

**The Debut of Broadcasting in Small Town America:  
A Reflection of Community Radio throughout the World**

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Introduction

In this age of global media conglomeration, high-powered commercial radio stations broadcast to broadly defined audiences. For instance, with Clear Channel Communications, homogenized programming decisions made in San Antonio, Texas, are disseminated to over 1200 stations across the United States. In addition, Clear Channel's Premier Radio Network syndicates more than 100 programs to more than 7,800 radio stations and has equity interests in over 240 radio stations internationally (Clear Channel). In 2000, the Federal Communication Commission agreed to begin to license low-power FM radio stations to serve individual community needs. However, existing broadcasters successfully lobbied congress to dramatically limit the number of low-power stations. Today, instead of the hundreds or thousands of stations proposed in the United States, there are just a few dozen (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003).

Elsewhere in the world, however, there are countless low-power stations targeted to specifically defined communities. In Paris, France, alone, nearly one forth of all FM frequencies are assigned to "community stations." Among these "radio associatives" are an anarchist station, a station closely associated with the right-wing National Front, Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic stations, a station with programming for gay listeners, along with stations that target minority listeners, including North African, Flemish, Basque, Bosnian, Kurdish, and Portuguese (Poindexter, 1997). Low-power radio stations also serve a valuable role in the dissemination of

social information in areas of the world with low literacy levels, limited financial resources, and developing areas without electricity (see Olorunnisola, A., 1997 and Rockwell, R., 2001).

While the FCC licensing action in 2000 has not changed the trend toward broader and broader radio communities in the United States, there is an important history of low-power stations serving very narrowly defined communities in the U.S. By examining the historical debut of radio in small town America, perhaps we can shed light on the contradictory position of low-power radio in today's "McDonaldized" mass media.

#### The Debut of Radio in Small Town America: Athens, Ohio

Scholars have argued over which broadcasting station in the United States was the first, almost as long as there has been radio in the United States. In "Broadcasting's Oldest Stations: An Examination of Four Claimants," Baudino and Kittross (1977) concluded that Pittsburgh's KDKA, which took to the air in 1920, deserves the title of oldest broadcasting station in the United States. The development of radio in small town America, however, came much later. The first radio stations in the Appalachian college town of Athens, Ohio, provide an example of this slower growth in local rural radio broadcasting.

More than twenty-two years after KDKA's first broadcast on November 2, 1920, Athens' first radio station had its debut. The headline in *the Ohio University Post* read, "First student radio station to take air for trial debut" (First Student, 1942). The date announced was the following Tuesday, December 15, 1942, from 7:30 to 8 p.m. Technically, this station may not even be considered a true broadcasting station, since it did not use wireless technology<sup>1</sup>.

According to the *Post*:

WOUB, entered as a trial radio station member of the Inter-collegiate Broadcasting System, will be of the wired type now in use at eastern universities such as Harvard, Brown, Yale and Princeton. Under this set-up, however, reception can only be gotten in buildings which have a direct wire leading to them from the broadcasting station in Ewing balcony, although there will be no need for special connections of individual radios (p. 1).

As a result, only residents of Lindley Hall dormitory and patrons of the Student Grill were able to hear the "broadcast." The engineering department hoped to obtain the necessary materials to send the broadcasts over the lighting circuit. This would have enabled radio sets to pick up the programs within 50 feet of any university lighting circuit. However, the United States had been in a state of war for just over a year when WOUB debuted. As *Athens Messenger* reporter Roy Cross put it, "You couldn't do anything during the war. It was hard enough to get a pound of hamburger, much less radio equipment."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, according to the *Athens Messenger*, broadcasts were scheduled for 7:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays "until the broadcasts can be made daily" (Radio Station, 1942).

The first program included an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Telltale Heart* and five minutes of news of the world and the community. An Ohio University class in news broadcasting gathered Lowell Thomas' broadcast and edited it into five minutes of news. Cross recollected:

We didn't have a wire service for a while so we had to tune in the other stations to pick up their newscasts and then later on we'd go on with pirated news. We clipped newspapers, that was for national or international stories. But we would send someone to the fire department to find out what was going on in the community. We did not have a wire service, but we had a record that sounded like a teletype, sort of like Lowell Thomas. It would play in the background, here's the news tat-a-tat-tat-tat.<sup>3</sup>

Needing a radio set within 50 feet of a university lighting circuit to receive WOUB was not the ideal set-up. Archie Greer, who worked in the radio station as a student and then became a professor at Ohio University, recalled:

