirit of Eugene V. Debs. The fund shall be administered and station operated by a Board of Trustees representative of organizations, movements and ideas which Debs championed. The Board of Trustees shall be appointed and vacancies filled by the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party.

This resolution contains a few key points about the proposed operation of WEVD. It is clear that the operation of WEVD will remain exclusively in the hands of members of the Socialist party, thus ensuring that the message broadcast by the station will fit within the ideology and goals of the Party. It is also established that the station will be erected in memorial of Eugene V. Debs, who was the charismatic leader of the Socialist Party before his death on October 20, 1926. The station would become, according the Board’s secretary G. August Gerber, a "fighting, militant champion of the oppressed and [...] will guarantee to minority opinion in America, its right to be heard without censorship.” This declaration demonstrated the Party’s commitment to spreading the Socialist message without compromising the integrity of both the listener and the broadcaster.

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65 The original call numbers for WEVD were WDEBS. However, since five-letter call names were only issued to aircraft, they had to change it to fit within FRC regulations.
68 For more information about the specific ideologies of Yiddish Socialists in New York, the book A Fire in Their Hearts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) by Tony Michels provides an overview of the different stages of the party’s development and lasting influence.
69 Gullifor and Carlson, “WEVD”, 206.
The meeting of the Executive Committee of the Socialist Party was almost a year before the first broadcast of the radio station, which was announced in a separate article entitled “Tributes to Debs to Open WEVD Radio.” This article was written in reference to the opening program of the Eugene V. Debs Memorial station on October 20, 1927 at 9pm. According to this article, the Board of Trustees of the station announced that “it would seek to run the station like a daily newspaper, giving the radio audience first hand news of events of interest to workers.”

This is one example of the ways that radio changed the game for mass media. Not only was radio a more interactive medium, but the original intent behind it was that of being something of a neo-newspaper. Radio would give consumers the news that they needed, but unlike newspapers, it could broadcast news that was interesting to the working class in a way that was more accessible.

One of the prominent figures in the station’s formation was Theodore Debs, the brother of Eugene Debs. In a letter between Debs and G. August Gerber, the Eugene V. Debs Memorial Fund’s secretary, dated October 15, 1927, Debs expresses his vision for the station:

In fancy we shall vision the opening scenes of this wonderful and beautiful tribute of tenderest love and sweetest devotion to the memory of our blessed Gene, […] the attainment of peace – not war with its sickening, atrocious crimes, the triumph of industrial and political democracy, the promulgation of high ideals, the uplifting of the race, the inauguration of the Brotherhood of Man, that all the children that come into the world may enjoy the equality of opportunity, develop, mentally and physically, to their fullest capacity, have their place in the sun and share freely in al the beauty and blessings of bounteous nature.

Theodore Debs’ vision for the future contains a few key themes. It is peppered with the type of socialism-charged language of which so many Americans were afraid. The fact that this sort of vision could be realized on the radio was an incredibly new phenomenon. No longer were the

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70 “Tributes to Debs to Open WEVD Radio” October 20, 1927, box 4.2, folder 10, Henry Sapoznik Collection, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; Though in a letter between Theodore Debs and Gerber, Gerber writes that the original air date of the opening ceremonies for the radio station were set for October 7, but they were anticipating that there might be a delay in the festivities. Although there would be a delay, he writes, the funding that they received for the station would not be affected.

socialists limited to simply spreading their ideals through printed media. They were now able to broadcast their ideals in a way that could reach their followers in an unprecedented way. Radio was not only easier to manipulate, but also it could impact the lives of both adults and children. This expanded the reach of the Socialist Party greatly, making it easier for them to spread their message to a wider audience.