The wired system was not very effective. If you were close to an electrical outlet, you might be able to get it but if you were somewhere else in the building, you didn't get it. And of course there was very little in the way of portable radios, so you didn't hear it outside of the building.<sup>4</sup>

As the station continued to grow, the *Ohio University Post* carried stories on its development. While the *Post* was not publishing a regular program schedule for WOUB at this time, it would feature stories on the station's upcoming programs. For instance, on February 9, 1943, a front-page story had the heading, "WOUB Offers Thriller Tonight" (1943). Little more than two months after going on air, WOUB expanded its audience by extending its wiring to the men's dorm. The thirty-minute program also was extended to forty-five minutes (WOUB Will Broadcast, 1943).

On February 27, Ohio University's rapidly expanding radio station took another step in local radio pioneering when it broadcast a basketball game from the men's gymnasium. Using a 500-foot line, engineering students laid temporary lines from the gym to the studio in Ewing Hall. In the weeks to follow, permanent lines were laid underground for the wiring of the Student Center Building. This represented a connection to the north end of the campus, as WOUB extended its wired radio coverage (WOUB Will Broadcast).

By early March 1943, WOUB's first program guide appeared in the *Ohio University Post*. The ad read:

WOUB Program at 550 On Your Radio Dial

TONIGHT  
7:30 World News and Classical Music  
7:45 "This Precious Freedom" A play by Arch Obler  
8:00 Campus News and Popular Music (WOUB Program, 1943).

Although tiny compared to the encyclopedic listings of twenty-four hour radio stations in major markets, another WOUB program guide would not appear in the *Post* until more than a month later. Coverage of the burgeoning radio station was beginning to abate. Rather than promoting upcoming programs, the *Post* started reviewing previous night's performances. Critiques of radio plays with the mention of every actor involved became standard practice. Stories also started to appear that unveiled the magic behind radio. In "OU Fakes Exposed at Radio Station," the *Post* gave away some of the radio station's secrets.

For example when you're listening to one of their [WOUB's] war plays, that murderous tommy gun is nothing but a typewriter that never hurt a soul. Too lazy to slam a door when the script says "slam door," sound effects men push a drawer shut in an old desk near-the mike. A rickety old wagon coming down the street is an egg beater and a crisp piece of cellophane crunched in the hand is a nice hot fire (OU Fakes, 1943).

WOUB had found a home at Ohio University, but the intended audience remained the university community and not the public at large. Still, it is clear that the station did serve its intended community. As the years passed, Athens' only "local" radio station continued to grow.

Greer noted:

The improvements continued as more and more buildings on campus were linked. After the war, the station moved. Initially the wired station was housed in a little control room built on the balcony of Ewing Hall.... Shortly after the war ended, the university was able to get an old metal Quonset hut which sat on the road that runs in front of the library and, in fact, it was housed right where the library sits now. We had the studio and control room and offices for the station there until they built Kantner Hall around 1951. That's when they moved from the Quonset hut to the basement of Kantner Hall.<sup>5</sup>

The Quonset hut location kept WOUB centrally located in university life. Cross, who worked for WOUB as a student after World War II, commented:

A Quonset hut was a military hut that came up in World War II that was a semi-circle. There were no corners to it. It was made of metal, galvanized metal. And it got its name because it was first used at Quonset Rhode Island Naval Base. And well our studio was in that and on any Friday or Saturday night there'd be someone celebrating who'd walked by and throw marbles on the roof, and that would play hell with your programming.<sup>6</sup>

Despite WOUB's almost exclusive appeal to the university community, it remained the only local station in Athens for more than half a decade. Its survival, and its intimate role in campus life, illustrate the service that low-powered stations can provide to narrowly defined communities.

#### Clear Channel Radio and Rural Communities

During the station's first year of operation, the *Athens Messenger*, the local newspaper, did not list WOUB's programming schedule and made little mention of it except for its debut (Radio Station, 1942). During WOUB's infancy, the *Messenger* was absorbed in covering the war in Europe. Most days during that period had headline stories devoted to wartime occurrences. The *Messenger*, however, did list radio programs of other stations whose signals could be picked up in Athens at night.

Because of WOUB's wired limitations, few people in the community outside the university could pick up the station. They, along with the university community, listened to clear channel stations from as far away as Atlanta.<sup>7</sup> These clear channel stations were permitted by the Federal Communications Commission to broadcast at high power levels, enabling radio

listeners hundreds of miles away to pick up programming. According to *Broadcasting* magazine:

From 1930 to 1950--give or take a few years on either side--the clear channel stations reigned supreme. They were the big voices of the air....Their programs and commercials rang loud and clear during the day, and rose to a roar at night....It was these stations that carried the most popular programs, the national advertising--both network and national spot--that brought to millions of listeners in rural America their only nighttime service (Clears Tops for 20 Years, 1962, p. 29).

Rural communities may have had the most to gain from the introduction of clear channel radio because of their isolation. Few towns the size of Athens could support a wireless radio station in the 1940's. Athens' population in 1946 was slightly above 10,000, with an additional 5,000 in the outlying vicinity (Turnbull, 1949). In "The Radio in Rural America," Wik (1981) observed that without local stations, radio owners "became obsessed with efforts to reach out as far as possible. Apparently there was a fascination with the notion that now you could annihilate distance" (p. 345).

Cross remarked, "Down here you were so restricted, you couldn't get the Columbus station like BNS but you could get Atlanta, loud and clear".<sup>8</sup> Greer also remembered listening to clear channel stations. "You didn't get a lot of radio back then in this area. You got WLW out of Cincinnati, that was a clear channel you could get on a good night. Also WJR out of Detroit. Of course, at night you could pick up a lot of stuff. You could pick up New York, Nashville, Boston, Atlanta".<sup>9</sup>

The introduction of the Federal Radio Commission's 1928 frequency allocation plan was the first to allow a handful of stations to broadcast on AM frequencies at the highest power available: first 25,000 watts and later 50,000 watts. Other stations could use these frequencies

during the day but were forced off the air at night to prevent interference with these clear channel stations. The purpose was to provide service to ensure good reception for rural and remote radio listeners. The Federal Radio Commission and later the Federal Communications Commission agreed that this policy should be among their most important concerns (Foust, 1994).

Owners of clear channel stations formed the Clear Channel Broadcasting Service (CCBS) to lobby for the protection of clear channel policy. After the start of World War II, CCBS members wrote a letter to President Roosevelt affirming the group's interest in keeping rural and small town radio listeners informed:

As the nation's independently owned clear channel stations, ours is a doubled responsibility in radio during this crisis. Our audiences comprise not only city listeners, but also the millions of Americans living on farms and in small towns across the country. The principal radio voice reaching some 50,000,000 rural and small town listeners must promote the unified effort needed to win this crucial struggle (Foust, p. 129).

During the war, the CCBS had little to fear from the expansion of new stations that would compete with their clear channel frequencies. The Federal Communications Commission had issued a freeze on new station construction in 1942. Foust wrote that this delayed "the calls for duplication on clear channels, but it created an even greater pent-up demand for frequency space after the war" (Foust, p. 128).

The war and rural isolation of many in the region gave clear channel radio broadcasting, and its wider audiences, a strong advantage over smaller stations with more limited audiences. These combined factors explain why Athens remained without a wireless regional broadcast radio station until the end of the 1940's. Still, there remained a need for regional broadcasting that could link people within the community to each other.



## The Coming of FM

Such a role for radio may have been envisioned when, after the war, the Federal Communications Commission began to allocate a band of frequencies to allow educational institutions to build FM stations with no more than 10 watts of power (Greer, 1984). However, it would still take until the end of the decade for Athens' first wireless broadcast station (WOUB-FM) to begin to operate. Greer recalled:

Remember we had just come out of a war and people had their minds occupied with other things during that period. So people didn't really give much thought to it. Radio was relatively new. It had been around for about 20-30 years. They listened to the networks and that was it. Local radio was very, very different during those days.<sup>10</sup>

In December 1948, Vincent Jukes, an assistant professor of dramatic art and speech, applied for and received permission to construct a ten-watt FM station. The new station, WOUB-FM, was to be operated in conjunction with the existing campus station at Ohio University (*Radio Broadcasting*, 1959). One year later, on December 13, 1949, WOUB-FM went on the air (*Broadcasting and Cable*, 1996).

The day after the station's debut, The *Athens Messenger* wrote:

Ohio University's new FM radio station...officially took to the air waves Tuesday evening [December 13, 1949] when regular programming was launched with a special 15-minute program at 8 p.m.

Operating on 88.1 megacycles with an educational license granted by the Federal Communications Commission, the station will be on the air from noon to 1 p.m., and 6 to 9 p.m., regularly, Monday through Thursday, during the noon hour on Friday, and for special broadcasts of home athletic events and other campus activities (OU Radio, 1949).