The opening ceremony of WEVD was, according to the correspondence between Gerber and Debs, a great success. In a letter sent from Gerber to Debs on November 16, 1927, he writes: “our reception boards show that we have a definite reception range of some 300 miles from New York City, and in one case, we have been received as far off as Chula Vista, Southern California.” This was an unexpected range, meaning that number of listeners could have ranged in the thousands. He goes on to say: “I hope that if we are able to continue our operations and get the necessary moneys to do the promotion work which we plan, […] we shall be able to increase the efficiency of our present transmitter and to establish a chain of radio broadcast stations whereby the entire country will be blanketed with the message for which Gene gave so much of his energy and all of this life.” Gerber is speaking about the original intent of the radio station, and how it was set up in order to propagate the message of not only Eugene Debs, but also the Socialist Party in the United States. Once WEVD was finally established as a viable source of news for socialists throughout America, then the Party will have accomplished its original

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72 For full access to the materials of the Eugene V. Debs Collection, including correspondence between Eugene Debs and others and correspondence by Theodore Debs on his brother’s behalf, visit the Indianapolis Historical Society in Indiana. There are also collections of papers relating to Debs at Indiana State University, which is where Henry Sapoznik originally made copies of the correspondence contained in his collection.


74 Letter, Gerber to Debs, November 16, 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection.

75 It should be noted that the reason why this is possible is because of the type of waves on which WEVD was broadcasting. Based on the claim that WEVD broadcasts could be heard in California, it is possible that the types of waves that were propagated were skywaves, which have the ability to cover large distances with changes in air pressure.
mission. Gerber and the other executives of the Socialist Party were confident that radio was the best way to propagate their message, most likely because of its potential reach. Unlike newspapers, radio had the potential to reach audiences outside of the typically Jewish neighborhoods, making the validity and relevance of their message more widely accepted by others.

The original thought with radio as a medium was that it was an “autonomous force, so grand, complex and potentially unwieldy that only large corporations with their vast resources and experience in efficiency and management could possibly tame it.” WEVD challenged this notion because it was established as a result of a collective effort. The station initially broadcast out of the sixth floor of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union building in Manhattan. On a typical day, WEVD would broadcast a variety of different mediums, including “poetry, music, and speeches reflecting the ideals of labor and socialism.” It presented shows for the minority populations of New York City—from the Yiddish-speaking Jews on the Lower East Side to the African Americans in Harlem and the Bronx—celebrating the diversity of cultures that existed within New York during this period. WEVD was a true representation of the multicultural world that Socialists were trying to create in New York City because it engaged with members of countless different communities. While this was revolutionary in its own right, it resulted in a series of altercations with the governmental institutions set up to regulate radio.

76 Douglas, Inventing, 305.
77 Gullifor and Carlson, “WEVD,” 206.
78 Gullifor and Carlson, “WEVD,” 207.
CONFRONTING BUREAUCRACY

On April 4, 1927, Alvin E. Hauser, the Managing Director of WEVD, sent a letter to the newly formed FRC. In this letter, Hauser describes in depth the types of programs that will broadcast during the Jewish programs on WEVD. He writes: “the type of programmes we have been putting out has embodied the broadcasting of church services and the better kind of music that is embodied in such services.” He goes on to say:

it is, however, at times rather discouraging to find that while this station is operating on one of the originally allocated channel waves, allotted to the district in the early days of radio, our programme material is either interfered with or totally obliterated by some newcomer who has appropriated for himself, a channel wave within a few meters of ours.⁸⁰

Hauser is expressing his concern for the station’s future, as the FRC and the 1927 Radio Act had made it clear that English-language stations were favored over those that broadcast programs in foreign languages. Hauser’s letter also reflects a sort of desperation that could only be a result of a conflict with the newly formed FRC. At the end of his letter, he writes: “I would like to state that I believe we are one of the few stations in the East who broadcasts beautiful organ music in the very late evening just before midnight and then at other times, again just before midnight, a concert orchestra.”⁸¹ It is curious that he should emphasize the fact that the station plays organ music on the airwaves because this seemingly has no relevance to the rest of the letter. However, it could be an indication that he was responding to allegations from the FRC that the contents of the radio station’s broadcasts were in conflict with its vision for the ideal form of radio.

WEVD was a typical foreign language station, broadcasting in over five different languages each day. These languages, according to a report published in the 1930s, included

⁸⁰ Letter, Alvin Hauser to the FRC, April 4, 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection, box 4.1a, Folder 1, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
⁸¹ Letter, Hauser to the FRC, April 4, 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection.
English, German, Greek, Italian, Jewish, Irish American, Lithuanian, Japanese, Polish, Russian, Scandinavian, and Ukrainian. This was potentially concerning for the FRC, because it was more difficult to regulate programs that were broadcast in languages other than English. The Jewish programming on WEVD aired on Sundays from 11am – 3:30pm, Monday through Friday from 8:15am – 1:30pm, and on Saturdays from 6pm – 10:15pm. What is interesting about this schedule is that the Jewish programming did not broadcast on Shabbat, when many of its potential listeners would be observing this Jewish holiday. WEVD was not a religious station, even though some of its programming had religious undertones. However, in an effort to include everyone in its community of listeners, the broadcasters made an effort to accommodate their needs.

Some of these accommodations are described in a letter written by Theodore Debs to Ruth LePrade. In the letter, he laments the loss of his brother Eugene and the complicated relationship that he had with his religious identity. He writes:

> I remember him making the observation that the meanest and smallest of men were most concerned about their souls. [...] of course [Eugene] accepted none of the creeds, had no use for the hypocritical church, which through the ages has always managed to be intrenched [sic] on the side of the mighty, the powerful, however cruel and brutal its reign.  

The Eugene that Theodore describes in this letter seems to be ardently against the very idea of organized religion. And while this distaste seemed to carry over into the operations of WEVD as a radio station, the degree to which the operators of the station were against organized religion were much less severe. There is almost no mention of religion in any of the documents written about the radio station’s operations, sans for a brief mention of organ music playing in the

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evenings. This is interesting, because it represents yet another division within the Jewish community during this period. The community was quite polarized, and had individuals ranging from deeply religious to ardently secular. However, it ultimately was the secular Jews who broadcast their ideas to the masses. This had a number of effects, most notably that it made Jews seem like more of a subversive population than they probably were. This potentially skewed the perception of the general public about Jews, making them seem like more of a threat to the original stipulations of the 1927 Radio Act.

A certain kind of desperation was further reflected in two separate applications for a WEVD radio license, one filed in August of 1927 and one in February of 1928. These applications had a variety of questions, all of which written with the intention of ensuring that the radio programming fit within the stipulations of the 1927 Radio Act. The applications were sent directly to the FRC, in the hopes that the FRC would renew WEVD’s license for its radio tower in Queens. On the application, it states that their current transmitter consists of a composite tube of only 500 watts, but that they would like to increase the wattage of their station to 1000 as soon as they have enough money.\footnote{Application, WEVD to FRC, August 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection, box 4.1a, folder 1, Library of Congress, Washington D. C.} WEVD was constantly trying to raise money to better their station’s reach, mostly likely because of changing technology and a desire for more listeners. The operators of WEVD promised the FRC that their “programs will be as rounded out as possible; will include music and entertainment of real value and possibly, too, of popular appeal. They will provide a means for educational work, consonant with the composition and purposes of the operating group.”\footnote{Application, WEVD to FRC, August 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection.} Promising a diversity of programming fit in with one of the most important clauses in the original Radio Act: the clause that dealt with public interest and
welfare. It is clear that the individuals who were filling out this application had done their research, as the contents of their application directly reflect the contents of the Act.

Since the station broadcast in so many different languages, it was important for those filling out the application to make it clear that their station would still be appealing to a large audience. In order to make sure the FRC recognized the mass appeal of WEVD as a radio station, the application stated:

this station will be unique, at least here in the east; possibly in the entire country. It will be a station from which will be made articulate the needs and desires, the purposes and aims of the labor, liberal, progressive, socialist and affiliated groups. We believe these opinions necessary to properly leaven public viewpoints and attitudes.\(^{86}\)

The application indicates that the majority of WEVD’s programming would be focused on promoting the socialist vision for America, regardless of whether or not it was the majority position. The operators of WEVD were confident that through radio, they would be able to make their vision for the future part of the mainstream. Radio, “provided an ideal medium for these innovations,” because immigrants “were not relegated to radio’s margins, but neither were they limited to its mainstream.”\(^{87}\) They could listen to both English programming and programming in their own languages, allowing them to shape their identities out of their experiences with a multiplicity of cultures. Yiddish radio, like many other forms of ethnic radio, was written for a population that wished to partake in an Americanizing mission, not only to diminish the potential for prejudice and discrimination, but also to make themselves feel more comfortable in this unfamiliar context.