Starting out with only 10 watts of power, however, the new station could only expect its signal to be received within a radius of not much more than a mile. This established a listening audience composed largely of university students and personnel, like the previous, non-wireless WOUB. But wireless FM broadcasting did expand the intended audience community for the new station. A preliminary report published by Ohio University stated that when the trustees of the university approved the FM station in December 1948, "certain basic principles were established for the operation of the station, the most important of which were:

1. That it should be operated on an educational, i.e., noncommercial basis to provide a program service to the campus and community that would be "basically instructional and educational," foster good public relations for the University," and "provide entertainment on the level consistent with the policies and practices of the University."
2. That it should function as a laboratory providing practical experience for students and supplementing regular classroom instruction in radio and journalism.
3. That the operation of the station and its broadcasting program should be entirely controlled by the University through its administrative officers and faculty (Radio Broadcasting, 1959).

The report's first basic principle makes it clear that although WOUB was chartered as an educational station to serve as a laboratory for students, the new FM station also was meant to provide program service to the community. Joseph Welling, the former director of the Telecommunications Center at Ohio University, recollected that "It was doing general audience programming but you could only get it in Athens. It was intended as a community service. It wasn't just done for university students".<sup>11</sup> According to Greer:

The community really rallied behind the FM station and consequently we got very involved in community activities. Even though it was a student-operated station they got very involved. I remember we did remotes from the gas company store window for United Appeal and all the local sports were covered by the FM station.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, the question remains, who was listening? In the mid-1940's, the cost of an FM table model receiver was more than \$60 (Sterling & Kittross, 1990). Compared to the average cost of \$32 for an AM table model (Peter, 1941), the FM radio was nearly twice as expensive. This is one reason why few people in the Athens community were listening to FM radio. Cross had a "two-bit radio that you could plug in, stick a coat hanger on, stick out the window, and [you were] in business. But it was an AM radio, and it wasn't for a while that you could buy a radio with both AM and FM. At that time it was an expensive proposition".<sup>13</sup>

When the FM station debuted, it was expected to serve about 500 FM radio owners in the Athens area (WOUB to Make First, 1949). This represented only about five percent of the community. To overcome the limited reception area of the station (given its mere 10 watts of power), engineering students increased the length of the wire that served as the FM station antenna. Greer recollected:

Now, rather than only getting out a mile or so, we began to get calls from listeners 40-50 miles away. The crowning blow came when we were picked up in Colorado Springs. This, of course, violated every tenet of our licensing agreement. So the FCC asked us to cease and desist until we could get that antenna problem solved. A good pair of wire cutters took care of it in short order. There was some talk of it being an atmospheric freak, but I think it was that wire (Greer, p. 3).

Despite the need and desire to serve a broader community with wireless radio, technological limitations and government regulations made that impossible until 1969, when WOUB-FM received permission from the FCC to increase its power to 50 kilowatts. At this point, WOUB-FM became a regional facility.

## Athens' First Commercial Station

Commercial interests led to the first development of true regional broadcast radio in Athens. Given the amount of advertising revenue necessary to support a commercial station, speculators interested in establishing a radio presence in Athens looked to AM. By the end of 1948, there were more than 544 applications for AM stations on file with the FCC (FCC Box Score, 1948). By 1950, there were approximately 2,100 AM stations on the air in the United States (Sterling, 1984). One of them was now in Athens.

WATH-AM went on the air October 25, 1950. The 1,000-watt station operated on 1540 kilocycles and broadcast from sunrise to sunset. Ivan Tribe, a country-music scholar and a faculty member at the University of Rio Grande, remembered when WATH came on the air. "We couldn't listen to it for the first year or two for some reason. I think it was 1540 on the dial then, and our radio only went to 1500. So, until we got another radio, as I recall, we couldn't get it".<sup>14</sup>

In addition to inadequate radio equipment, other factors also stood in the way of the community's acceptance of commercial regional radio stations like WATH-AM. Clear channel stations were powerful competitors for audiences. According to Tribe, "Here in the Athens area just about everybody listened to WLW out of Cincinnati. At night they did network shows. And then in about 1950 we started listening to WSM in Nashville a lot, and the 'Grand Ole Opry.' People also listened to WLS in Chicago".<sup>15</sup> Those clear channel stations had frequency signal protection at night from 700 to 750 miles (Foust), and Athens' geographical location placed it within the frequency protection zone of several clear channel broadcasters.