From this emerges Seymour Lipset’s accommodationist thesis, which states that Jews

\(^{86}\) Application, WEVD to FRC, August 1927, Henry Sapoznik Collection.
\(^{87}\) Kelman, Station, 10.
would only survive in America by adjusting to the expectations of those in power. Jews needed to understand that the certain parts of the United States population were wary of the influx of new immigrants, so the best way to gain their acceptance was through assimilationist tactics. Jews were very much on the periphery of New York society, and many Americans believed that Jews lacked the inherent ability to accommodate American culture at large. The fear and doubt that many Americans felt ultimately manifested itself into anti-Semitic rhetoric, which subsequently led to an emphasis on the secularization of Jewish culture within Jewish communities themselves.

Examples of Jews’ attempts at secularization can be found in the decades prior to the 1930s. For example, the 1908 play *The Melting Pot* advocated for a level of secularization that was described by a Rabbi as being pernicious because it “preaches suicide for [Jews]…Americanization means what Mr. Zangwill has the courage to say what it means: dejudaiization…The Jew is asked to give up his identity in the name of brotherhood and progress.” Even at the turn of the century, Jews were wary of the Americanization that the United States promoted because it required that Jews give up the cornerstones of their identities. According to Daniel Soyer, “adaptation to life in America consist[ed] of a complex and ongoing series of adjustments, by which, […] immigrants and their children strive to reconcile the ‘duality of … “foreignness” and … “Americanness.”’ Jews were grappling with a dual identity, and it seemed as though their solution was to cultivate an American identity that was

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88 Rosenberg, *New Jewish Identity*, x.
89 The accommodationist thesis is part of a greater study of diaspora, a narrative that has characterized Jewish rhetoric for decades. Matthew Frye Jacobson’s book *Special Sorrows: the diasporic imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) is a good starting point to better understand the Jewish story.
90 Rosenberg, *New Jewish Identity*, x.
uniquely Jewish.

STRUGGLES WITH THE FEDERAL RADIO COMMISSION

General Order #32, passed in May 1928 by the Federal Radio Commission, could also explain the content of WEVD’s applications.93 This order threatened the existence of 162 stations that the FRC was concerned were irrelevant, violating the original stipulations of their licenses, or promoting an ideology that directly conflicted with their original vision for radio. This order mandated that each of these stations needed to go in front of the FRC for a hearing and present their case as to why they should remain on air. The majority of the stations targeted were those that the FRC thought of as disseminating propaganda that would push its listeners towards a path that conflicted with American ideals and values. Most of these stations, as it happened, were owned and operated by the labor or socialist parties.94

WEVD was, unsurprisingly, one of the first stations called in to plead its case. Norman Thomas, the President of the Debs Memorial Fund, and G. August Gerber, the fund’s Secretary, filed eleven points with the FRC before they appeared before the commission:

1. The burden of proving the necessity of cancellation of the permit rests on the Commission, and the proof should be clear and overwhelming before the Commission should act.
2. To reproach WEVD for not having a more extensive audience is equivalent to reproaching the Radio Commission for failing to provide its own license with adequate power, time, and wavelength.
3. WEVD should be given preferential status because it is not operating for profit.
4. WEVD should be given preferential status because of the purpose for which it is organized.
5. The personnel who surround WEVD is a guarantee of its public service.
6. The financial support of WEVD indicates a great public interest.