Yet, these stations were hundreds of miles from Athens and could not provide a public service to the local community. As WATH's current owner, David Palmer put it:

If you listen to WLW and you listen to WATH, the only thing that makes one appealing over the other is localism. They're not going to do local news of interest to Athens....They're not going to tell you about school closings or the Athens' weather or an incident uptown. And that's why we will always have a place....Localism is what has caused radio to be so successful.<sup>16</sup>

A similar sentiment was also being voiced in Congress. Foust reported:

In 1949, Senator Edwin C. Johnson...read into the record a telegram from the owner of WTCM in Traverse City, Michigan. The telegram told of an incident there involving a rabid dog. The dog's owner took it to a veterinarian, saying it had bitten a small child. After the dog died of rabies, local authorities asked WTCM for help, and the station responded by dropping much of its regular programming and airing announcements trying to locate the child. Two hours later, the child was in the hospital receiving treatment. "What could WJR or WGN, with 750-watt [sic] power, do about this?" the owner asked. This incident was merely anecdotal, but Johnson's reading it into the Congressional record showed that such arguments were valuable to opponents of the clear channels. In the end, the FCC decided that it was better to provide more voices for more people (Foust, p. 276).

Commercial AM stations also had advantages over low-power FM stations like WOUB. WATH debuted nearly one year after WOUB-FM but with 1,000 watts of power, WATH was 100 times as powerful as the university station. Consequently, WATH served a far greater area of the community. Tribe recalled, "I lived out in Albany, 10 miles out, and I don't think it [WOUB] hardly reached that far. You probably couldn't get it out of the city".<sup>17</sup> Given its limited broadcast area, WOUB-FM did not provide the same level of service to the community at large. Tribe continued, "Stuff that was played on the OU station was mostly of interest to the college population. To the best of my knowledge, I'm not sure people in the rest of the area listened to it that much".<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

In looking back at the history of radio in this small college town in rural Appalachia, there were three levels of broadcasting, all serving different communities in different ways. WOUB, in both its wired and wireless phases, served the very specific needs of a college community, WATH linked people within a larger regional community, and the clear channel stations, although unable to link individuals within the community, were able to link isolated areas of the country to a national community. I would argue that there still is a need for all three levels; the local, the regional, and the national. Commercial radio stations are successful for obvious reasons, yet looking back, we see how low-power stations can serve small communities' needs, which are often overlooked within the "McDonaldization" of media today. Certainly, within all developing areas of the globe, low-power radio, with its lower costs, can provide much needed information on health, agriculture, and education. Throughout the world, low-power stations can provide specific communities of local interest with a means for information exchange and identity building.

In looking towards the future, with the advancement of cellular telephone technology, many underdeveloped areas of the world are now better able to take advantage of telephone access, which may not have been as readily-available if traditional wiring of the region was required. This could make possible the wide spread use of Web radio, which could perform the function of old style clear channel stations; linking people nationally and even internationally, but

avoiding the homogenization methods of multinational conglomerations like Clear Channel Communications. Web radio could bring news and entertainment into underprivileged regions of the world not already within the receiving area of traditional broadcast stations. Just as the arrival of radio into rural Appalachia addressed an individual community, the arrival of Web radio could result in the increase of communal listening habits in underdeveloped regions without radio stations. Residents could gather at community centers, or even listen to the news while riding on a bus; thereby creating an opportunity whereby issues of the day could be discussed with other members of the community. Of course, Web radio could also complement areas with established broadcast stations by bringing alternative voices into a region. It is in these areas that future research would be beneficial.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> New technologies developed since these early stations have changed broadcasting terminology significantly. According to the Communication Act of 1934, broadcasting is "the dissemination of radio communications intended to be received by the public, directly or by the intermediary of relay stations [and said stations are] equipped to engage in radio communication or radio transmission of energy" (The Communications Act of 1934). According to R. Franklin Smith (1959-60), there are five criteria for defining a broadcast station. These are the same criteria used by Baudino and Kittross. "A broadcast station," Smith wrote, "(1) transmits by wireless; (2) transmits by telephony (this second stipulation requires that messages transmitted be composed of sounds instantly intelligible to the general public, for instance music and voice as opposed to Morse code); (3) transmits to the public; (4) transmits a continuous program service; and (5) is licensed by the government" (p. 43).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Roy Cross

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Archie Greer.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Cross interview.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>9</sup> Greer interview.  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>11</sup> Interview with Joseph Welling.  
<sup>12</sup> Greer interview.  
<sup>13</sup> Cross interview.  
<sup>14</sup> Interview with Ivan Tribe.  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>16</sup> Interview with David Palmer.  
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### Biography

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