94 Craig, Fireside Politics, 74.
7. The material broadcast by WEVD is a public necessity.
8. The support and appreciation of WEVD is a strong indication that WEVD is a public necessity.
9. Eliminations should be made on the basis of priority, not service.
10. The closing of WEVD will be correctly construed by the public as extreme intolerance and complete censorship of the air.
11. The license of WEVD should not be revoked.⁹⁵

These points indicate the operators of WEVD’s deep understanding of the potential reasons why they were called to question by the FRC. The multiple mentions of public interest and welfare indicate that the operators of WEVD were positive that their station was fulfilling the original reasoning behind the 1927 Radio Act itself. Whether or not this was sincere, however, is inconsequential. The very mention of these concepts illustrates that the Act was, in some ways, successful in its original mission. Broadcasters were hyper aware of the original stipulations of the Act, which caused them to make sure that their broadcasts fit in with this vision. Not only was the content that appeared on WEVD in line with the overall welfare of the public, the very existence of WEVD represented a deviation from the typical formation of radio stations during this period. WEVD was the pinnacle of a community-funded radio station, as it would not exist without the support of the population to which it catered. WEVD was clear in its mission, and its operators were confident that their station was upholding the values of the 1927 Radio Act. It is for these reasons, Thomas and Gerber wrote, that WEVD should remain on the airwaves.⁹⁶

The trial itself was not until a few weeks later. When called to question, the operators of

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⁹⁶ In addition to concerns within the political sphere, radio stations like WEVD that broadcast more subversive topics were also under the scrutiny of the FBI. This investigation began in the 1930s, after a WEVD program broadcast information about the Pension Bill. It states that the radio station was under investigation because the Undercurrent of the News did a segment on the passage of a retirement act for Special Agents. This document was also next to a letter from J Edgar Hoover, which seemed to be praising the station for its treatment of the bill. There are a few problematic things with these documents. For one thing, it is unclear whether or not the program in question was broadcast during the Yiddish-language hours of the station, or if it was during the allotted time for other ethnic groups. The majority of this report, which details an investigation that began in the 1930s and did not end until the 1990s when Yiddish was no longer broadcast on WEVD, can be found in the Henry Sapoznik Collection at the Library of Congress.
WEVD stated:

This station exists for the purpose of maintaining at least one channel of the air free and open to the uses of the workers. We admit without apology that this station has no deep concern with reporting polo matches...We are not convinced that the public necessity dictates the broadcasting of descriptions of ladies’ fancy dresses at receptions in fifth avenue ballrooms...if WEVD is taken off the air and in fact if it is not treated on a parity with others who are richer and more influential with the government, the people of the nation can truly recognize that radio which might be a splendid force for the honest clash of ideas creating a free market for thought—is nothing but a tool to be used by the powerful against any form of disagreement, or any species of protest.97

Here, the representatives of the station make it clear to the licensing authorities that their station exists with good intentions. Not only are they unapologetic of the content that broadcast on the station, but they were also clear to point out that not letting a station like WEVD stay on the air would compromise the rights of those involved. WEVD should exist, according to its operators, because it was a champion of the rights of minorities who would otherwise not have a voice in radio, which would fall in line with the text of the 1927 Radio Act because it is in the spirit of public interest and welfare.

In the end, the FRC renewed the license of WEVD, assigning it a less desirable wavelength and warning its operators that they must conduct themselves “with due regard for the opinion of others.”98 They issued the following statement:

Undoubtedly, some of the doctrines broadcast over the station would not meet the approval of individual members of the Commission.... The Commission will not draw the line on any station doing an altruistic work, or which is the mouthpiece of a substantial political or religious minority. Such a station must, of course, comply with the requirements of the law and must be conducted with due regard for the opinion of others. There is no evidence that station WEVD has failed to meet these tests; on the contrary, the evidence shows that the station has pursued a very satisfactory policy.99

In this statement, the FRC was careful to recognize the mission of WEVD. The FRC would not close WEVD because of the station’s commitment to giving minority populations a voice. It is

97 Barnouw, A Tower in Babel, 216.
98 Craig, Fireside Politics, 74.
possible that the FRC was receptive to WEVD’s case simply because the members of the Commission were afraid that if they didn’t, it would seem as though they were trying to limit free speech. While it would seem that WEVD would be upset with this outcome, it is more likely that they were happy that they were able to continue broadcasting their message to the immigrant masses. There was something special about radio as a mode of mass communication. Radio had a way of bringing communities together in a way that was previously impossible. People could experience radio simultaneously, making it more of a communal event than print media. In addition, it was ultimately more cost effective, as it only required that individuals purchase one piece of equipment that would, in turn, allow them to experience programming as much as they want. In addition, radio was less permanent than print media. Radio programs were rarely made available after their original broadcast date, thus requiring that listeners experience their news in real time. This made listeners more active participants in their consumption of media in ways that were vastly different than newspapers.
CONCLUSIONS

This thesis raises a number of questions, most of which could be answered by further research or framing the discussion differently. Radio was incredibly important to the formation of a Jewish identity during the 1930s. However, this begs the question as to whether or not radio had the same importance in other communities. WEVD broadcast in at least five languages a day, making it a cornerstone of multicultural radio. It is unclear as to whether or not WEVD was as important of a platform for other immigrant communities because the majority of the primary and secondary sources focus on its influence on Jewish audiences. In addition, it would be interesting to look at radio outside of New York City. There were a number of socialist radio stations similar to WEVD in cities such as Chicago and Boston, and it would be noteworthy to examine the specific contexts of these radio stations as well.

The main focus of this investigation was on the 1920s and 1930s, both of which were incredibly important to the foundation of radio as a mode of mass communication. However, this does not take into account the importance of the 1940s in the world of radio. During this decade, radio transformed from being a source of entertainment to being the most important source for news about the Second World War. In the 1950s, radio transformed again, promoting new American ideals about the nuclear family and the red scare. Researching the lasting influence of radio would better contextualize not only its commercial importance during the 1930s, but also the way that it shaped Jewish identities during and after the Second World War.

It is difficult to judge the success of a piece of legislation as monumental as the 1927 Radio Act by solely looking a small population of Jews in New York City. However, the Jews living in New York were something of a special case because of their ethnic and cultural
character. Jews were some of radio’s earliest proponents, and, with the passing of the 1927 Radio Act, they were able to create their own media that was broadcast in their own language. Some Jews, like the Socialists behind stations like WEVD, took matters into their own hands, creating radio empires that propagated their message to the masses. Others chose to participate in media by listening, engaging with the radio landscape the way it was meant to be. Radio presented listeners with a unique routine. They could tune their sets to their favorite channels and were immediately transported to the theatre, a concert, or the scene of an important moment in history. Radio completely changed the game for individual expression, which is why it has remained an important mode of communication for both news and entertainment. Radio could bring audiences together and isolate them at the same time.

The 1927 Radio Act accomplished much more than its original mission. In addition to serving as the primary standard to which radio broadcasts were held, the Act also licensed (both literally and figuratively) the masses to be in control of the media that they encountered. Radio was revolutionary. It allowed people to express themselves in a way that was previously impossible, simply because it expanded the boundaries for individualism and creativity in media. Listeners could tune in and be transported to different worlds that were characterized not only by their storylines but the acoustic landscapes in which they were rooted. WEVD, even with all of the obstacles it faced in the early days of its existence, broadcast Yiddish programming regularly until it transferred ownership to ESPN in the early 2000s. It became a staple in the New York radio scene, has inspired numerous scholars to celebrate and preserve its legacy.

Although many were wary of radio when it first grew to prominence, their fears were quickly quieted as the sheer magnitude of radio’s potential became more apparent. A common thought was that radio would tear apart the unity that so many Americans cherished.
Furthermore, many nativist Americans during the 1930s thought that allowing immigrants who spoke languages other than English to broadcast on the radio would encourage them to further isolate themselves from the mainstream. However, individuals with this viewpoint couldn’t have been more misguided. Rather than isolating communities from each other, radio brought people together who had shared experiences and ethnic backgrounds. The original intention behind the 1927 Radio Act was to create a clear standard to which radio should be held. And it did so, while simultaneously enriching the melting pot for which the United States was known.
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